



Blood Lust

Book One in the Blood-letting Series

T.A. Lumley

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For my wife, who listened to my stories
and didn't have me committed.

Our love will never die.

TRIGGER WARNINGS

This romance novel features the following topics that may be triggering to some readers. The subject matter is not intended for anyone under the age of 18. Please read with caution.

To my readers in the U.S.-

If you or a loved one is experiencing thoughts of suicide, please call 988. This is the suicide and crisis hotline number **nation** wide. People are there who want to help you. **YOU MATTER.**

- Automobile accident
- Drowning
- Blood Drinking
- Descriptions of Severe Injury
- Cannibalistic References
- Domestic Violence

- Thoughts of Suicide
- Evisceration
- Graphic Murder of Children
- Violent Sexual Assault
- Decapitation
- Dismemberment
- Torture
- Kidnapping
- Memory Loss
- Murder

Listen to the music that helped inspire it all! Check out my public “Blood Lust” playlist on Spotify, and hear the songs that inspired characters, events, and much more!



To learn which songs inspired which events, be sure to check out the additional Spotify info on my website, www.talbooks.com (spoilers)



THE SONGBIRD

Locals claim that dangerous creatures lurk in the woods of the Catskill Mountains. Rumors that, as an artist, I love to fantasize about. However, the realist in me knows there's nothing that goes bump in the night beside the odd bear or moose.

Instead, it is filled with absolute charm. From the picturesque views to the adorable cabins and this unique general store. Only a handful of shoppers are inside. Memorial Day weekend doesn't usually send people to the mountains this time of year. They are much more likely to head East and take in the vast beaches of the Atlantic Ocean.

As much more of a tree and freshwater kind of girl, I have enticed Spencer, my boyfriend of the last two years, to come West instead. Two hours outside Springwood, where I live, and one hour outside Callery, where he lives. He wasn't exactly... thrilled about it, but since we have four days off, he doesn't want to spend it cooped up in his apartment either. The cabin I've rented is small, with just one room and an adjoining

bathroom. Complete with a little kitchenette, a wood-burning fireplace, and an incredibly cozy bed.

Summer greenery sprawls all across the mountains. Honeysuckle, Dutchman's Breeches, Foamflower, and Starflower are all in bloom up the mountainside, making the drive up not only beautiful to look at but amazing to smell. Deep breaths of fresh mountain air are rejuvenating.

I peruse the wine selection in the little store, wondering if we need anything else before heading back to our getaway.

"Spence," I call, making sure my voice is loud enough to be heard over the sounds of the beer cooler. "I'm grabbing wine. Do you want white or red?" The silence is deafening as he ignores me.

"Good talk," I mutter, selecting one of each and placing them in my basket. Looking at the shelf, I add a third. Something tells me I will be the only one drinking wine, and I will need a lot of it to put up with Spencer if he keeps adding cases of beer to his cart.

I just want a nice quiet weekend with him to *connect*.

We've been so distant lately, and I don't know why. Have I done something to upset him? Are we just in a funk? He tells me he loves me every time we talk, but the passion seems to be missing. He only deeply kisses me when we're about to fuck, and even then, he seems so absent it's like I'm only there to get him off, and it could be anyone lying beneath him.

I remember when he used to make sure I felt wanted, to check in and ensure I was having a good time and finished. Now it is like a chore. I fear this is the end, but a last-ditch effort to rekindle the romance is in order. I want to stoke his passion for me again. I got some very naughty lingerie, some oils, and some toys... A quiver rolls through me, and I feel an ache forming between my thighs.

What I wouldn't give for Spencer, or anyone at this point, to slam me down and have their way with me. Heat creeps up my neck and into my face, a spot of wetness forming in my nicest lace panties as I fantasize about someone doing just that.

Sighing before the wine rack, I look over to Spence, three cases of beer. I grab a fourth bottle of wine. I can at least toast to the end.

We can use a few more things as far as food goes, but we are stocked outside of cold goods. Milk, eggs, some cheese, and lunch meat would be excellent. They even have a small meat department where I pick up a few pounds of ground beef for burgers later.

I allow myself to slip into my fantasies that hit a little closer to home. Images of hiking with Spencer, eating sandwiches, and making love in the sun breeze through my mind, bringing me joy as if they could someday be real. Ultimately they drive sadness into my heart. Shaking my head, I know he'd never go for it. He doesn't like 'dirt,' he says.

We have changed too much since we graduated college and started our 'real' jobs. He is going corporate, wanting to

acquire as much wealth as he can and damn anyone who gets in his way, and I am going the “hippie” route, according to him. I got a job at a small advertising firm doing graphic design, our focus is primarily on small businesses and nonprofits. It isn’t glamorous or high-paying, but I feel good about what I do at the end of the day. We do a lot of pro bono work for charities, which usually gets us invites to their events. Fairs, dinners, raffles, you name it.

Spencer usually blows me off for those, so I go alone or take my roommate Denise if she is available. Wrinkling my nose as I load the beef into my cart, I wonder why I am even staying.

Love?

I do love him still.

I think.

I know I did once.

But I’ve never been in love before to know what to look for when you fall out of it.

Cereal!

Making a last-moment realization that I need to grab some shredded wheat or something to go with breakfast, I about-face down the aisle.

“Where are you going?” Spencer’s voice is filled with annoyance.

“Just a sec, I forgot the cereal!” He looks frustrated as he deals with both carts of stuff. His is only beer. He’ll get over

it.

Rounding the corner, I dart to the end of the aisle, thinking, *shredded wheat, shredded wheat, shredded wheat*. It is my favorite. The store surprisingly has regular and frosted.

Fuck, I hate decisions.

Yellow box or orange box? My eyes dart back and forth, deciding I could use the extra sugar. I reach for the frosted kind, pulling the last box off the shelf and meeting a pair of the most piercing blue eyes I'd ever seen.

Surprised, I jump a bit, and a little squeak comes out as I drop my cereal box. Bending over to pick it up, large calloused hands beat me to it. As the box rises and I straighten from my awkward lean, it's pressed into my grasp.

I stare at the hands that helped me and follow them to well-toned forearms, tan with veins roping down them. Biceps that look like they belong to an axe-wielding woodsman and broad shoulders to match. My neck keeps craning upward, drinking in possibly one of the most beautiful faces I've ever seen on a man. Angled nose, strong jaw, sharp cheekbones, and full lips that turn down at the corners.

It is as if I can feel the world spinning all around me.

"Sorry," I mutter, staring at the blue-eyed stranger. His hair is the color of chestnuts, smooth, straight, and a little on the longer side. I desperately want to run my fingers through it.

My heart skips a beat as his hands brush against mine.

“No, it was my fault. I didn’t mean to startle you.” His voice drips honey, and I can feel the heat in my cheeks, as well as... elsewhere.

“I’m fine,” I wish my voice dripped with anything other than embarrassment and nervousness. His eyes bore into mine, and my breath hitches as the store fades. I couldn’t drop his stare even if I wanted to.

Slowly he reaches a hand toward me, toward my face, like he will caress my cheek or brush my lips with his thumb. A pulse surges through my body and something snaps in my brain as I stare into this man. It travels down into my heart, giving me a sense of yearning. Lastly, a wave of desire settles in my core. My arousal heightens, and the wetness in my underwear is more evident than before. I am spellbound by this man.

His nostrils flare for just a moment, and as his hand grows closer to my skin, I want nothing more than for him to take me in his arms and-

“What the FUCK!”

And the moment is gone.

Spencer is behind me, face red with rage. “What the hell is going on here, Wren?”

I am speechless, and nothing is going on. Sure, I had gotten lost in the eyes of a stranger, a six-foot-something godlike creature of a stranger, but it’s not like he caught us with our tongues in each other’s mouths.

“Spence, I-” I take a step toward him, and he takes one back.

“I didn’t come all the way out to this god-forsaken hell hole to watch my girl eye fuck some townie! Jesus, Wren. Drag me out here and pull this shit? I’m going home.” He turns on his heel and rushes toward the front door. Shock freezes me to the spot momentarily, and I am only released by the soft sound of a bell jingling.

“Sorry,” I mutter to the stranger, thrusting the box back at him. Moving to take off after my boyfriend, a spike of adrenaline spikes through me when long thick fingers lace around my wrist. I turn back to my stranger, my heart pounding as his eyes see right through me.

“Stay with me,” he breathes. A weight behind his words tickles at the back of my mind.

I want to listen.

I want to stay here and get lost in those eyes.

In his fiery touch.

An engine roars to life in the parking lot. Blinking away from the fog of this fantasy coming to life, I pull myself from the man. His sure grip loosens when I try to leave it, thank God. If my stranger insisted I stay, would I have the mental strength to leave his side?

I doubt it.

Running for the door and using my weight to push against its heavy metal, I hear tinging sounds as a spray of gravel pebbles the cars in the lot. Spencer is whipping the car from the

parking space, uncaring about damaging other people's property. His dark eyes pour into mine, even from here. Rage and hatred are seated there, and a knot begins to form in my stomach. Somewhere in the distance, thunder claps.

“Spencer!” I yell, hoping he can hear me. Finally, outside, I launch myself at the hood. “Spencer, wait!”

He lowers his window. “What are you doing?”

“Let me in!”

Jaw clenching and with a look of disgust on his face, “Don't you want to go home with your new boyfriend?” I can hear the venom in his voice.

“Don't be like this, Spence. It wasn't anything.” He rolls his eyes. “You can't just leave me out in the middle of nowhere!” The hot stinging of tears pricks at my eyes. Then, I hear the distinct clicking sound of the locks disengaging.

A sob escapes as the first raindrops fall from the rolling clouds above. I get in the car and buckle up, just in time for Spencer to finish backing out, kicking up even more gravel. Sparing a final glance at the store, I see my stranger walk out with something in his hands.

“My bag!” I cry as we whip out of the parking lot. “Spencer, stop. I left my bag.” It had been in the cart, and he hadn't grabbed it.

“Fuck your bag, Wren. What the hell was going on back there?” He is heading down the mountain to Callery. He is going home, just like he said he was. I ruined our trip, and I

can't explain why. He doesn't even care about our things back at the cabin.

I am going to pay for this, I know it.

“He startled me, I dropped the box, and he picked it up and handed it to me.” That is it. I'm not going to go into detail about my intense attraction toward this man or how he almost made me cream my jeans standing in the breakfast aisle.

His fists hit the steering wheel, making me jump. The rain is coming down harder now, and my heart beats loudly. I spare a glance at our speed and feel a concrete block drop straight into my gut. “Spencer, please slow down.”

“That wasn't all it was, though, Wren. I saw you. You were getting all hot and bothered. You haven't looked at me like that in months!” I'm pretty sure I feel him step on the gas.

Annoyed now, “I've thrown myself at you for the last four months, Spencer, and you've barely touched me.” I regret my words and tone as I watch the numbers climb up. I hush my voice, “Slow down.”

Tears are freely pouring down my cheeks, matching how the rain is now hitting the windshield. Wipers going back and forth aren't enough to drown out Spencer's anger.

“So it's my fault you were looking at that fucking guy like you wanted to climb him?” He grips the back of my neck, forcing me to look at him, pinching harder than he should have. I let out an involuntary whimper, not that it ever mattered before. I'd have bruises for sure.

I blanch.

Is it that obvious? The stiffness in his jaw tells me it had been as he releases me in disgust. “Spence, it wasn’t *anything*, he may have been trying to flirt with me, but I wasn’t doing anything. I was just embarrassed from getting scared and dropping my cereal box.” Even I couldn’t make myself believe it’s true. But damn it, I hadn’t *done* anything. “Spencer, PLEASE slow down!”

His knuckles are white from gripping the wheel so hard. “You’re a real piece of work, Wren. Dragging me up here, flirting with some random the very first night we’re here, and then trying to fucking blame me for it. Christ! Well, he can fucking have you. I’m done with it. I’m done with all of it.”

Done?

Is he breaking up with me?

Shattered sobs rake through me as I realize the last two years mean nothing to him. Gone in a moment because of a look? What the fuck? “Spencer, *please*, I didn’t do anything! SLOW DOWN!”

He stares at me, eyes flicking back to the road less frequently than I’d like. “He was going to touch you, and you were trembling. If he’d kissed you, or shoved you to the ground... If he’d wanted to fuck you, you’d have let him.”

Spencer is right about that and shame blazes through me. I can’t deny it. I can’t look him in the eye, instead lowering my

tear-filled ones to stare at my lap. The satisfied tone of his voice sickens me. “Bitch,” he mutters.

“SPENCER, SLOW THE FUCK DOWN!” I shout as we come up to a sharp curve. He looks forward, eyes wide, as he slams on the brakes. With the sickening sound of metal crunching, we hit the guard rail. We are sliding, the rail barely holding as we jerk along the curve. Deafened by the scraping sound filling the air, I can’t hear my screams even though my throat is raw.

Spencer’s arm reaches out, pinning me to my seat. The end of the guard rail draws nearer, and he doesn’t have control.

We are airborne.

Like something out of a movie, the tops of trees loom below us. We fall in slow motion. I press myself back into my seat as hard as possible, like it would put us back on the road. Lightning flashes above our heads, illuminating the ground and rushing closer to us. A rock about a quarter the size of the car is jutting out of the mountainside, waiting to catch us.

When the wheels connect to the ground again, it feels like someone sent an electric shock up my spine.

I am not sure whether it is the thunder crashing or the car, but I can’t hear my screams again. The airbag rushes at me, slamming into my face, and sending a blinding pain between my eyes. Gravity shifts, and the car jerks forward. Spencer’s arm releases me. I try to clutch at it, fearing that if I can no longer feel him, I will lose him.

I feel the side of my head connect with something hard, and then there is nothing.

No pain.

No sound.

Empty.



The sounds of scuffling and scrambling make my ears itch. A tingling in my brain as my mind fights to return to the surface of consciousness. I am swaying, moving with the car as it shifts. Are we still falling?

My fingertips are going numb. They are cold.

I am cold.

I am ice cold.

I can hear the sounds of water rushing at me.

Suddenly, my eyes flash open. I must've blacked out at the end. The car isn't moving anymore, but I am freezing. My arms hang above me, and I realize I am upside down. Tilting my head, I see water covering my hands. I flex my legs, thanking the cosmos that I can feel my toes, despite how much pain I am in. A coppery taste fills my mouth as I cough, trying to take a breath. It hurts.

Something warm is dripping up my face. An odd sensation, blood flowing from my nose leaking toward my eyes and

forehead. I try to wipe it from my eyes, a sharp pain in my right arm causing me to cry out. Is it broken? Dislocated?

FUCK!

“Spencer...” I groan, looking at the driver’s seat. He is gone. All I see is water pouring through his window. Where is he? “Spencer!” I call again, more desperate. Nothing, not a sound.

A pang of grief haunts me.

Had he been thrown from the car?

Is he dead?

This is my fault, all my fault.

My head is pounding, and my whole body hurts.

I need to get the fuck out of here.

I use my left hand to fumble for the button to release myself from my seat. This is going to be very painful. I fall into the shallow water, hitting the roof of the car. Searing red hot spikes tear through my shoulder and arm, and darkness clouds the edges of my vision, threatening to take me back into the world of unconsciousness. I lift my head out of the water, coughing, and sputtering.

“HELP!” I cry as loud as I can, wondering if anyone was nearby as we crashed. My voice is raw. Blood comes out when I cough, hopefully from my nosebleed and not something else. I look around. Water is coming in quickly from the window on the driver’s side, and a leak in the windshield.

My window on the passenger's side has a crack in it. Bits of blood and hair stuck to it, but it didn't shatter completely. Water is lapping against the glass, almost covering the window. I try to push on it, but I am weak. The door itself is so crumpled and bent it won't open, and if I can't break the glass, there is only one other way out.

I eye the driver's side window and steel my resolve.

I am going to get out of here.

Water is filling the car fast, covering my legs. I feel woozy as I shift to turn my back to the driver's side window. Pushing against the frame of the car with my feet, I inch closer to my freedom. Ducking my head to avoid the center console, I brace my feet against the roof of the car and push again, fighting the force of the water steadily pouring in. Panic fills me when I see the level has risen to my navel. One more push and my back is right up against the window.

Cold and pummeled by the lake hell-bent on joining me in the car, I take my good arm and force it into the sheet of water. I clamp hold of the window from the outside, wincing as glass cuts into my palm. I gasp in pain but don't release my grip. Instead, I pull with all the force I can muster. The roof of the car isn't the best foothold, but I use my legs to push regardless.

Water barrels against my hurt arm, and I scream out, "HELP ME, PLEASE!"

Pressure and force from the lake are too much for my weak body to fight against, and it pushes me back into the car.

No use.

Through the windows all around me, I can see the darkness of the lake thickening as I sink further and further below the surface.

God, I don't want to die.

I should have just left the fucking cereal!

The windshield finally gives way from the pressure of the water, glass sprays me, and little cuts tear into my skin. Fortunately, I raise my arm in time to protect my eyes, but I can feel the sharp pin pricks on my face. It didn't shatter completely, but the water is coming in much too fast now, already reaching my shoulders. I am sinking with the car, and the pressure is too great for me to get through.

In seconds I have almost no air left, I try to time it right and take a deep breath at the last moment. Opening my eyes in the murky water stings, but I have no choice. Now that the car is filled, and the pressure equal, the driver's side window is accessible for my escape. I try to swim through the window with my injured arm tucked close to my side, it is so difficult. I only have three working limbs instead of four, my clothes are weighing me down, and I have no idea how far I have sunk.

Going through the windshield would've been easier, but I don't want to waste time breaking apart more glass. The window will give me faster access to the surface, and time is of the essence now.

Inky blackness surrounds me between lightning strikes, the light being the only indication of which way is up.

My lungs burn for air.

I am able to get my torso through the driver's side window. I press on the car door with my good arm and push myself out as hard as possible. Until my legs are completely out. I kick away from Spencer's car as it sinks and try to propel myself upward.

My muscles ache from exertion with no oxygen and I feel like my chest is going to explode. I can't tell if I am getting close to the surface of the water or not. Darkness closes in around me, and I stop kicking. I am so tired. My vision is blurry, and the pure black of nothing pulls me into it.

Until I can't see the lightning anymore.

Until I can't feel anymore.

Until I wasn't anymore.



**CHAPTER
TWO**

THE WARRIOR

Seven hundred and thirty-two years on this planet is a long time. You'd think I would have seen enough to satisfy me for a lifetime, but I haven't. I can't get enough of this ever-changing world, and one of my favorite things is to insert myself around the humans that inhabit it. That's why I find myself in the general store today, slinking through the aisles until I find the source of the most wonderful scent I've ever known.

She is beautiful.

Auburn hair and pale skin spotted with freckles. I watch her study the wine with such care and precision. Her eyes flick to a human male standing by the beer, loading a cart with cases. She calls, asking his opinion, and he says nothing. Anguish flashes across that beautiful face. Anger coils inside of me like a cobra. How could he be so fortunate to earn the attention of such a creature and then ignore her?

Her placing multiple bottles of wine in her cart makes me laugh to myself. It seems like she will be in for a long

weekend that she might prefer to forget.

Centuries of practice made me excellent at being invisible, so I go unnoticed even as I stalk my quarry through the store. I study her as she fills her cart with food items, taking in her face as she makes each decision. Her lips are apart, revealing two large front teeth. The corners of my mouth tick upward. She looks like a little chipmunk.

I am behind her for the briefest moment, close enough to reach my hands out and weave them through her coppery hair. I want to wrap my arms around her, twist my fingers into her tresses, and kiss her soft pink lips. But I resist. She isn't mine.

I am drawn to this human who smells like honeysuckle and fresh paper.

The man she is with is hers. His scent is all over her: Hopps and cigarette smoke.

I sigh. If I were a weaker man, I would destroy him and indulge this pull I have toward the human woman. They must be staying nearby. I could compel him away...

That isn't honorable. If nothing else, I still maintain my honor.

I used to be a knight once upon a time.

That was before Leland, before my family, before I was truly born.

Before I was made a vampire.

The name was given to us long ago, and ever since I was turned, I have thoroughly enjoyed my life as one. There was something about having immense strength, fantastic hearing, and sight. Every sense is at peak perfection. I was practically indestructible, able to bend the wills of mortals, and being immortal is quite a perk.

It is also lonely.

Days bleed into months, bleed into years, bleed into centuries. Time moves so slowly when you have an infinite amount of it. Even slower when you're alone. I have my family, but no one to call mine.

Our home in the Catskills was usually tranquil. The odd traveler here and there, but we are deep enough that tourists wouldn't be camping that far out, and the locals are so spread out from us it is easy to be ourselves. When we stay in Callery, we have to be careful not to draw too much attention.

So I lurk, hovering by the cereal, watching the human woman search for her preference. The shelf between us hides my movements as they shadow hers, the boxes of cereal themselves blocking my face from view.

I want to hunt her, feed from her, bed her.

A low growl is rasping in my throat at the thought of taking her in my arms and sinking my fangs into her sweet neck. I feel my body respond to the idea of being pressed against hers.

The unexpected shifting of a box reveals her glorious gray eyes to me. We are face-to-face.

She drops the box with a little yelp. Before I can stop myself, and faster than I should have in public, I am around the shelf, picking up her item and presenting it to her.

Waves of electricity pass between us, and I return the favor as she drinks me in. Her slight frame is delicate and begging to be thrown around by me. There is a gentle curve to her slender hips, and I can only guess beneath her sweater is a pair of small perky breasts that would each fit entirely in my mouth.

She tries to apologize, her voice breathy and frightened. Not because I am a predator but because she *wants* me. I offer an apology of my own for startling her, only for her to protest that she is 'fine.' The scent of arousal blooms as her eyes lock on mine, and I resist the urge to compel her to leave with me. Our skin grazes as she takes her item in hand.

It is like a flame engulfs me, forging a new man, bound to this human woman. I want to steal her, claim, change, and keep her. I've never in my centuries of life felt this drawn to anyone before, human or vampire.

Impossible.

Had I found my mate in the general store? Had I truly felt the bond begin to form as I handed her a box of frosted mini-wheats?

I reach for her, yearning to feel more of the heat from her skin. My arousal is plainly evident. If I could hold her close, steal her away, and be alone with her for just a moment, I could seal the bond, and she would be mine.

Forever.

A God-awful stench ruins the moment.

Her male.

He screams her name in rage.

Wren.

A little bird making sweet music for the world.

My little bird.

The name stitches itself on my heart, branding me as hers for all eternity.

Wren.

I could tear him limb from limb for screaming at her. If I could take my eyes off her, that is.

She turns and runs from me, even though I ask her to stay. I resist the urge to put compulsion behind my words, but barely. I feel my mind try to pull hers into mine, to take her will. Now though, she is triggering every instinct I have to chase her down, but I steel myself and instead move to the front of the store to better watch the events unfold.

Her human is in his car, and if I could compel him to leave her here alone, I would. Proximity is key. The most I can do is make the hairs on his neck stand up so he will look at me. I do, and I'm not ashamed to say I enjoy the fear I see within him. He does the first smart thing since they arrived at the store. He unlocks the car and lets her in. Their carts are to my right, and the smell of honeysuckle wafts over to me.

Wren's bag.

I know it must hold her entire life, wallet, and personal items. Taking it from the cart, I rush outside just in time for them to peel away. She is shouting at him to stop so she can get her bag, but he ignores her, running off with my little human. My eyes narrow. I don't like his temper.

Clouds above have threatened to storm for the last few hours and are finally making good on that promise.

No, this was the wrong time to have a temper with a fragile human in the car.

It doesn't take much effort to follow them.

The storm overhead churns and begins in earnest as I make my way down the mountain, the little bird's bag still in hand. I track their progress, growling when I notice he is going much too fast.

It isn't long before the worst happens, and I watch as their car careens out of control and goes down the mountainside.

Fear streaks through me as I rush to follow. The sound of groaning metal and shattering glass is cut off by a plop into the water. Goose Lake has a hold of them now. The car is upside down and sinking fast. I hear coughing and sputtering and spy the male dragging himself from the water, head bleeding and looking like he was half drowned. That's when I hear her.

“Spencer... Spencer!”

The fuck?

He'd left her!

“HELP!”

Wren's plea for assistance flutters across my mind and through my ears. My pace falters only for a moment. I hear it distinctly from the car sinking into the lake below me. Faintly, but I hear it. How the hell do I hear it in my mind as well?

“HELP ME, PLEASE!”

The male is still alive but passed out on the shore, and somehow my honeysuckle human is sending her screams directly into my mind. Confused, I shake my head but quickly continue my trek down the mountain.

This isn't normal.

Humans don't have telepathy.

Vampires get a mental connection with their mates and their mates only. Never while that mate is still human. Typically, there is a heightened sense of attraction, like the spell we were under back in the store. This is most unusual.

I reach the lake's edge, but the car is fully submerged. My little bird is nowhere to be seen on the bank. I scan the depths of the dark lake, and I see her. Arms extended above her head, eyes closed, as she slowly sinks deeper into the water.

No!

Have I lost her so soon?

Fear carves a hole in my chest at the thought of losing her. I can feel madness creeping into my brain. If she is gone, my

entire reason for being is gone with her. I will devolve into a creature that can only feed and wander the shadows. I will embrace my baser instincts and everything that ever made me a person will be gone. I will be nothing more than an animal.

Shaking off the darkness working its way into my mind, I drop her bag, dive in, and quickly close the fifteen-foot distance. Grasping hold of her tightly, I swim upward, breaking the surface in no time.

Propping her head against my chest, I swim back to shore, taking great care with her delicate human form. I lay her body on the ground and listen for a heartbeat that isn't there, and the darkness threatens me again. I push it away because she's not gone for good, not yet.

She is beautiful, even in death.

She is *mine*.

And I refuse to let her go.

I've never been drawn to anyone like this, let alone a human.

What a strange way to find my mate.

I place my hands on her chest, pushing down and pumping her heart for her. I stop and lower my lips to hers. I can taste her blood... It is unlike any blood I've had before.

Blowing into her lungs, I give her the air I don't need and draw in only for her. I alternate between the two, pumping her heart and giving her rescue breaths. I place my lips on her for the third breath when I hear the first beat.

Pulling back, I watch as the woman who has claimed my soul sputters water. I assess her injuries as best as I can.

Her arm is broken, she is concussed, and I can smell the internal bleeding. Her face is battered and bruised, her nose broken. Likely the airbag. She's lucky it didn't break her neck. I push her hair away from her face. Even running at full speed, she won't survive long enough for a doctor to help her. My blood could heal her.

Stuttering, her heart grows weaker. There isn't enough fucking time. I run my hand through my hair, desperation growing as my mate's life fades before my eyes. It took me over seven centuries to find her, and I will lose her in less than a day.

I could turn her...

I have to turn her.

My very existence is tied to her life.

I never had another option, no other decision to make.

I am already hers.

Time isn't on my side, and if I am going to do this, it has to be now. It pains me to force it on her like this. We usually meet our mates out in the world, and they choose to join us for eternity. She has no such choice because I have to decide for her.

She stirs with a soft groan of pain. Her eyes open, and she struggles to focus before finding me.

“I’ve got you,” I say in a hushed tone. “I’m going to make sure you’re okay.” I pull her into my arms, cradling her. “You’re safe with me.”

The voice that answers is weak and strained. “You...” Her eyes flutter and then go still again.

I nuzzle my face against the side of her neck. Christ, she smells divine. Slowly my teeth sink into Wren’s flesh.

Fuck, she tastes like heaven.

I drink deeply, pulling her essence into me, thoroughly enjoying the feeling of her soul dancing through me. It is unlike any experience I’ve ever had before when drinking from a human. Her heart begins to slow, but it happens quickly, much too quickly. Wren is definitely on the brink of death.

Taking great care, I bite into my wrist and hold it to her mouth.

“Drink,” I say. Firm. Commanding.

She moans, her lips brushing against my skin, sending electricity through my body and to my groin.

“Drink,” I demand, louder and unyielding, pressing my wrist against those soft lips. They part slightly, and I angle myself to ensure my blood would go into her mouth. Her heart is slower now, but she has to drink more if she is going to change successfully.

Growling in frustration, I pull my wrist away and tear deeper into my flesh with my fangs. Hitting an artery, I make sure I

am bleeding quickly. I tilt her head back and let it pour down her perfect throat. Wren's brows knit together as she coughs, sputters, and tries to kick away. A pang of guilt strikes my heart.

She is fighting because she doesn't want this. Shoving it aside, there is no going back now. Either she will wake up and accept what happened, accept *me*, or she will hate me forever. As long as she still walks this Earth, I will take her however she is. Weak and injured from the trauma, it is nothing to overpower her, and I press my wrist down on her mouth, willing her to hurry.

"Drink," my voice pleading now.

Finally, the switch happens.

She grasps my arm tightly and begins to suckle in earnest. Hunger fills her as she takes my essence into her belly. She moans as she drinks like it is the sweetest nectar.

God help me.

The way she devours me, her soft lips pulling my very soul into her body and loving it, and a wave of relief pours into me. I know she will be okay now. "Good girl, Wren." I let her take all she can, welcome her to have every drop as far as I am concerned.

Every successful turning had one thing in common. You know it will work when the human finally latches on like they want it. I press my body against hers, content to stay there until Wren takes all she needs of me until she fills every empty

crevice of her body with me. Changing a vampire leaves us vulnerable, and weakened. With her injuries, she will drain me far more than the vampires I've turned before. I lean my forehead against her temple and whisper, "Stay with me."

Wren.

My little bird.

Mine.

Her heart takes one last fluttering beat and then stops, lips releasing my wrist. I lay on the shore with her for a moment. Studying her, imagining what is to come. I pray to any being that could be listening that she will understand why it had to be this way.

That she won't hate me forever.

Now that she is no longer drinking from me, I can take her home to complete the turning. Scooping her limp body in my arms and grasping the bag she had left behind, I rise to leave. Annoyance flashes through me as I remember her male, "Spencer," on the shore behind me.

He did this to her.

He killed her.

Maybe not directly, but his irresponsible driving put her in this position, and then he left her to die. I could easily do the same and forget he exists.

My eyes dart to my little bird. I don't think she would like that very much. I resolve to call for emergency assistance once

I have her safe and secure at my home. If he dies before they get here, then that isn't my concern.

I climb back up the mountainside, taking her directly to the home I share with my coven, my family.

Our home is technically a cabin, but it is a large and modernized one with eight bedrooms, a modest kitchen, a wide open living space, and even a private study. Most people assume it is a timeshare or vacation home, but I and several of my coven members have lived here for the last five years.

Most of them are out doing whatever they care to do, but Rolando, the first vampire I ever turned, is here doing whatever it is he does with our archives. He explained it to me once.

Something, something, digitize.

He raises a brow when he sees I have a woman in my arms but says nothing as I carry her upstairs. "Send an ambulance to Goose Lake. There's been an accident." That is all I tell him. Without wasting a second, I hear him on the phone with dispatchers. We have a full house with as many coven members as there are staying here. My room will have to do for my little bird.

Laying Wren down on my bed, I inspect her injuries. They are already mending as the turn from human to vampire takes place. Her nose appears to be no longer broken. The cuts and scrapes are healing before my eyes. I inspect her arm, setting it to ease the healing process. If mended incorrectly, we'd have

to re-break it to set it right. Satisfied that the change is normal, I search my drawers for something that might fit her.

I am not going to leave my mate in those wet clothes. Glass clings to her sweater, blood stains on it and her pants.

Settling on drawstring sweatpants and a t-shirt, I quickly change Wren out of her grimy clothes and into something dry. I don't pay attention to her body while I take care of her. There will be time for that later when she is awake and inviting me to look.

Until then, I will be a perfect gentleman.

It may have been some seven hundred years since I was a knight, but that did not change the fact that I pride myself on displays of chivalry.

Happy that my beloved is in clean and dry clothing, I comb through her hair, braiding it loosely. I finally cover her with a quilt and tuck her in. I am satisfied that Wren is as comfortable as I can make her.

Turning might take a day, maybe two. I will wait and watch over her until she opens her eyes again.

Until she comes back to me.

My sweet little bird.



CHAPTER THREE

THE SONGBIRD

Spinning like a top, my body is going wobbly and sideways. Sounds of glass crunching mix with my screams.

I am cold. I am burning.

Arms are around me, pulling me. Tugging me.

I am nothing...

Suddenly, I am something again.

Hands are pressing into me.

Crushing me.

Air forces itself into me.

I am coughing. I am dying.

A man holds me and calls me by my name.

He kisses my neck and whispers to me.

Then something hot, thick, and heavy is in my mouth.

I don't want it, and I want to get away.

But I am so tired, and my body hurts so much...

It starts to taste good. I give in.

Nothingness returns.

*The last thing I hear... “**Mine.**”*

I am floating.

I remember pain, I remember death, and I remember him.

Beyond that, there is a void. I cannot describe who I am or what I am doing out here. Nothing. I only know *him*. The one who saved me, who brought me back. Who brought me here...

Where is here?

Here is where we become.

A voice that is like mine but isn't, stirs in the recesses of my mind. It rasps and scratches against my thoughts, frightening me.

Do not be afraid. We are one. Join me.

I don't want anything to do with her. No thanks.

She growls low, and I begin to see a shape take form in my head, a woman with severe eyes and brutal features.

We must become.

Become what? It seems like she stalks closer to me. I pull away, avoiding her.

Become one.

Nope.

Absolutely not.

Stay far the fuck away from me.

I cannot.

We must join before we wake. It is the way.

*The **only** way.*

I have no idea what she's talking about. I only know I need to escape.

I died.

This must be a demon.

She must be here to take my soul down to the underworld.

Or eat it.

Or something...

She doesn't like that.

We are the same. We must become.

She keeps saying that, but I'm not buying it. I am desperate to get out of this darkness. To get to a place she isn't, wherever that may be. My breathing increases with stress until I'm panting, and I feel her getting closer to me. She is reaching out to touch me, and I am certain that's the last thing I want right now.

I want to push back, to fight her. Fear is sinking into my stomach like lead. The cruel woman is almost upon me.

“NO!” A very real scream rips through me, tearing at my throat as it does.

Eyes snapping open, I jerk upward with a deep gasp for air. I can still feel the water in my lungs from the lake claiming my soul. A few minutes pass, and I catch my breath, accepting that I am not actually dead, despite clearly remembering dying.

A nightmare? I try to calm myself and shrug off the strange dream of a terrifying woman.

Taking in my surroundings, I am in a dark room, a lantern sitting on a nearby table, the only source of light. I am dry, and my clothes are different. The bed I lay in is covered in the smoothest bedding, pleasing to my skin. There’s a quilt over me, warm and snugly. I swing my legs to the side of the bed and get hit with vertigo. Swaying, I prop myself up with my arm.

My arm?

My arm had been dislocated or broken. I flex it now, rolling my shoulder. It is fine.

There’s no pain. I distinctly remember the pain.

I touch my face, my temple. There are no wounds.

I should be dead.

I did die.

Why am I not dead now?

Fear races through me as I realize I don't remember anything.

No, I remember some things, but they come in flashes. Incomplete moments. Waking up in an upside-down car all alone, struggling to swim to the surface, and the man who saved me afterward. Before that, though, there's nothing.

"Where am I?" I muse aloud. No brutal woman is waiting for me. No one wants me to 'become' anything. A figure swims into my mind, covered in shadow, dark hair.. Unlike the woman, I yearn to touch him, to run my hands across his body and through his hair. I recognize him. He is mine.

I can hear footsteps approaching. Are they *his*? My savior's? Will he tell me what the hell is going on? A soft knock on the door, and I call, "Come in." Feeling stupid for inviting the person who lives here into their own room, I examine my clothes. In my mind's eye, I'd been wearing jeans, a tank top, and a sweater. Now I am sporting some sweatpants and a baggy T-shirt. I am suddenly very aware that I have no underwear on.

The door opens, and the most beautiful man I've ever seen stands there.

Probably.

His hair is thick, a little on the long side, and a deep dark brown. It compliments his face. Oh God, his face is divine. With high cheekbones and a strong jaw, the angles and planes make him look like an ancient warrior. His eyes are piercing blue, seeming to penetrate through me. He resembles the

figure I pictured. He is lean but toned and takes up a fair portion of the doorway. Six foot something of deliciousness.

“I’m glad you’re awake,” the man says, his voice deep and gravelly. He steps in and shuts the door behind him, standing before me and crouching to peer into my eyes. I could get lost in those eyes of his. Two pools of crystalline blue, ready to devour me and my secrets. “How do you feel?”

I ponder the question... I feel fantastic. I flex my muscles, stretching my legs and toes. I reach up to the sky and flex my back. There is no pain. I can’t see any visible marks from glass or debris. How long have I been asleep?

“I feel amazing.”

He reaches for my face, gently pressing his palm to my cheek and stroking me with his thumb. I could sink into his touch if it were possible. Warm and inviting, I just want him to touch me more.

“Are you thirsty?” His voice is strange. It carries a certain weight to it. Right when he mentions it, a sudden dryness fills my throat.

“Parched.” I almost whisper, my hand grasping the base of my neck.

The man nods and walks to the dresser. A cup sits there, and I have no idea if it has been there for a while or if he’d brought it with him. I am too busy examining his features instead of looking at his hands. At my side again, he passes the cup to me. It is warm in my hands. I can’t see what it is, the cup has a

lid and straw. Ever so carefully, I suck on the warm liquid, not wanting to burn my tongue.

I don't have a comparison for the drink as it hits my mouth. It tastes so pure, so delicious, like heaven. It is warm and thick, and reminds me of the lakeside. Still, I drink deeply, not stopping until I hear a loud slurping sound coming from the cup. This man, my savior, chuckles and takes the cup from me, setting it aside. "Better?" I nod, and he kneels before me. He places his hands on the bed, one on either side of me, caging me in. Attraction cuts through me to my center, and my nerves flare to life. He is so close, closer than a stranger usually would be. I can smell lemongrass and iron. Is he mine?

Images play in my head, a man with a friendly face and graying beard. A woman with smile lines on her face, grinning, laughing. Children. So many, too many. A man with a brooding stare and a tense jaw. Each of these images fills me with emotion. Until the end, that emotion is warm and happy. The last one feels like a punch to the gut. I shake my head. I don't want to think about that one. Is this my family?

My fingers rise to my temple again. I'd hit my head hard. Did that take it all away? Every memory before the accident is just gone.

"I'm Oz," his voice soft and smile warm, welcoming. "I pulled you from the lake and brought you to my home."

Oz.

Sparkling red shoes. Singing. Dancing.

Then the flashes are gone as fast as they'd arrived.

Not mine.

Disappointment washes over me. If Oz is introducing himself, then he doesn't belong to me. I had hoped he could fill in the blanks of what happened. I raise my eyes to meet his, "I don't know who I am." Tears begin to form with my admission.

Immediately his smile falls, and he cups my face in his hands. The skin of his palms is rough and calloused, but his grip is gentle. Eyes search mine, he is looking for answers I don't have. "You don't remember?"

I can't stop the tears that escape. "Not really. I remember flashes. A car, water, and... you. You saved me?"

Nodding, he uses his thumb to wipe away my tears. "I know little about you, but I know your name. You're Wren." He gestures to a bag sitting on the side table. "Your bag as well."

It sounds foreign to me.

Wren.

A little brown bird dances into my mind before taking flight.

I can feel my brow furrow. The harder I try to remember anything, the further away it gets. "Thank you for saving me."

Oz smiles at me, but this time it is different like he is masking a kind of sadness behind it. "You're very welcome, Wren." I like the way my name sounds coming from his

mouth. “Do you remember what happened when I pulled you from the water?”

I frown, trying to conjure the memory again. “I remember you... kissed my neck? And then... then I drank something warm, like what I just drank but different. Not tasty.” I am confused. Why would he be kissing my neck? My hand goes up to it, touching the spot where his mouth had been. He reaches his hand out and places it on mine.

“It wasn’t a kiss, Wren. I bit you and took your blood.” He maintains eye contact with me. I am lost in his eyes and can’t look away. Somehow, as crazy as it sounds, I know what he told me is the truth. “You drank my blood in return. That’s how I was able to save you. You were dying, Wren, so I changed you to be like me. I made you a vampire.”

I manage to snap out of it and a peal of laughter escapes me. “A vampire? That’s ridiculous!” I dismiss his words, turning my head to look around the rest of the room.

Oz grabs my head, forcing me to look at him. While his grip is rough, his voice is smooth and calm. “No, Wren. It’s the truth. I turned you, and now you’re like me.”

The honesty of his words crashes into me hard.

Of course, he isn’t lying. It makes sense. I am fully healed and feel amazing. Somehow I know it hasn’t been that long since the accident. Maybe a day?

“Why?” I still don’t understand. “Why change me?”

“I couldn’t let you die. You-” he trails off for a second and takes a breath. “You tried so hard to survive. You called for help, and you almost made it out of the lake on your own. I didn’t get to ask you what you wanted, but I decided to err on the side of you waking up again.”

My eyes can’t settle in one place for too long. Thick drapes over the windows, a door where he came from, a door to my left, presumably to a bathroom. He had pulled me from the water, made me a vampire, and brought me to his home for no reason other than I was dying. I shake my head, rubbing the spot on my temple like it would return my memories.

“It’s just so much to process.” I know he is being honest. I know I am a vampire, and he’d probably just had me drink blood.

My mind is reeling; this is too much to take in, and I can’t remember what was before. I am suddenly very aware of the fact that my heart isn’t beating. I am dead.

Am I un-dead? I’m not human anymore.

What.

The.

Fuck.

Oz sits on the edge of the bed, looking down at the floor like he is riddled with guilt. “I had to save you. I couldn’t just... I couldn’t watch you die.” It is like he is afraid I am mad at him or something. As if I wish he’d just let me go. I am confused

and I am shocked. But I'm not angry or resentful. He had the power to do the impossible, and he did it.

“What does all of this mean for me?”

I look at Oz and see the corners of his mouth turn up in a smile. He looks smug. “Now, you live happily ever after.”

“Ha, ha.” I roll my eyes.

Dropping the smirk, I see he is deep in thought and worry. Something tells me my memory loss had more to do with my accident than it had to do with the whole vampire thing, and that bothers him.

“Now... Now we try to trigger your memory to return.” He looks at me, a pained expression on his face. “I don't know why it happened. I can only guess it's because of head trauma during the accident. But the turning should have fixed that....”

Fixed?

Ah yes, like my arm and other wounds, why wouldn't it heal my mind?

I feel something stir within me.

Familiar.

And terrifying.

Almost like me, but not me. She feels more raw. Primal. And she is still hungry.

Ice creeps through me as the image of the cruel woman in my nightmares comes to my mind.

“Oz,” I say, struggling to describe this exactly, feeling like my grasp on reality is fading. “I think I’m still thirsty. I feel... I feel like there’s someone else in here, and she wants more to eat.”

His eyes widen for a second, but he tries to hide it. “You didn’t merge with her?”

Merge? Well, that sounds terrifying.

Is that what she had meant by ‘*become*?’

“When a vampire is born, we gain another sense of self,” he explains. “It merges with our existing selves and helps us govern our new instincts and abilities. This is most unusual.” The sound of warning in his voice sits heavy on my mind. Shame washes over me as I realize I fought her. She is the epitome of my every fear.

“I don’t know why it didn’t happen with you, but one thing at a time. I will go get you some more blood.”

Oz returns a few minutes later with pouches that look like donor blood. My stomach doesn’t even turn over when he offers them to me. I am so hungry that I drink the blood quickly. After the third pouch, I finally feel full. The raw part of me settles back down with a purr, satisfied for now. At least the woman didn’t insist on prowling through me as she did before. Still, the sensation is incredibly odd, like an extra mind inside me.

“The sun will be rising soon,” Oz told me. “I’ll let you get some rest. At sundown, I’ll come to get you and introduce you

to the rest of the coven, and we can start trying to get that memory of yours working again.”

“Thank you,” I say. “For saving me, for turning me, for guiding me through this.” I didn’t know much, but I knew he didn’t have to do any of the things he’d done for me. He could’ve just let me die and rot in that lake. I would never be able to repay him.

“You’re welcome,” his smile is sincere. “See you at sundown, little bird,” he added before leaving the room. I cut the light off and crawl back under the quilt, tuck myself in, and try to remember something about myself.

Anything.

Sleep washes over me, and flashes of those same faces spin in my head all day as I dream.



CHAPTER FOUR

THE SONGBIRD

Opening my eyes, I'm half hoping everything has been a strange dream. Looking around the room again, I realize this is my reality. It is exciting to be given immortality. I sit up and push the quilt off me, stretching my muscles as much as possible. Feeling them go taut without pain is intoxicating.

Yesterday, when I woke up, I'd assumed I was in some guest room. But looking around, I think this room belongs to someone. There's artwork on the walls, primarily landscapes of rolling hills. The fireplace across from the bed has a sword hanging above the mantle. It looks antique and probably is. No pictures. I see a few pieces of metalwork figurines that look like they were created from scrap metal.

I am drawn to the little metal sculptures.

On the dresser is a dog, a horse, and what looks like a bear. I resist the temptation to rifle through the drawers. Instead, I cross to the desk and find another figurine shaped like a large cat. Maybe a mountain lion? Another dog is here too. No, not

a dog, a wolf. I pick this one up, turning it over in my fingers as I examine it. The pieces formed and welded together. Whoever did this is talented.

Opening the drapes, I'm not surprised to see the night sky lit up with the moon and stars. I wish I knew the constellations...

A nagging feeling at the back of my head turns my attention to the bag on the bedside table. It is a plain, simple brown canvas bag. A small pocket on the outside, a large zippered compartment, and bronze fastenings. It sits on the table as a landmine sits below ground like it could blow up my life rather than shed light on it.

I am afraid to look for answers, but I have no choice.

Taking the purse and sitting on the bed, I unzip the main compartment and do the only logical thing I can think to do. I dump the entire contents on the bedspread. Out drops a red leather wallet with a clear plastic film over the top of a card that carries a smiling me and my information. A small brush with a hair tie wrapped around the handle, a tube of chapstick, a pack of spearmint gum, and a key with a green plastic diamond-shaped fob chained to it. One side read "Catskill Cabin Getaways" in yellow writing, and the other had a matching yellow number five.

I pluck the leather wallet from the small pile and examine the license first. I learn that my birth date is May 13th, 1999, and my full name is Wren Ellison Butler. I stare at my picture, trying to make a memory come forward. The ID was issued recently, which means my address is probably correct. It is in

some place called Cornerville. I look at what else is in the wallet.

A debit card and a couple of credit cards are useless to me since I am technically dead. A business card catches my eye. It is glossy and expensive. In bold at the top is the name Small Starts, Big Dreams Advertising. My name is further below, with a couple of phone numbers and a work email. Apparently, I am a graphic designer. Nothing else.

I suppose it's a start.

A knock sounds at the door.

Inviting someone into a room that isn't mine still seems odd.

"Come in," I call anyway.

Oz comes into the room with a cup, presumably of blood for me, and sets it on the table where the bag had been. He eyes the pile of things on the bed and sits beside me, his head cocked with interest. "Jog any memories?"

I shake my head and sigh, stuffing everything back into the bag. "No, but I learned my full name and date of birth. I'm an organ donor. There was also this," I hand over the key to the cabin getaway. I grasp the cup from the table and begin sipping my dinner. That primal vampire inside of me hasn't stirred again, and I want to keep it that way.

"I know this place, and it's not that far. Maybe we could go check out the cabin and see if your things are there?" He examines the key closely, seemingly pondering something.

"Okay, we could go tonight, maybe?"

Oz opens his mouth to say something, but before he can, in waltzes the most beautiful woman. She is breathtaking. Tall, leggy, and blond. She is dressed in a harder style, all torn denim and leather. Her makeup is dark and severe, but it suits her. “Wren, this is Charlee, my sister, more or less.”

I reach out my hand to shake hers on instinct when she knocks it aside and pulls me into a hug instead. She is fast. It catches me off guard, but it is such a good, solid hug that I quickly return it. She smells like something flowery and wood smoke. The mixing of the scents is oddly comforting. “It’s so nice to meet you. I can’t tell you how excited I am to have more feminine energy around here.” Her accent has mild European vibes. She pulls back from the hug. “I’ve got a bunch of clothes we can work with, so you don’t have to keep wearing Oz’s sweats.”

Oz’s? So this is his room?

“Thanks. It’s great to meet you too. Are there not a lot of female vampires?” I have so many questions.

“We have a fair amount of women in our coven in general, but staying here, in particular, you two are the only ones.” Charlee rolls her eyes.

“It’s because my brothers are ridiculous. They have kind hearts, don’t get me wrong, but they are very aggravating.” I smile. It sounds like a family.

The woman’s face with laugh lines flies into my mind again. Family. Is this my mother? She is gone almost as fast as she came. “I look forward to meeting everyone, but uh, I have a

question about my clothes..." I gesture to what I am wearing. "What happened to what I had on?"

Oz wouldn't look at me. "I, uh, I changed you out of them. They were covered in glass and blood and soaking wet from the lake."

He changed my clothes...

"And I'm sure he was the perfect gentleman about it," Charlee interrupts. "Knights and all, the whole *honor* thing. It would be dull if it weren't so endearing," She teases. "Off with you, Oz, I'm going to help get Wren here presentable, and we'll meet you boys downstairs in a bit."

Heading for the door, Oz looks back at me for a brief moment. His expression is hard to read. I get the distinct feeling he wants to tell me more than he has. Maybe it just isn't the time or place. In any case, Charlee reaches into the hall and pulls about four bags filled with clothes into the room before shutting the door. "No memory means you don't even know what style you liked to wear, so I brought *options*." She lays the clothes out on the bedspread.

There are jeans, leggings, skirts, dresses, shirts, blouses, and sweaters. Any style I could enjoy has some outfit possible out of these options. I am getting stressed out from the choices, though. "I'm going to go take a shower first. I still smell like the lake," at least, I think that's the smell I can't get out of my nose.

Charlee nods. "Go right ahead, bathroom's through there," indicating the door I saw the night before. "I'm going to run

your cup downstairs and get some of my makeup.” She winks at me and leaves the room.

She seems genuinely happy to have another woman to do this sort of thing with. Her zest for life is contagious. I step into the bathroom and see my reflection for the first time.

I gasp.

Uncertain as to why, but I thought my reflection would be gone.

Was that random vampire knowledge that happened not to be true?

My hair is messy, and I curse that it had looked so unruly the whole time Oz and Charlee were in the bedroom. I fiddle with the knobs in the shower and get the hot water pouring in, steam rises and fills the bathroom quickly. A fresh towel is folded neatly with its other towel brethren on a storage rack. I move it to hang it on the hook by the shower, marveling at its softness.

Everything is the best material.

It seems when you have forever, you can amass a bit of wealth.

The shower feels heavenly. Hot water cascades over my body, and I let it wash over my face for several minutes before looking for soap. Grasping some body wash, I give it a sniff. It is passably decent. A masculine scent. Woodsy tones, like pine, which makes sense since we were in the mountains.

Oz has given up his room for a random woman in a car wreck because he couldn't stand to let me die. I smile and reach for the shampoo. This one smells like lemongrass. Like Oz. I scrub my hair and rinse it thoroughly. I finally feel clean, unable to smell a hint of lake anymore.

Cutting off the water and wrapping myself in the thick fluffy towel, I grab another for my hair. I am gently scrunching to get the water out. A comb sits on the sink. Perfect. I take it in hand, but I pause before I can put it to my hair. A copper-toned strand of hair is stuck in the teeth. A closer inspection reveals a few more just like it.

Had he combed my hair too?

It probably shouldn't be surprising, but it touches me that I was treated with such care and consideration when I can't even remember it.

What was it Charlee had said? Chivalry and honor? Knight? I guess Oz was old. Centuries old. That is certainly intriguing.

Charlee is waiting back in the bedroom, and together we find something I like and feel nice in. It is simple leggings and a T-shirt with a button-up sweater. She declares I must have had a "cozy" style when I was human. "I own a shop in Callery," she says. "I'll grab a few things from there that will fit you and your vibe. Till then, I'll leave some jeans and tops." She went above and beyond what I expected in the clothes department.

After dressing, I can do nothing to deter her from wanting to do my makeup. "Not too much," I say, biting my lip. I get the

feeling that I wasn't good at makeup. It frightens me to see all the products.

"Look, makeup is an art form," she states, brushing color onto my eyelids. "Wear it for yourself, for fun, and you'll always look beautiful. Not that you need any help there! Your skin is gorgeous, and I absolutely love your freckles. Being a vampire has a lot of benefits. Clear skin and tiny pores are probably my favorites." I let her carry the conversation. I have no memory, so it isn't like I can offer anything other than questions.

When she moves on to blush, she holds my chin to keep me steady. The smiling woman is in my head again. She held my chin this way once, then leaned back when she was done dabbing something on my face before declaring I was "Perfect!" Charlee squeals, breaking me out of my memory. "Oh my God, Wren, go look at yourself. I'm a genius!"

I scramble to the bathroom, and my lips part.

I love Charlee.

She listened when I said, "Not too much," and went with a natural look. Light brown shadow to give me depth, with a bit of golden shimmer for some pizzazz. Cherry blush gives my skin just a kiss of color, and I don't remember her coming at me with lipstick, but there is a gentle stain of red with a slight sheen of gloss. The brown mascara and eyeliner keep my eyes from looking too harsh, and whatever she does to my eyebrows makes them look fantastic. She used a bit of everything, but it doesn't feel like my skin is suffocating.

“Charlee, I’m beautiful!” I credit everything to her handy work.

“Shush, you were already gorgeous. I just helped bolster it.”

I hug her again. It feels good to have someone help me do these things. Maybe I will find that I loved doing them before, but until that day comes, I will take all the help I can get to feel normal.



It turns out Charlee wants to “show me off” to the rest of the coven. It is embarrassing, but she assures me I have nothing to be embarrassed about. So what if I had been in a horrific car crash, I am part of the family now. She also informs me that most of the coven had worse death stories than mine, and many, if not most, had been rescued on the brink of death.

I discover the house is a big modern home tucked into a bunch of tree cover. Large windows in the living space give a fantastic view of the mountains rolling around us, and the other direction has a nice view of Callery. An open concept lets the entryway, living room, kitchen, and dining area flow nicely into one another. There are two staircases, each leading to a landing with several doors lining the wall.

It seems like an odd amount of bedrooms, but I remind myself this is a coven that probably had the house custom-built for their needs. All the furniture is mismatched, blending

the different personalities of this family. “The boys,” Charlee called her brothers. There were Oz and six other vampires.

Introductions are made, and I try hard to remember everyone’s names. Rolando, who Oz also turned into a vampire. He has kind eyes and seems bookish. When he smiles at me, though, I think I catch a flick of his eyes to Oz. Does he know something I don’t?

Rolando is making a digital archive of all of the coven member journals to have a detailed history. He shows me the crates of leather-bound books he is hoarding like a dragon in the study that has become his cave. I’m immediately intrigued, and my mind drifts back to the business card I found in my things. Maybe I can be helpful here?

“Right now I’m transcribing this old journal of Leland’s” He shows me a book that is centuries old with faded writing. Even with vampire sight, I can barely make out the lettering. No wonder he wants to preserve all of this history.

In walk two men, one tall and lean with short brown hair and kind eyes. Rolando calls him Zach. The other man has dark tan skin, and short black wavy hair, and despite his baggy clothing, I can tell he has a fair amount of compact muscle beneath. His name is Chandra.

Rolando explains that Zach was found being slowly compressed to death in a silo after a mishap led to him falling into his grain. It turns out, Chandra had been passing by that day and used his strength to tear the silo apart and get Zach out. The pair is pretty clearly an item.

Zach is quiet but has a warm smile that he offers me when Oz gestures to him in turn. Chandra, it turns out, is the mouthpiece of the relationship. He takes my hands in his and stares deeply into my eyes. Dark brown, rich in their color, and filled with a serene sincerity that is captivating. A hint of danger lies behind it all, and when he gives my hands a gentle squeeze, I realize I have tensed and force myself immediately to relax.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Wren.” He says, and each word sounds rich in my ears. He tells me about his life in India, but before he can get to the part where he became a vampire, three more of the family tumble in.

Alex, Raymond, and Derek are referred to almost as a unit, and just as I’m wondering if they’re brothers, Oz sidles up beside me, nudging my shoulder with his, and murmurs, “Triplets. Fraternal, of course.” I see small differences between the brothers, but they all share the same crooked smile.

Alex, who seems good-natured and joyful, throws his arms around me in a big bear hug, fully lifting me off the ground before setting me back down. “Welcome to the family,” he all but shouts, ruffling my hair.

Quickly, I try to smooth it back out, but Raymond takes his turn to also hug me, much more gently than his brother had. “It’s nice to meet you, Wren,” he said, his voice softer.

Derek brought up the rear, and approached with his hands shoved in his pockets. “Yeah, welcome to the land of the

dead.” Morbid, but there is a hint of a smirk on his face.

I smile back. “Pretty limber for a dead girl, huh?”

His smirk broadened into an actual smile and he clapped me on the shoulder. “Quite a pistol, you’ll fit right in!”

The atmosphere is friendly and communal. My focus is split between watching everyone and speaking with them. I am amazed at their effortless existence with one another. Everyone in harmony while they each did their own distinct hobby or activity. Zach and Chandra excuse themselves to go spar outside. Charlee left to check on her shop in Callery for the night, and Rolando returns to his work. The triplets take off after Charlee to spend the night out, leaving me alone with Oz and Rolando.

Oz lightly takes my arm and says, “They were in pretty bad shape when Leland found them about a century ago.” He gestures at the door they just left through.

Leland.

The leader.

Apparently, he is away on some important business, so I won’t meet him until later.

“Strange to have three brothers all turned, or are blood relations common?” I turn to look at him. An involuntary gasp escapes as I take him in. I don’t know if it is all the confusion of being new, but I couldn’t see him clearly when we were upstairs. Here though, I can see the light tan of his skin, and

the angles and planes of his face are sharp. I almost miss his response.

Is it the haze of being new that did it? I thought he was attractive before, but this is different. Something in my brain screams at me to focus my attention on Oz.

“No, they are unique.”

Attraction pulses through me, and I suddenly wonder what his lips feel like. They are full and look incredibly soft. A quick memory of him pressing those lips to my neck and biting into me comes without permission. He seems to tense up beside me and quickly excuses himself, entering the kitchen. I allow my eyes to roam, and as he bends to get something from the fridge, I admire the shape of his backside.

He fumbles with whatever he is getting out, and when he pulls his torso back into view, I see he is holding a blood pack.

“So what do you like to do, Wren,” Rolando asks me. “Besides admire the scenery.” I pull my eyes off Oz and see Rolando looking at me pointedly. My eyes dart away quickly, and it suddenly feels very hot in the room.

“I’m not sure. I was enjoying the art upstairs,” I say quickly, trying to gloss over the fact that I’d been caught. “And my business card says I am a graphic designer, so maybe I like to create art myself. I guess I’ll get to experiment and figure it out.”

His dark hair falls into his eyes, and I swear he cuts a glance to Oz and then back to me. He smiles and he lets me get away with viewing the “scenery.” I relax a little. “We have a run to town tomorrow,” he says. “I’ll pick up a sketchbook, and we can see if you’re a hidden artistic genius.”

I doubt I’m good at much of anything, I thought, self-conscious about the possibility of a hidden talent.

“I bet you’re good at more than you know,” Oz pipes up from the kitchen.

Random.

I guess my face looks confused, and Rolando’s sure does.

Oz looks back and forth between us. “Graphic designer, art enthusiast. I’m certain you have an affinity for it somehow. If not, we have forever to figure out where your talents lie.”

Time for me to head to bed rolls around but I want to talk to Oz first. He is lost in thought about something, staring out at the sky that is beginning to lighten. I glance at the heavy-duty blackout panels of curtains, wondering how long before they would be drawn shut. “Oz,” I say, and he turns his attention to me. “I’m in your room, aren’t I?”

Nodding, he asks, “Yes, and is everything to your liking? If not, let me know, and we can make some changes for you.”

I shake my head. “No, everything’s wonderful. It’s just that since it’s your room, you should take it back. I don’t mind surfing the couch.” I add the last part, patting the sofa beside me.

“Absolutely not,” he said, his tone firm. “I insist. It’s fine.”

“Okay, if you’re sure.” I still feel weird about it.

“I am. And about the cabin?”

I look at him with hopeful eyes. We hadn’t made it tonight, but maybe soon?

“We could go by tomorrow if you like.”

I smile and wrap my arms around him in a hug. He stiffens for just a moment before settling his arms around me and hugging me back. Oz’s warmth seeps through to me, and I feel him rest his face on the top of my head. I didn’t want to let go. I wanted him to step back, tilt my chin, and kiss me.

I wanted Oz to pick me up, sit me on the kitchen counter and-

Pulling back and releasing me, Oz gives me a smile that seems tinged with what looks like pain. “Goodnight, little bird.”

“Goodnight, oh great and powerful wizard.”

I say nothing as a puzzled look falls over his face. Instead, I turn around, smirk to myself, and go upstairs. I may not remember my friends, family, or what I did for a living, but I could never forget Dorothy and the yellow brick road. I don’t know why it is there, at the ready, but the look on Oz’s face was priceless.

Closing the curtains in Oz’s room, I wash my face and look for something suitable to sleep in. Charlee hadn’t left

anything, but I don't want to sleep in the nude. Biting my lower lip, I pull open one of Oz's drawers, then another. I find some T-shirts. Slipping a black one over my head, I'm not surprised when it falls below my ass. I need to get some underwear. Laughing at my reflection, I climb under the comfy quilt on Oz's bed.

Faces swim in front of me again. The woman and the man with the graying beard. Were they my parents? Sadness seeps in as I struggle to hold onto any image for more than a few seconds. Sleep claims me just as a tear rolls down my cheek.



CHAPTER FIVE

THE WARRIOR

Watching my mate climb the stairs to my room, I realize it is getting harder to hide the bond we share. I'd accidentally reacted to her thoughts, despite my best efforts not to listen in earlier. I want her and yearn to be near her. I want to take her in my arms and never let her go.

She feels the same pull but doesn't understand what it means. Is it cruel to keep it from her? I struggled with the dilemma when I realized she had no memories. When I turned her, I expected her to wake like we all did, fully remembering her human life and experiences and having merged with the primal vampire part of herself that awakens during the transition. I'd expected her to remember me from the store, the attraction to me that she'd felt. That she would remember and give me a way to explain. That she would *feel* it, and it would make sense to her.

While I could dive into it, tell her about vampire mate bonds, tell her we have one, it feels wrong. I don't want to hold her to the bond when she doesn't know who she was before all this.

No. I won't act on it until her memories return. I vow to help her find herself again, and damn however my body feels about it.

Though, when I heard her admiring my features, wishing I would kiss and take her, I couldn't help but want to act on my feelings. It takes everything I have not to give in. To not offer what she wants from me, I would give her anything. She is truly beautiful inside and out and I marvel that she's mine. Her hair reminds me of sunshine on iron, and the freckles that scatter across her face seem to call to me. I want to know each one, memorize their positions, and find patterns in them.

What if she never remembers her past?

I shudder at the thought. I can only imagine how terrible it would be not to know yourself. To wake and hear the impossible words of vampire, immortal, and not remember what was before. She might become a new person, build new memories, and discover things about herself that could be different than they used to be, and she'd never even know it.

If that happens, if she has truly lost her past, I will help her build a future. I will let the relationship develop as naturally as I can, with minimal influence from the bond. Then, and only then, will I let myself reveal this connection.

I pull the tall, thick drapes shut. I don't exactly need to rest. But I have already spent two days awake. In between my moments checking on Wren, I have to keep things running smoothly for the coven until Leland returns. I am weak like

this though, so tonight, I should rest. I've already fed, so a good day's sleep and I will be good as new.



Catskill Cabin Getaways is about ten minutes from the general store I first met Wren in. They are commonly used as a romantic destination for newly wed couples who favor mountain air over sandy beaches or, in Wren's case, a failing relationship. We walk there, avoiding the road so no one will see us sneaking on the property. The news revealed that she is currently 'missing,' but that officials are assuming the worst.

Spencer was found and saved, though he is still unconscious, and authorities are trying to get permission to search the lake for her body. Since it is considered part of a national park, there is a lot of red tape to go through.

I need to tell Wren about the man who abandoned her in the car. Just not tonight. Tonight we are going to see if any other personal items remain behind. I hope something will be enough to give her back her memory and spare me the difficult task of revealing Spencer's betrayal.

Cabin number five is nothing fancy, just enough for two. It doesn't look like anyone has come by to investigate yet. Likely without Spencer being awake, they don't know exactly where the couple had been staying. Fortunate for us to get here first.

Wren is tense, and I wish I could do more to ease that sense of foreboding that I feel growing within her. I can't even acknowledge that I know what she is feeling without outing the connection we share. It is awful, and I am beginning to feel like I am *lying*.

Maybe I am.

No matter how noble it might be, I'm not okay with blatantly lying to her.

The key grants us access to the cabin easily enough, and with only one room to search, I let Wren meander at her leisure. There is a suitcase, two duffel bags on the bed, some bags of food that won't spoil, and what looks like a toiletry bag sitting on the sink in the bathroom.

"It looks like I came here with someone," she tells me, going through the first bag, which holds men's clothing. A flash of irritation and anger at Spencer surges through me, unwelcome but present all the same.

This is my chance. I can tell her everything. Tell her how we first met, what happened with her and her boyfriend, and that he lives on... Or I can at least tell her what was on television. "I saw on the news that your accident had a survivor, a man named Spencer Brown." It isn't a lie. Technically. I won't color her view of anything with my opinion if I can help it. She looks at me curiously, mouthing the name to herself.

She rubs the spot on her temple that had been bleeding profusely when I pulled her from the water, I watch as her face falls into a frown. "I feel like I know his face... but I don't

know anything else. Other than that, I don't like the feeling I get when I think about him." I would be a stronger man if I didn't feel a sense of happiness at her words. She doesn't like Spencer. With good reason, even if she can't recall it. "Did you see anyone else at the lake?"

I was hoping she wouldn't ask me that, and as much as I don't want to admit it, I am going to tell her the truth.

"Yes. I did."

Her eyes peer at me with an emotion I can't name. It isn't strong enough to force itself through the mate bond, and I don't want to pry. I hope it is just curiosity and not anger that I haven't mentioned this until now.

"I heard you cry for help, still in the car as it sank. When I arrived at the lake, I saw this man, this Spencer, swimming to shore. He was hurt, but he'd left you behind. I'm not ashamed to admit I saved you and left him. Though I did make sure an ambulance was called when I got you home." I hold her gaze the entire time I speak. Just as I said, there is no shame in my decision. He doesn't deserve her pity and certainly doesn't deserve mine.

I watch Wren's brows knit together. She bites her bottom lip and turns her attention to the other duffel bag, unzipping it and pulling out some clothes. Jeans, sweaters, tank tops, and t-shirts. I can see something lacy from here, but she leaves that inside the bag. Thank heavens because if I had to picture her in whatever lingerie she'd brought on her trip, I don't know if I'd be able to stop myself from making an advance.

“He left me?” Her voice seems sad and distant, and I hate Spencer all the more.

“Yes. He did.” I probably could have hidden the venom in my voice a little better. I may not be human, but I am still an imperfect man.

She nods, and the pain on her face is unmistakable.

Before I know what I am doing, I am kneeling at her feet, taking her hands in mine, unable or unwilling to stop myself. “Wren,” I reach up and brush my thumb against her cheek. “I do not know exactly what was happening in your relationship with this man before the day of your accident. But I do know, if he would let you go, then he isn’t worth your sadness.”

Her breath hitches, and I see her desperately fighting back her tears. “I’m glad he lived, even if he didn’t make an effort for me. I want to give the benefit of the doubt, but we may have been having problems....”

“How can you tell?”

She holds up a journal that she had slipped out of the bag when I wasn’t looking. “I apparently wrote about some trouble in the relationship.” My heart sinks to see her in such pain. I move beside her on the bed and wrap my arms around her shoulders. That seems to be the cue for her tears to fall in earnest as she clutches herself to me. The bag falls to the floor, and I lean her back onto the bed, holding her through the pain as best as possible.

Her human life is gone, without even the ability to remember it, and the few ties she'd made to her past were colored with sadness. We lay there for a while, I'm not exactly sure how long, but I don't let go until she does.

"Sorry," she mumbles, palming her tears away.

"Don't ever be sorry for needing support, little bird. I will gladly give you whatever you need." I press my forehead against hers, wishing I could take the pain from her entirely. Wren's hands slide to my face, her warm breath against mine. I know I should pull away. She is hurting, and she doesn't know what she is doing.

I lace my fingers with one of her hands and pull it from my cheek, only to bring it to my lips. Ever so gently, I brush them against her knuckles, my body already stirring from her closeness. It would be so easy to give in to my feelings, and I desperately want to. Forcing myself to pull away slightly, I brush a rogue section of hair behind Wren's ear.

"Tell me about the coven," her voice is soft, curiosity about her new family shining through as she fights to move on from a past she can't even remember. Her eyes remind me of the rolling storm clouds overhead the day I chased after her. Confusion and a hint of sadness peek out at me, but behind all of that, a glimmer of hope.

"What would you like to know?"

"Are there more members than the ones I've met?"

“Yes, there are.” I roll onto my back and tuck one arm behind my head. “We have a lot of members that live in the city, and they check in from time to time. Several that like to wander and travel around the world, they check in less frequently, but still show up for major events.”

I haven’t seen many of them in decades, some centuries, but it is nice knowing they’re out there somewhere.

“Have *you* turned many vampires?”

She sounds almost jealous. I feel a sly smile cross my face. I like that she is a little possessive. It is the bond, and while I’m not acting on it, it is good to know it is there for her too.

“You are my third.”

For obvious reasons, Wren is also my favorite. She seems to like my answer, but I can already anticipate her next question. “Rolando, me, and who else?”

Wren curls up into my side, finding a nook at my shoulder and resting her head on me. Her warmth is something I want to dive into and submerge myself in. Instinct has me shift and bring my other arm around, resting my hand on her hip. I look down at her, unable to resist marveling at the uncanny events that led to finding Wren. Fate, luck, the gods, whatever it is that brought us together had a fucking awful sense of humor. Stealing her thoughts and making it so much more complicated than it needs to be.

“Herbert Sutton,” pride fills my voice. Rolando was my first, Herbert was my second, and while Herb doesn’t stay with us

locally, he is an enigma. “He runs a wellness center in California right now, helping people who struggle with addiction. He leaves about every ten years and sets up again elsewhere. That’s usually when we can expect him to check in.”

Wren raises her eyes to meet mine, staring into me. Her thoughts are screaming at me again. Images flash of her running her hands up my stomach, of our lips crashing together in fiery heat and passion. I can tell how she wants me to grasp her thighs, spread them apart, and take her here and now. I try to quiet them, to distance my mind from hers.

Our breath mingles together. I fight to keep my wits when all I want to do is roll on top of her and give her exactly what she wants. It is so messed up. I don’t know much about how mates work, but something tells me it will be harder to be around Wren until we act upon and seal the bond. Every fiber of my being wants her, and fate seems pretty pissed that I am resisting. My hand is absently stroking her shoulder, and her face is far too close to mine.

More flashes of Wren pressing her lips to mine, of pulling my shirt off and admiring what lay beneath. She gives me far too much credit as far as my physique goes. Christ, it is driving me slowly insane to keep getting these glimpses. As much as I want to be near her, as much as I want to get to know her, we have to call it a night.

“We should probably get going soon,” I remind gently. The last thing we want is for someone to see her here, knowing she

is technically missing.

“Yes, we should leave.” Her words agree, but I don’t miss the reluctance in her tone. “I don’t think I will get my memory back from this anyway. Let’s go home.”

Home.

Warmth spreads through my chest at the word. She thinks of my home as hers now.

It is.

It always will be.



**CHAPTER
SIX**

THE WARRIOR

The evening wears on, and the house stirs. Charlee is already tending to Wren. I am glad that one of my sisters is staying locally with us. I can't imagine how it would have been if she had woken to a bunch of vampire men lurking about. It likely would have been more unsettling, at least.

Charlee herself is enthralled with having someone to dote on. In her one hundred and fifty years as a vampire, she has clung more to fashion than anything else. She designs clothes and runs shops in various cities. Now she has a living doll three rooms away. Her kindness and attention to detail make her the perfect stylist. She always listens to what the person she is helping wants.

When she first said makeup, I was a bit nervous. Charlee is beautiful, true, but her beauty includes high drama everything. Wren doesn't seem to be that kind of woman, if her tastes still match what they were when she was alive, then I am correct. Tonight she looks much the same as the day before. Even in its simplicity, it is enough to take my breath away.

So to speak.

Alex, Ray, and Derek are already outside building a bonfire. I am in the kitchen fixing everyone up a snack for the evening. Chandra and Zach are helping Rolando in the study. My thoughts drift to Leland, our coven leader, and my maker. He is traveling at the moment, meeting with some other high-level vampires, going over things like territory lines, and reporting the number of vampires in the area. He is responsible for most of the area, and his responsibilities are numerous. He has to help keep a lid on our existence and punish those unwilling to comply.

Getting permission from the coven leader before creating a new vampire isn't strictly required, especially when finding one's mate, but I am still nervous about his return. Nervous for him to meet her.

To meet Wren.

My beloved.

Shaking my head, I stuff my feelings down again and look up as Zach and Chandra go outside. Charlee and Wren are already out there, and I can hear Charlee's loud voice as she directs and supervises the bonfire building. I smile at the tray holding everyone's blood supply for the evening, and Rolando stops beside me.

"Answer me a question, Oz," He says, leaning against the counter.

His tone is almost accusatory. I look up. Being the first vampire I ever made, Rolando probably knows me better than I know myself. We've been together for over three hundred years. Always the inquisitive and scholarly type, he has a quiet disposition about him. Studying people and things, not unlike myself, so it makes sense that he could read me better than others. Though it doesn't mean I have to like it.

"What's that?" I pull my eyes away from his deep brown ones. I think I know where this is going.

"Wren." Just her name, a statement.

It is enough to make my jaw tense.

I can tell what he is getting at, but I'm not going to help him. I eye the door, and it is shut now. Chandra closed it as he joined the group outside. We are talking softly enough that no one should overhear us, at least not over the commotion going on outside.

"You come home with her bruised and bloody, a vampire in the making, and you tell me you heard her thoughts in your head." All true. "We both know that makes her your mate, so why are you keeping your distance? What gives?"

Two nights since she'd woken, and he knows I have stayed out of my room, far away from the temptation to give in to physical wants and cravings.

"I'd like to know the answer to that myself," I jump, freaking Charlee managed to sneak up on me. Rolando laughs at me silently, and I flash him a withering look. What if Wren

had overheard? The door is still shut. She is probably too distracted with the rest of the guys.

“Look, I don’t want to pressure her into anything. She just woke up, found out she’s a vampire, and can’t remember a thing about her past. If we’re going to be together, I want her to choose me because she wants me, not just because of something like fate or whatever decided for us.” It is as simple as that. “If she gets her memory back, I’ll tell her.”

Charlee narrowed her eyes. “And if she doesn’t?”

I run a hand through my hair. I dislike the thought that she might never recover the memories of her past. “I suppose then I’ll woo her.”

Rolando claps me on the shoulder. “Woo her, be her knight in shining armor?” he teases.

“Shut up,” I mumble, grabbing the completed tray and heading for the door. “Not a word, either of you,” I warn.



The fire itself is something to behold. Wood piled high, and while this may not be considered “safe” by forest ranger standards, we are private enough that they won’t notice it out here. We have the added benefit of being vampires and could stop a fire from spreading if anything happens.

Wren is sandwiched between Charlee and me, and I can feel the warmth pouring off of her. When she looks at me, her eyes

take my breath away. Their color looks so much like the storm clouds I love watching. A light breeze wafts the scent of lemongrass to me from her hair. She has been using my things in the bathroom, and having her smell like me is intoxicating and arousing. I shift my legs like a pubescent boy.

“I have to know,” she said, grinning at the antics of the triplets. “How did all three of you come to be vampires?”

“ORIGIN STORY TIME,” calls Charlee, getting Zach and Chandra to quit muttering off to the side by themselves and join the group.

Rolando even grows more attentive. He loves when we tell our origins, and it gives him more things to add to the archives. Granted, he knows precisely why the three were turned together. Hearing them recount the tale with more drama and flair than the last time is entertaining. The long and short of it is Tuberculosis. Somehow they manage to make it sound like they were on the run from the law and that the police were lucky they got sick.

The truth of it is far more dull. Leland and I had been passing through when we found the brothers. Each at death's door. Their parents were already taken by it, dead, and buried in the yard of their small farm. It seemed like they'd only had hours left. The decision had been easy for Leland, he hated to see people suffer.

It makes me think of what his reaction will be to meeting Wren. Will he praise me for saving her or condemn me for taking her choice away? Not that she had been in a position to

make a decision. Attributing the nerves to being something more akin to introducing your partner to your parents, I try to push the doubt from my mind. There is no reason Leland won't love Wren as a daughter. Especially since he knows she is my mate.

I still want to hold off on directly revealing that tidbit of information to her. It seems unfair to hold her to fate when she doesn't know who she is.

Wren's stormy gray eyes look up at me, and the conversations of now come rushing back to the forefront of my mind. It must be my turn to divulge how I became a vampire. A tale I am well practiced in telling. I take a long stick about as thick as two fingers and place the tip barely in the fire. Letting the wood smoke and embers set into it, but not allowing it to fully blaze in flame. "In 1291, I was born the third son of a nobleman in England. Being third in line for my father's title, I did what most "spares" did and set my sights on knighthood."

Taking the stick, I sketch a winding path, a cart, and a few stick figures in the dirt. I describe my training in detail. How grueling it had been, and how I received no special treatment. When I joined, I was in the same rank as the peasant boy beside me. My life was valued just as much.

I loved it.

I relive how I was kicked, punched, sliced with swords, bashed with shields, and earned my fair share of concussions. My armor was dinged and dirty more often than not, and by

the time I was twenty-six, I'd made a small name for myself. I was proud, too proud, certainly. Being a knight ensured I had enough food, even as famine crept across the lands. People began turning on each other for whatever meager supplies they had.

“The day I died, I did so in a noble pursuit. I died with honor.” Charlee is watching me with her head on her knees. She always loves this story. Rolando is scribbling away in his notebook. The triplets stare into the flames. Zach and Chandra close their eyes, possibly imagining the scene themselves.

Wren, however, is listening with rapt attention. Eying my crude drawing as I continue my story.

“I was riding down a road between towns and happened across a merchant being raided by thieves. He was an older man, and the four easily overcame him. I raced to aid him but was nowhere near fast enough.” I draw an X over the merchant's stick figure.

“That's when I, and the thieves, noticed his daughter. Leaping from my horse, I quickly impaled the man who'd reached the girl first. He pinned her to the ground, and we all know his intentions....” I mark out the figure closest to the representation of me.

“I faced the other three men, each bearing a weapon, and the girl kept herself behind me. I wouldn't let them pass. I couldn't. I was furious with these despicable excuses for men and let them know it. Antagonizing them into making a mistake.” I place an X on each one slowly. “The fight itself is

a blur now. Most of my fights relied heavily on muscle memory from training. I made quick work of the attackers and was happy to have cut them down.”

Yet I had been careless. I slowly place an X on myself.

“One of them had managed to jam a blade through a weak point in my chain mail. The girl fled, insisting she would go for help, and as the sun set on the road, I knew I would die. I’d accepted it. Staring up at the sky, I held my blood in as best as possible, but I felt my limbs growing cold. Leland came when it was almost too late. And he asked me the same question he asks everyone he’s ever turned.”

I do my best imitation of my maker. “He said to me, ‘Sir, would you like to live?’ I was hanging on by a thread, and trying to talk sent me spiraling into a coughing fit.” I can see Charlee and Rolando share a look between them. Charlee looks like she is fighting off the giggles. They knew precisely what Leland had said, and I’d left out of my story. I was well known in the area, and he had used my full name to address me. I never liked my name and see no point in bringing it up.

“I sputtered up blood, but he asked me again if I wanted to live. I finally croaked out a ‘yes,’ thinking I was making a deal with the Devil himself. He turned me right there on the road and carried me away. I never did find out if the girl came back for me....” I place an X over her figure now. She is long since dead.

Leland always laughs when I tell the part of the story where I thought he was the Devil. Because I was wrong, so damn

wrong. He is filled with kindness, respect, and empathy. I am the first human he ever turned, and I've stuck by his side all of these centuries because his values mirror mine.

Looking back at Wren now, it is like the rest of the world has faded away. I try to stay out of her head, I do. But her thoughts are so loud when she thinks about me. About my lips, about what it would feel like to twist her hands up in my hair and press herself against me. She wonders what my hands would feel like on her skin and if I am a generous lover as she pictures.

I blink and force myself to look away, my body reacting to her attraction. I want so badly to tell her. It isn't honorable to do so. I can't justify taking advantage of our bond until we know each other better or she had her memories. Until then, I will gladly suffer in silence.

Wishing everyone a peaceful sleep, I leave to go inside. Part of me notices that Wren gets up and follows me in. I want to turn around and pin her to the wall so badly. I know she wants me to, it is the way of the bond, but I underestimated how difficult it would be to fight it. That is with me knowing what is happening. She is stuck under its thrall with no idea what is causing it.

"Oz," her soft voice comes, grasping my hand and stopping me dead in my tracks.

Face controlled, I turn to look at her. Her hair is now piled high in a messy bun. The sweater she picked out clings to her subtle curves. "Yes?"

“I wanted to ask you about the figurines in your room.”

I can't help but grin. “Ah, yes, my sculptures?”

Returning the smile, Wren gives me the most curious look.
“You made those?”

Bobbing my head, unable to look the least bit sheepish, “I did. I've been smithing for a few centuries now and found I have a knack for making little trinkets.”

She seems to like that.

“Do you think you could show me the process? They're beautiful, and I'd love to see how it's done.”

“Of course, little bird.” When she throws her arms around me this time, I am entirely unprepared but thoroughly satisfied. Her warmth, her tenderness, her kindness. I could soak up every last drop that she has. I place a gentle kiss on her hair, reveling in the fact that she still smells like me.

It is getting harder and harder to resist the call of the bond, and I worry I will give in sooner rather than later.



CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SONGBIRD

*T*ears are streaking down my face. My throat is raw from sobbing, anger, and heartbreak fills me to the brim. The rain is heavy, and lightning is frequent. I am in the heaviest part of the storm, which rages as I do.

I don't know why I am so upset.

What happened to me?

What happened to us?

Visions of a man beside me, face wrapped in shadow. He feels ominous.

Dark.

Deadly.

Our tires lose traction and spin out of control. The car hits the guard rail and slides against it until we soar in the air. The rail then disappears, and without its support, the vehicle succumbs to gravity, and I fall.

Pressure across my chest, holding me to my seat.

Then it is gone.

Weightless.

Glass and metal twist around me until the water stops me from falling more.

Instead, I am sinking. I am begging for help. I am screaming for it. I am running out of air, out of time.

Pulling myself from the wreckage, my limbs are on fire, and my lungs are going to burst.

Darkness.

Nothingness.

My eyes flutter, and I see him.

Oz.

He takes me in his arms after returning me from death, only to give it to me again. But this time, this time he is there to guide me, to fill me with the blood of the immortals. To claim my soul as his.

*I drink, taking in his essence, and I **know** him.*

He clings to me, keeping me safe, and I hear a voice.

*I hear **his** voice.*

Mine...

It dances across my mind.

Faces flash around me. The woman, the man with the beard, the children... The other man tries to surface, but it feels like searing white-hot rage. I fight against that one. The woman

fills me with the most happiness. I hold her image close. I can feel her arms around me. Then, the children again. I can feel their little hugs and hear their laughter before they let me go.

My eyes open, and it feels like my heart is in a vice.

There are people out there who care for me, miss me, and I don't even know who they are.

I had hopes, dreams, and goals. My hands sweep over my stomach briefly, grieving for children I wouldn't have.

I may not remember my past, but something tells me that with all these kids I keep seeing, I wanted to be a mother one day. That chance is gone now unless you count making vampires.

Turning over on my side, I feel the tears come and let them spill. I have been so wrapped up in the magic of everything I've gained that I haven't considered everything I lost in the process. A sob escapes me, and I lay there wallowing in my misery. I vow to get it together. If I am going to figure out who I am, I need to accept what's happened. I need to face it head-on and not let it kick me around anymore. With my eyes dry this time, I repeatedly play the faces from my dreams in my head like a movie until sleep sucks me back down with it.



A knock sounds at the door. I open my eyes and sit up, I wipe my face, trying to hide any evidence of crying in my sleep. I

climb from the bed and open the door. Oz stands on the other side. His eyes at first are filled with concern, but they shift quickly. Light dances in them, and a smile spreads on his lips.

“Wren, I’m glad you’re awake,” he stands with his hands behind his back. He’s already dressed, wearing jeans and a plain T-shirt. What time is it? “I was wondering if you’d like to go on an adventure with me today?”

“What kind of adventure,” I tease, narrowing my eyes with mock suspicion.

Oz leans in and whispers, “If I told you, I’d have to kill you.”

“Too late.” I smile and laugh. It feels good like it is pushing the sadness outside my body. “But really, what do you have in mind?”

He thinks momentarily before raising one arm on the door frame and leaning into me. His whisper is much more authentic and genuinely secretive. “Without giving too much away,” I can feel the heat coming off him. I want him to pull me against him and press his lips against mine. There is no rational explanation for why I am so attracted to him. I just feel drawn to his entire presence. “I know a place nearby that I think you would love to see, but it’s a bit of a hike.”

A night hike? We *are* at the top of the food chain around here. A hidden place that he is sharing with just me? Excitement bubbles, and I let it show in my voice. “Sounds great,” I smile at him. “I can be ready in about ten minutes.”

“Meet you downstairs.” And with that, he pushes away from the door frame and disappears down the staircase.

I throw on something comfortable to wear. Settling on jeans and a long sleeve T-shirt, I go into the bathroom and gasp.

I can't believe he saw me like this.

My hair is a rat's nest. I must have been tossing and turning as I slept. Groaning and embarrassed, I hurriedly work the knots loose. I leave it down, happy it is at least tangle free now.

When I bound down the stairs, I find I'm not even thinking about the faces anymore. I have been pulled back into the magic of now. New experiences around every corner and all the time in the world to discover everything I want to know about everything. My first project? The mysterious vampire knight who rescued me. I want to pick apart his mind and see if he possibly feels this same attraction that I do. Maybe, just maybe, I can steal a kiss and see what those damn lips taste like.

He stands at the door, waiting, talking animatedly with Rolando. Everyone is doing their own thing, but I notice one person is missing.

“Where's Charlee?” I am used to being mildly assaulted when I come out for the night, and it doesn't feel right without her.

“Charlee is staying in Callery tonight.” With a nod, Rolando retreats to the study he is always cooped up in. Oz continues,

“She’s going to get some supplies and bring back some food for the house. I’ve also asked her to look for news about you to see if we can get any information to help jog your memory.” I feel a knot of nerves begin to grow in my stomach. “She’ll be back tomorrow night.”

I might know more tomorrow night. The thought is exhilarating. Oz opens the door and stands to the side as if to say, ‘Ladies first.’ I walk past him into the night, the scent of lemongrass wafting over me as I do. God, I love the smell.

We trek through the woods, with no trail or path to guide us, just Oz and his keen sense of direction. It couldn’t be me. I’d probably get lost just trying to find my way back to the house from here, and everything looks the same to me. “How long have you been in America,” I ask, trying to make conversation. Oz is quiet a lot, and I can’t very well pick his brain if he’s not talking. I don’t mind being the one to steer the conversation, though. With an empty mind, I have nothing but questions.

“We came here in 1586 and left about two years later, traveling south. We did go back to Europe for a few centuries and then spent some time in East Asia before returning permanently in 1985.” My jaw drops. It’s one thing to hear in the abstract about being around in medieval or colonial times but quite another to hear about more recent decades. I don’t know much about history at the moment, but I know enough that Oz and Leland were in America exceptionally early.

I need to see how much of this is in the archives and what I can dig up. I suddenly have a powerful urge to have Rolando show me everything he's been working on.

My question opens Oz up a bit. He starts recounting tales of random battles he and his family have fought against rival covens or humans who were up to no good. From his stories, I am able to determine that this coven, this family, isn't unique. Most vampires seem to be genuinely decent, but others are very dark.

"We keep who we are when we change," he tells me. "If you were a good person in life, you would be good as an immortal. Maybe with a few less cares of simple moralities, but when it counts, you'll be the same for the most part." Am I a good person?

"Yes," Oz says suddenly. Had I said that out loud? Stopping in front of me, I almost run into him, having been watching the ground, and trying not to trip on anything. I can see well in the dark, but it doesn't matter if I'm not looking at the roots trying to trip me. I would think that being a vampire would make me graceful or something. Oz chuckles softly, probably laughing because I nearly plowed into him. "We're here," he says, gesturing to a dark opening in the rock face beside us.

A cave?

Did he bring me to a freaking cave?

I step forward and past him, eyeing the opening. It's dark enough that even my super sight can only penetrate so far. I can hear water, various insect and rodent life thriving inside.

My tense muscles relax. So what if it looks like where a serial killer would go to dump their victim's bodies? This is Oz's place, and if there is anyone on this planet I trust, it's him.

A whisper in my ear sends a shiver down my spine. "I promise the view is worth it," Oz is no longer laughing at me. It feels like electricity is passing between us. I could lean back into his chest and lose myself in him. The thought sends a spark of arousal to my core. "Let me show you," he breathes, taking my hand and lacing his fingers through mine. I let him lead me into the darkness.

I'd let him lead me anywhere.

"I found this place ten years ago," he tells me, his voice echoing. He leads me into the main chamber of the cave system. It isn't enormously large, but the rock formations are beautiful in their own right. "It has six easily accessible chambers, one if you swim through the water and under that ledge," he points to the far side of the cave. "And another that is pretty much a dead drop about fifty feet down," he gestures to a crevice this time.

I look around, peering down into the abyss, unable to see past a few feet. It is so dark. I step over to the water's edge. It flows gently. Water from above trickles down the walls, forming what looks like a small pond, except the pond doesn't overflow. It keeps going under a ledge of rock, and I can make out the sound of the water lapping against the stone in its slow current.

Oz lets go of my hand for a moment, turning on a small lantern already waiting here. The light doesn't reach too far, but it allows me to see a bit further. Going from seeing crazy far in the dark to barely at all is strange. I guess it's because we're never in complete darkness until we get into the depths of the Earth. He slips his hand back into mine and says, "I want to show you my favorite chamber."

He sounds excited, and so am I. I want him to show me more magic, and that's exactly what this place feels like. His warm hand guides me to a small opening. Letting go of me again, he places his hand on the small of my back, the gap too narrow to walk side by side. Can he tell how his nearness affects me? Is he doing this on purpose?

The next chamber is filled with various sharp-looking rocks hanging from the top of the cave and smaller patches of rocks growing up from the bottom. They look almost like teeth. I laugh to myself, thinking it is ironic that vampires were in a room with pointy rock teeth.

"It's the next chamber ahead." I turn in a circle and walk backward, craning my neck to look up at the spears of rock hanging down. Some are impossibly sharp, others more blunt or bulbous. It is truly mesmerizing. I turn back toward Oz, who is watching me with a patient smile as I join him. He likes watching me take it all in. This is his place, and he is sharing it with me. I wonder if watching me see his cave through fresh eyes is almost as good as seeing it all for the first time himself.

The next opening isn't nearly as narrow. A steady dripping sound of water and the soft hum of insects breaks up the quiet. He sets the lantern down in the center of the room, but I can't see the walls. It's bigger than the other chambers. From the sounds of the echoes, it is probably twice the size of the chamber we were just in. "Sit with me," he asks, lowering himself to the smooth rocky surface of the cave floor. I do as he asks, purposefully planting myself next to him. The casual touches, hand-holding, glances, and smiles while showing me his favorite place... He has to feel about me the same way I feel about him.

He doesn't pull away, even as our arms brush against one another.

Oz reaches over to the lantern and turns it off with a click that echoes. "Now," he says, his deep voice soft but no less rumbly than usual. "We wait."

"Wait for what?" My voice sounds loud in the darkness.

"Shhhh," he hushes, reaching for my hand again. I don't doubt it anymore. He feels *something* for me. I don't want to scare him off, but I am learning that I'm not the most patient person in the world. Still, I quiet myself, leaning against him. I tuck my head onto his shoulder. I feel him stiffen for half a second and then relax, giving my hand a gentle squeeze.

It is so dark that my eyes can't focus on anything other than him, but not wanting to move my head, I settle for just staring into the depths of nothing. Finally it seems like my eyes might be adjusting. This strikes me as odd, I kind of took the vampy

sight thing as a one size fits all sort of deal. Things are getting clearer, though. I can see a stalagmite ten feet away, short and squat. A blue light begins to bloom on the wall beyond it, followed by dozens more.

I gasp and look all around. The entire cave ceiling and most of the walls are covered in little glowing worms. They are beautiful. Thousands of them twinkle against the rock like stars. “Dazzling, isn’t it,” Oz whispers, and I look at him. He’s staring at me, watching my reaction. His stare penetrates me, setting me on fire from the inside. I want to wrap that warmth around me, to give in and drown in it.

I brush my lips against his.

Oz’s hand quickly goes to the back of my head, holding me to him as he kisses me back. His lips are sweet, and I want him to kiss me everywhere. His tongue forces its way into my mouth, catching me off guard. Oz is so gentle with me in every other aspect, his sudden hunger is surprising. I massage his tongue with my own and moan into the kiss.

I feel his hands grasp my hips as he pulls me onto his lap so I am straddling him. He releases my mouth for my neck, kissing a spot just behind my ear. I can feel his teeth graze against my skin, and goosebumps cover my body. One of my hands reaches under his arm to grip his shoulder from behind, steadying myself. The other grabs his neck, my fingers threading through his thick hair. “Oz,” I whisper his name to the cave’s depths like a plea—a plea for more.

Our lips crash together again, and I feel him pull my waist as close to him as he can, pressing me into his body. My head is swimming, and his hands rove over my form, exploring. I can feel his arousal against me, and I grind my hips against him.

A groan escapes his lips, and his kiss deepens with a fierceness that sends fire down my skin. A large hand snakes its way up my torso, stopping at the curve of my breast. I long for his touch. I want to give all of myself to him, and I want him to take over every part of me.

His wandering hand moves upward as if he can hear the plea within me. He caresses me through my shirt, his thumb strumming against my hardened nipple. Breaking the kiss, I gasp, my head falling back.

I am on fire.

The world shifts as Oz leans me backward until I am lying on the cave floor. A hand gently works my shirt up my stomach. Feather-light traces make my skin prickle and pebble under his sure touch. Soft lips gently kiss my skin as it is exposed. When he reaches the peak of my breast and takes me into his mouth, my back arches into him.

Sensitive skin responds to every tease of his teeth and every lap of his tongue. Writhing beneath him, I want desperately to be closer. This is not yet enough. I guide his face back to mine, tracing lines down his back, lifting his shirt, and letting my hands explore his skin.

The taut muscles in his back are tense with excitement, with want. His shoulders are broad and well-formed from years of

sword work before he was turned. Scars from before are barely there, whispers on his flesh. I want to explore them in the light, to kiss each one and hear the story of how it was earned. A shudder runs through him from my touch, and I am pleased to be the cause of it.

I feel him press against me, the bulge of his want evident, he rocks his hips against me—a silent promise of what will come. I want him so badly. My hand slips downward, reaching and sliding past the waistband of his boxers. Gingerly grasping his shaft, I stroke him gently, massaging the tip of his crown with my thumb. He groans at my touch.

“Fuck,” he whispers, breathing labored.

Everything freezes. His hands no longer explore me. His lips no longer press against mine. He isn't looking at me. My breaths are heavy, and my mind fills with confusion. Oz pulls away, my hands slip from him as he sits up, his eyes still not meeting mine.

“Wren,” he says softly, sounding distant and sad. “Oh God, I'm so sorry, but I can't.”

Oh.

Rejection hurts a hell of a lot.

Pushing myself off the cave floor, pulling my top straight, and patting my jeans. The taste of copper teases my mouth as I bite the tip of my tongue, using the pain to stuff down the intense sorrow that is building in me. I don't want to cry right

now. And if the weight on my chest is any indication, tears are not far off.

I am angry too. I want anger to win out over sadness. I want to yell. Something primal in me stirs. It likes the feeling of anger. I don't like that it is waking up.

That *she* is waking up.

I take a deep breath, wanting to hear him out. He rises to stand before me, still unwilling to look me in the eye. "Look at me," I demand, speaking at a normal volume. He owes me at least that much.

The glow worms go out, and we are cast into darkness. Still, we are close enough to see each other. He finally looks me in the eye, and his are filled with pain. I refuse to pity him. "Why can't you?"

It's a simple enough question, though my voice is stern and accusatory. The way he touched me, he felt *something*. Whatever is holding him back had better be damn good.

"I want to. God help me, I do. But without your memories, it feels like taking advantage." Oz raises a hand to stroke my face, but I slapped it away.

"That's a stupid reason," my voice is getting louder now. "And if you felt like that, why do all this? Why bring me here and hold my hand and show me your *special place* like it's a fucking date?" I am seething.

His eyes widen in the dark, and his shoulders slump with defeat, but he takes it all while staring me in the eye. "You're

right.”

“I know.”

“Wren, I’m sorry. I didn’t intend to lead you on. I want to pursue something with you. I just want to help you find yourself first.” He looks around the cave. “Bringing you here was a bad choice. I don’t know what I was thinking.” His face is pained, and against my better judgment I feel terrible for him, no matter how much I don’t want to.

I am still pissed though.

Just not enraged anymore.

The thing stirring inside me simmers down for now.

I don’t want things to return to what they were before.

Can I stay mad at someone trying to avoid taking advantage of the girl with amnesia? Chivalry runs deep in this man, which undoubtedly influenced his decision. As for this “date,” I guess? I suppose he may not have considered just how fucking romantic the whole “glowing secret cave that I’ve never brought anyone to before,” thing would be. He said we keep ourselves when we become vampires. Will I keep these feelings when I get back my memories?

I trust that I will. What I feel for him is more than just a damsel in distress response. It has to be. I still can’t quite put a name on the pull I feel toward him, but I know he feels it too. That has to survive even after I get my memories back.

Right?

I close the distance between us, and slide my arms around his waist, pulling him to me in a hug, pleased when he doesn't resist. I rest my head against his chest and close my eyes, breathing in his scent. Lemongrass and iron. His arms enclose around me, and for a moment we stand there, unmoving and unspeaking. It is one of the best feelings in the world. "We can't just take it back," I say gently.

"I know," he whispers into my hair.

"What if we take things slowly? Set a hard limit for now, but leave our options open to explore our feelings?" I'm a genius, really. One day they'll write books about my brilliance.

His hold on me tightens, "I'd like that." I look up at him, and as the glow worms begin to shine their light once more, I close the distance and kiss him again.

Oz will learn. He can't get away from me that easily.

When we return to the house an hour before dawn, I want to run an idea by Oz. I am thinking about going down to the lake, to the car, and seeing if that sparks any of my memories. It has been almost a week since the accident, and I still have no real memory to hold on to, and since breathing isn't necessary.

"It will be extremely uncomfortable," Oz warns. "I can go with you if you like."

He presses his forehead against mine. Our limit is pretty much just sex. Hugging, kissing, and intimate moments like this are all well and good. He needs a firm line to feel better about the whole thing, and if it means we can continue to

explore the feelings that are developing between us, I am happy. "I'd like that."

Kissing me softly, he lets me go up the stairs alone. Truthfully I hope he will want to do the whole 'We're adults and can sleep in the same bed without sex,' thing and then fail miserably at it, but he refuses and stays downstairs.

Smart man, being wise to my scheming.

But also stupid man, because I hunger for his touch.



CHAPTER EIGHT

THE SONGBIRD

The paved road has only the faintest skid marks from feeble attempts to stop the car. The most evidence that something has happened is in the bent shape of the guard rail and the bits of fiberglass that litter the edge of the road beside the hard rock of the mountainside. I close my eyes, breathing in, willing the sounds and smells to bring anything back to me.

Kneeling, I grasp pieces of the broken car and let them slip through my fingers. I remember my distress, my rage. I can taste the salt of my tears and feel the crying blocking my nasal passages. The rain that pounded on the windshield was almost loud enough to mask the booming thunder overhead. Lightning tears through the sky, ripping into the world as if it shared in my anger.

Nothing before.

Where were we going?

Why was I crying?

Why was I so enraged?

Who is the man that was with me, and where is he now?

Answers escape me as I eye the edge of the rail, where the car began its descent. It ought to be longer. I glance down the hill. Steep. The only reason it isn't blocked is because the curve has ended. The mountainside becomes more level in this area, more forgiving of mistakes. Four, maybe five more feet of rail would've likely saved my life.

Oz and I travel the path the car took, but at my request, he remains silent for this part. I want to see it all and try to put myself back in my head that night. Broken limbs of trees surround us, and a side view mirror lay shattered nearby. I am surprised a tree didn't stop the car entirely. I try to remember why, but the accident happened so fast, faster than my human mind could keep up with. I try hard to concentrate.

Moving further down, I see this area is surprisingly sparse with trees. Some bushes and shrubs, but the few growing trees are small and pliable. A large rock juts out of the earth, solid in its form. The tip looks chipped, as if something larger hit it with force. I imagine the car falling from above, the rear swinging, moving the vehicle to turn until the passenger's side lined up with the rock. The force of the impact had sent us flying in the air.

Further down still, we are near the water now. More fiberglass litters the ground from where the car touched down. It leads me to the water's edge. The car had landed on its bottom but flipped onto the hood as it rolled into the water.

Sliding in far enough that the bank gave way, that the depths began pulling it down with me inside.

“Where did you pull me out from?” I stare into the water. Much like the cave, my eyesight allows me to see quite a bit better than a human, but the darkness is so thick I can only see so far down.

Pointing out about twenty feet from the shore’s edge, Oz says, “You were about fifteen feet below the surface of the water when I got to you.”

Damn, I’d been so close to making it.

I feel a flutter of nerves in my stomach as I kick off my shoes. I need to go down there. I have my bag and my ID, but there may be other personal items that could give some idea of who I am. Turning to Oz, I warn, “I don’t care if you look, but there’s about to be a naked lady here.”

I see his smirk, but he turns his back on me to give me my privacy. Smiling, I remove my clothes and stand before the icy water. I try to remind myself that I don’t need to breathe, that it is purely out of habit that I do.

“Any advice to help me not panic down there about the breathing thing?” Oz isn’t going with me for this part. I am glad he is willing to be my moral support and isn’t pushing to be more active in the process.

Back still to me, he calls, “Let all of your breath out before you dive. You’ll sink faster. If you breathe in while you’re

under, force your body to still and close your eyes. It's better to give into it at that point and cough it up later."

Well, that sounds terrifying. "Here goes nothing," forced confidence colors my words.

I wade into the lake until I feel the bottom slope in earnest. Lakes can be very deep, and I don't know how far down I need to swim. I take one last deep breath and exhale fully.

Then I dive into the water.

Pitch black in the night it takes a while for my eyes to adjust. Vampire sight isn't enough to penetrate it entirely, but I can at least see enough. Keeping myself close to the bottom, I swim as it slopes further into the lake. I hope this will be the right path, that the car didn't veer so far to either side that I won't be able to see a part of it.

Deeper I swim, the fish swirl out of my way as quickly as they can, not used to such an intrusion. I can't make out the surface anymore. A brief flash of my lungs burning as I swim for the surface. Now there is just discomfort. Oz told me that the condition I was in was more than he could have healed and that I would've needed to turn either way if I wanted to live.

Would I have accepted his offer?

I like to think I would have.

I can't shake the feeling that there is more to this than he's letting on.

I also know how important it is to him that I become whole again.

Whatever the reason for this odd draw we both feel, I trust that it will be revealed in due time.

Rocks and bottom-dwelling creatures are all I see as I continue swimming. It has to be close. The steepness of the downslope has eased. I am near the deep point now. Assuming it must be some fifty feet below the water's surface, I shudder to think of what it would be like to have this place as my watery grave.

There, embedded in the bottom of the lake, is a piece of a taillight. Just a few feet more, the car's husk sits eerily dark and empty. The body's weight made the car flip right side up in the water. I cringe, seeing how the roof is bent in. It's a miracle I survived the crash at all.

I swim to the broken window I must have climbed out of just days before. Is it too much to hope that this will trigger a memory? There could be something in the car that can help give me a memory. Maybe it can start a domino effect that will give me back my hidden past? I am inside the car again, trying to remember, seeing nothing but water and a growing layer of slime.

Frustrated, I push myself into the back seat. I picture the bags that had been at the cabin. Of loading them into the car. Of the face that belongs to a man who makes me sad when I think of him.

Nothing.

Clamoring my way back into the front seats, I look down at the center console. The armrest bows in. It seems like the

briefest of flashes, but I visualize opening the compartment and dropping something inside.

What though?

Pulling on the hard plastic, it won't budge. It is bent and trapped on itself. I pull harder than I should need to, tapping into the strength that being a vampire gives me, and pry the damn thing open.

Inside are waterlogged papers and a dark rectangle. Pulling it out, I realize that it's a phone. Mine? Maybe. It will be useless having been in the water for so long. But the device itself could trigger something from holding it. Deciding I will take it, I give the car one last sad sweep of my eyes.

What a waste of time.

I turned towards the window and began pulling myself from the car.

A colossal fish speeds past me.

Startled, I instinctively tried to take a breath to scream.

Fuck.

Water is pouring into my lungs, and it hurts. I am gagging on it. My limbs start to flail, and I am vaguely aware of a sharp pain in my thigh as I kick myself off the car's body and swim straight up.

I am panicking.

I try remembering what Oz said about relaxing and letting it happen. I attempt to take an intentional breath of water.

Nope.

No, no, no, no, no, no, no!

I heave, forcing the water out of my lungs just to take more back in. Tears are pouring out of my eyes, mixing with the water the second they do. I am drowning again. I am drowning, and I can't fucking die. There is no peaceful darkness protecting my mind. No nothingness to fall into. There is just pain and terror.

I break through the surface of the water, flailing, coughing, and sputtering. But I'm not alone.

Oz is already here. He supports my weight as I convulse, easily keeping me above the water. I hold onto him like a fucking life preserver. I can't speak or do anything other than try to breathe. Most of the water has been expelled from my lungs, but the breaths still aren't clean. A few more body-shuddering coughs take care of the remaining lake water.

I gulp clean air at last.

We stay like that for two minutes as I breathe deeply and try to calm myself down. When my breaths finally even, and I don't feel half dead anymore, I look at Oz's concerned face.

"You ok?" He asks, still holding me close.

I press into his chest and nod.

Drowning the second time is much worse than the first. "I am now, yes." I notice he is still fully clothed. He dove into the same water he'd saved me from a week ago without a second thought, and this time there is no real danger to my

life. I am just a silly new vampire who bit off more than she could chew and paid for it.

He doesn't even address that he is holding me against him, and I'm nude.

Oz is a strange man indeed.

I like it.

We swim to shore together, but when we leave the water, I feel air sting my leg and look down. A piece of glass is shoved deep into my thigh. The stupid window...

Fucking fish.

"Well, there goes my career as a leg model." I joke, reaching down to yank the glass out. His hands beat me to it.

He kneels before me, holding my leg gingerly as he clasps the glass between two fingers, his other hand gripping my calf to hold me still. I am very aware of how close his head is to me. Even injured, even after drowning again, even with a gaping wound in my thigh, I can't get my mind off of a physical relationship with this man. His eyes haven't even moved to look at me that way.

Maybe because he is in savior mode?

Or the gentleman thing again.

Honor?

I laugh quietly to myself and wobble on my one ankle. His eyes flash up to mine, and my smile is immediately gone with

the intensity of his stare. He pulls the glass from me with a quick jerk. That bad boy was embedded deeper than I thought.

“Son of a,” I start, bringing my forearm to my mouth and growling my pain into it instead of the night.

Oz brings his wrist to his lips, bites down, and blood pours from it. I gasp as he presses it to my wound. It starts to stitch itself together again. Well, that’s a neat trick. He places the gentlest of kisses on my knee.

I take a sharp breath as arousal sends a pulse to my center.

My skin feels electrified where he kissed me.

I want him to kiss me more.

Mesmerized, I don’t think anything of it when he releases my leg and stands close to me, raising his wrist to my lips. “Drink,” he insists. His voice is firm, and I am reminded of that night. He’d told me to drink then too. Commanded it.

I do as instructed. God, he tastes good. “You’d have healed eventually, but this is faster,” he said. I release his wrist from my lips, licking them to get every last drop.

“Ready to go home?” His eyes bore into me in a way that makes me think his hunger for closeness is as intense as mine. He’s just better at denying it than I am.

I don’t understand.

Why are we fighting this?

Settling my hands on his chest for balance, I stand on tiptoe and press my lips against his. His lips return that kiss ever so

gently at first. Hands wrap around me, I fist mine into his hair. Oz tastes like heaven and home as I kiss him. He walks me backward until we press against a tree. The force and passion grow as his kisses deepen.

Moaning into the kiss, I sigh with pleasure as his hands roam over my bare hips and legs. As he turns the attention of his kisses to my neck, I sigh. It feels right. Everything about Oz feels like it is supposed to be this way. I can't explain it.

I want to be near him. I need his comfort and his affection.

I am growing tired of being denied.

We are both willing adults here. I don't need memories to know that I want this. That I want him.

"Wren," he breathes against me. I know he wants to stop before he gets carried away.

"Oz, please," I practically beg. "I want you to," I whisper into his ear, my yearning evident.

I think that's what breaks him.

A grumble from his throat surprises me. He forces me to turn around. "Grip the tree," he directs.

Excitement rings through me.

Not quite how I imagined things, but I am a good listener and do as he tells me. Gently, he kicks my legs apart, giving him full access to me. His wet clothes press into my back, and his lips find the curve of my neck again. I moan as he kisses

me. A hand settles on my hip and slips forward, dipping between my legs. I gasp as he touches me.

Stroking between my folds as evidence of my arousal covers his hand, I hear the shudder in Oz's breath. He knows I want him, but he didn't expect me to be this ready for him so quickly. His muscles feel tense against me and I realize he is fighting to contain himself and holding back. A thick finger slides inside me. I press my back into him, and my head lolls on his shoulder. Slowly he moves against me, sliding the digit in and out with a teasing pace unbecoming of him.

I tremble against him, my breathing getting heavier, and my mind foggier. Oz sinks a second finger in to join the first. I cry out, unable to stop my hips from bucking against his hand. A chuckle escapes his lips as his free hand settles at my hip, keeping the speed under his control. I can feel his own need behind me. On impulse, I move one hand from the tree and join it with his. Gathering my wetness before slipping my arm behind me, searching for him.

Rewarded with a gasp as I find his shaft, I stroke him in time with his movements. Oz's thumb draws torturous circles around my clit, avoiding it on purpose. I press down on his hand, grinding myself on him, fucking his fingers. A growling sound escapes his lips, and he nibbles at my throat. I can feel the promise of an orgasm building in my belly.

"Oz," I beg. His touches are deliberate and cruel and wholly intoxicating.

"I know, baby, I know," he gasps into my ear.

A pulse of excitement cuts down to my center. I almost lose my mind when he adds another finger. Crying out into the night, my hand around him grows more desperate. Circling him, massaging him, teasing his tip as I try to keep myself present instead of going insane with the pleasure he gives me.

I am so close to completely falling apart.

He begins to stroke my clit now, pressing down. "Oh God," I cry, the crescendo mounting higher and higher. "Oz," I moan as the fluttering begins, and I feel myself clamping down on his fingers. His teeth sink into my neck as I explode. Every piece of my body comes unglued, breaking into a million pieces. The crashing sensation as release washes over me almost makes my legs buckle.

"Fuck, Wren," Oz groans as he shudders against me, warm ropes of his cum shooting into my hand. Panting, his chest presses into my back as he leans against me, blood drips down my neck.

We lay against one another for a few moments, gathering ourselves. When his hand slips from between my legs, I feel empty. I want to have all of him. And memories be damned, I intend on doing so very soon. I won't let whatever happened to me stall my life when I want to live it so badly.

"Okay," I say, turning to face him. "I think I'm ready now."

He laughs at me, pulling me in for another kiss. Sweet and soft this time, the hunger of our need is sated for now.

I am still entirely enthralled by the whole experience. Hurriedly I dress and feel terrible that he is in soaking wet clothes because of my stupidity.

“Sorry that I freaked out,” I apologize. “But thanks for being there for me.”

“I’ll always be here for you, Wren.” He means it. He really does. He will give me anything I desire. All I have to do is ask. This makes me confident that we can move forward with each other if my memories continue to be lost. That thought gives me comfort as we return home.

The warm shower is heavenly, and completely erases the scent of the lake from my body. A knock at the door. It is Oz, I call for him to come in, and feel his arms wrap around me.

Sighing into his hug, I let a moan escape me as he presses his lips to my neck.

“Did you see anything to jog your memory?” He says softly into my hair.

“No,” I frown. I hate this state of not knowing.

“I’m sure it will come in time. I know it’s not happening as fast as you would like, but I will do everything I can to help you regain your memory.” He strokes my hair gently and kisses the top of my head. The sun is beginning to rise, and I am growing very weak and very tired.

I climb into the bed. My mind needs a break from all of this.

“Goodnight, Wren,” Oz’s voice is quiet and soothing as he turns off the light.

I sit up, panic forming a knot in my stomach. “Wait, Oz,” I call. He stops and opens the door a few inches wider. “Will you please stay with me?” I don’t even want to get up to any funny business. I just don’t want to be alone. His silhouette frames the doorway as he studies me for a moment. Half a second is all it takes to shift his entire resistance and convince him to take his place at my side.

“Of course,” he said, entering the room and closing the door. Sliding into bed with me, I notice he only wears his boxers. He curls behind me, being the big spoon, wrapping his arm around my middle and holding me close. “Whatever you need, little bird, it’s yours.” I wiggle into him, ensuring I am as close as possible. I feel safe and warm like this and I don’t want it to end.

When I drift off, I have no fear of nightmares about the crash bothering me tonight.

Oz will protect me and fight them off.



**CHAPTER
NINE**

THE SONGBIRD

Events of the previous day have exhausted me more than I thought they would because I sleep in. It is mentally taxing to constantly look inside yourself for your past and find it empty. I dress in leggings and an oversized sweater that hangs off one of my shoulders, revealing the strap of the tank top I wear underneath. I pull my hair back into a half ponytail, letting the back cascade down my shoulders. It would be out of the way like this, but still down. I don't bother with makeup tonight. I'm not good at it. Charlee will be coming back this evening, though, and I look forward to letting her doll me up again.

Oz had left me earlier, kissing my temple and telling me to keep sleeping if I wish. I appreciate the extra rest. Physically I feel like I can do anything, but mentally and emotionally, I am spent.

The lake had been terrifying.

And I am nowhere close to remembering my past.

According to Rolando, while there isn't anything he can do for my phone itself, he may be able to pull some data off the SIM card. They can be damaged by water, but not as severely as the general electric components of the phone itself. It is a long shot, but if he can do it, I may be able to recover things like my contacts and text messages. Those can certainly help in my journey to discovering myself and my memories.

Nerves worm into me as I examine my things from the cabin, touching each one gently and willing it to give me something. *Anything*. Any damn clue as to who I am. They all lay there, unable to provide me with what I want. I frown and shake my head, deciding to try again later.

Downstairs is starting to get lively as the guys all gather. That must mean Charlee is getting close. The parched feeling is in my throat again. Hungry. Thirsty. It's all the same. I join them in waiting.

"How goes it, new girl?" One of the triplets, I think Alex, asked. They may not be identical, but they seem pretty freaking close to me.

"It goes..." I sigh. "I still can't remember anything before I woke up like this," gesturing to myself.

I can see the uneasy frowns among my new family. This must be incredibly unusual if it causes them distress.

Zach rests a hand on my shoulder. "I'm sure it will come back. And if not, Leland can probably help you." Mutterings of agreement surround us.

Leland.

They speak of him with such reverence, such admiration. Is it simply because he is their creator? I doubt it. He must be an awe-inspiring leader to garnish this much loyalty and respect.

The doors open, Oz walks in with Rolando and a handful of humans trailing behind them, and Charlee brings up the rear. Every human is compelled to be here. Charlee had literally grabbed us all a bite. Oz grins as he greets his brothers before standing at my side. Kissing my lips gently, I can feel him breathing me in. Charlee smirks at me and shares a knowing look with Rolando.

Great.

They've probably been taking bets on how long it would take before I could knock through Oz's good guy routine and get him to let go a little.

"Did you sleep well?" He asks.

The concerned look on his face from last night is gone. He seems content that I have recovered from the whole lake debacle. I try to remember if I had any dreams, but nothing comes to mind. I don't remember even seeing the faces. "Probably the best sleep since I turned," I admit. "No nightmares," I whisper just for him.

"Good, I'm glad." He is so calm all the time, I'm a little jealous of it.

"Well, this will be one hell of a party!" Charlee strides over quickly and pulls me into a hug. My stiff form relaxes in her

arms and I grin, squeezing her back. “I’m so glad that things seem to be going well now that you two are ma-” She pauses briefly, and I catch the look Oz throws at her. “-making headway in your relationship.” Charlee is quick on her feet, I’ll give her that. However, I am quick too, and Oz doesn’t want to look me in the eye again.

There is something they still aren’t telling me. I try to shrug it off. If they are keeping something on the down low, knowing Oz, it is for some noble or honorable reason. I choose to let it go for now.

“I’m happy I get to be here for your first time drinking from a human,” Charlee says as releases me. I watch everyone else circle the humans, picking who they want. “We have a fresh supply of donated blood too, but something about drinking directly from someone is just better. You know, farm to table and all that.”

I snort. The thought of directly sourcing blood is entertaining. There are enough humans here that we could each have one to ourselves. That gnawing sensation in my gut is back, my nerves flaring to life and anxiety taking hold of me.

Charlee must’ve picked hers on the way here because she possessively pulls a female human from the group. “Mine.” She grumbles at Chandra before turning and winking at me. She leads her human away. I look to Oz, unsure of what to do.

Oz guides me toward the humans who are standing there, unmoving. Lights are on in their faces, but no one is home. It’s

erie, seeing them as shells of themselves. “Study them, smell them, and if biting them would please you, then you know you’ve picked a good one.”

Excuse me, *smell* them?

This is kind of gross.

“How do I know if biting them will please me?” This all sounds simple, but I still don’t know what he means.

Noting my confusion, he walks behind a human and inhales deeply, demonstrating. “Their scent will stir your thirst.”

Okay...

I can feel his eyes on me as I select. I pass a woman who looks like she could be a teacher. She didn’t smell any special kind of way. A man in a suit with his hair slicked back. He smells disgusting to me. No idea what that means. Then finally, a man in his mid-twenties, whose smell tingles the back of my throat. I look him over. He is average in every single way imaginable. Not unattractive but not particularly good-looking. I stare into his brown eyes. They are far away, unseeing. “This one,” I tell Oz. I tug the human’s hand, imitating Charlee, and lead him to the living room.

Oz follows behind with his selection, another young man, but this one looks like he just stepped off the military bus. He sits on the couch and pulls his human to it. The man sat willingly. “This is the part where you decide *how* you want to drink. Some people prefer wrists, others necks, and some find the femoral artery is one that they particularly enjoy.” He

stares pointedly at Charlee in the corner. I follow the direction of his eyes and raise my eyebrows. Charlee has pulled the pants off her human and latched her lips to her thigh. By the look on the woman's face, it is quite enjoyable to be fed from that particular location.

I make a note of it for a later time.

Oz laughs at my expression. "The neck is traditional," he says softly. "To the casual observer, you could be kissing, and it's the easiest start for most new vampires."

The neck. Not in my five days of memory have I ever found a neck so imposing. Usually, when I picture necks, it comes with an image of Oz kissing mine.

I look at the man's jugular and take a deep breath. I get a strong sense to feed from there. The raw and primal part of me is awakening, and she is thrilled by being allowed to feed from a living being instead of a blood bag.

"Neck it is," I said.

Oz pulls his lips back from his teeth and raises his human's wrist to his mouth. He slowly sinks his teeth down, and I watch as they penetrate through effortlessly. I don't need to know the science, I just need to do it.

Sitting beside him, his neck is at an awkward angle. I look around, everyone is feeding now, and they are family, nothing to be embarrassed about, right? I swing my leg over and straddle my human. I can feel his heart beating in his chest as I press closer. I rest my mouth against his neck and felt his

pulse. Pulling my lips back like Oz had done, I gingerly bear down with my teeth.

A warm gush of blood is my reward. My lips acting like a seal against his skin as I drink. He tastes good. A moan escapes me as I savor the taste, my eyes rolling back into my head. I grip my human's waist tightly. His blood is delicious, flavored with something I couldn't put my finger on.

Desire?

Fear?

Do emotions flavor humans like wine?

Oh, what a delicious wine he is, pouring into my mouth hot and thick. I have chosen a very juicy spot, indeed. I pull from him what I need, what will sustain me. Closing my eyes, I can feel the rawness of the blood lust slithering into me, wanting me to drain the very last drop out of him.

The other Wren whispers sweet promises of what could be if I let go. If I let her in.

Surrender control.

She is seductive and compelling, and it would be oh-so-easy to step aside and let her in. I don't want to. This is my body, my mind, not hers.

You don't belong here. I do.

She's lying. We are supposed to be one. I belong here as much as she does.

Almost as if she is pacing a cage, I feel her desperation to rise to the surface, to be released. She whispers more to me. Promises of pleasure, swearing how much easier it will be for us if we rely on her instincts.

My brows knit together as I feed. The war inside my mind is something only I can be aware of. I didn't know how to fight her off.

Don't fight me.

She's insisting.

Suddenly, it hurts. It's like a sharp pain digs into my skull. The other Wren is taking her fingers and clawing her way into me. I don't want it, and I don't trust her. I want nothing more than for her to get away from me. The effort forces the part of myself that is *me*, my consciousness, my sense of self, further into the recesses of my mind. I don't want her touching me at all. The darkness, the wild abandonment of reason. No, it can stay far away from me.

Suits me just fine.

I realize too late that she is making a play to control my body. I feel her slink her way into the mechanics of my nervous system. Everything I am is now hers to command. I struggle to stop her, to force my way back in. No use, it was over the moment she had her claws in me.

I feel as she pulls harder.

I can see what's happening, but I am powerless to stop it.

I see my arms grip tight onto the human.

I feel when drinking turns to ripping.

Shredding.

Oz is behind me, trying to pull me off. Rolando had his hands on the man, trying to get him out of my grasp.

MINE.

I drink his blood and continue to tear at his throat. The arms trying to pull me from him are nothing.

Screeching as I devour him.

I can't hear. I can't see. The only thing that exists is hunger and my prey.

I don't release him until his heart stops beating.

Rising to my feet, I stare at my handiwork. A sickening wave of satisfaction washes over me, and in an instant, the other Wren is gone. Retreating back inside of me where she came from, I am left to pick up the pieces of her destruction.

I freeze in place, staring at nothing.

A flutter of activity surrounds me. The triplets take my victim's body from the room and bring it outside. I can hear the clanking of wood being brought together, the sound of something liquid spraying, and then the whoosh of flames as the fire licks his corpse.

Rolando and Charlee set to work removing the blood from the couch.

Hands cup my face, and I don't know how long they've been there. Oz is trying to get my attention. He blocks my view of

the distant corner I am staring at.

“*WREN!*”

Oz is shouting at me?

He never shouts.

Yet he is shaking me by the shoulders, trying desperately to pull me out of my stupor. “Are you alright? Wren!”

He comes into focus, and I see the relief in his eyes as mine find him. “I can’t believe I killed him,” I whisper. Oz crushes me to him, not caring that I stain his clothes with blood.

I can feel him stroke my hair, telling me everything will be okay. “You didn’t mean it,” he excuses.

I had meant it. Well, the other Wren had anyway.

“You’re new to this,” he pushes my actions aside.

I still killed a man.

“It was an accident,” his voice is hushed.

I shove Oz away from me. I don’t believe him. I murdered an innocent man, and he is just so fucking calm about it.

Unable to look at him, or anyone else for that matter, I run upstairs to the bathroom and then lock myself in. I run the hot water in the shower as I scrub the dead man’s blood and torn bits of flesh from my body.

I am sickened with myself. Looking in the mirror, I don’t recognize who I am. The voice, the one inside me that stirred when I was feeding. Is she the one that I am supposed to merge with? She is murderous. She’s led me to take a human

life, and she will lead me to take more, I am certain. I absolutely do *not* want to merge with that.

You have no choice. You will accept me.

“Shut up,” I say aloud to my reflection. “Shut up and leave me alone. This is my body, my life, and I won’t let you cause chaos and destruction.” The other Wren quiets down. I stare at myself into my own eyes, and even though she’s backed down for now, I can still see the flash of her that is dangerous in my eyes.

Opening the door, I’m not surprised to see Oz waiting for me.

Of *course*, he is.

I am in pain, and whenever something is wrong with his little bird, he is there to care for me. I both love and hate him for it in this moment.

Saying nothing but still longing for his comfort, I ease myself into his lap. He accepts me willingly, cradling me to his chest in silence. I tighten the grip on the towel around my body, not wanting to make this any more awkward than it already is. I let him shift us so I am lying on the bed. He rests his head on my stomach and keeps it there. Without thinking, my hands begin playing with his hair, which feels soothing.

“We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to,” he starts, and I stiffen. “I just want you to know that all new vampires struggle with this, and you are not the first person in this house to make that same mistake.”

He doesn't understand...

"I let her in. The other Wren, the one that I am supposed to merge with." I bite my lower lip. I didn't know how to explain this. I raise my hands to rub my temples and close my eyes. "She asked for control, and I fought it, but she took it anyway, and then she used me to kill."

Oz sits up this time. "Wren, this wasn't your fault. Your mind should have been healed during the turning. You should have become one entity, and that would give you a measure of control. When we can fix those things, it will get easier, I know."

He seems so confident, but I am still unsure. I don't say anything. I just lean back into the pillows and turn on my side, away from him. What if I can't do it? What if I can't merge, and I kill people every time I try to feed? Will my family have to stop me? There is only so much murder they can allow before suspicion might point in this direction. Our family will be in danger if I don't fix this. Will they end me?

No.

Oz will never let that happen, I'm sure of it.

Will we run off together?

Destruction and death left behind in our wake?

A sure arm wraps around my waist, pulling me into the curve of his body. Protecting me, keeping me safe from whatever troubles are out there. I wish he could save me from myself. I wiggle and press my body into his, taking in his

warmth. He strokes my bare arm gently, and soft kisses sweep across my shoulder.

“We can try again,” he tells me in a whisper. “When you’re ready.”

I fall asleep with Oz holding me, but his presence isn’t enough to stave off the nightmares this time.



CHAPTER
TEN

THE WARRIOR

Failure. I am an utter failure when it comes to keeping my mate safe. Unable to protect her from the pitfalls of being a vampire. Even as she sleeps in my arms, I can see the events plaguing her. That human died. She now knows what it means to lose control of yourself. But this is different. She had been feral, crazed, and unyielding. It has to do with not merging her consciousness with the piece of wild predator that unlocks during the turning.

Pure speculation.

Rolando has been searching high and low for *anything* resembling what has happened to Wren. So far, no reported cases of vampires failing to merge with their counterparts and become one. At least, not one we have access to. He's tried to retrieve information from her SIM card, and nothing. We search for answers day after day, and everything we try is a dead end.

Having no precedent leaves me in the dark about how to guide her forward and save her from this turmoil the next time

she needs to feed.

Sure, I could supply her with blood bags for a time, but it isn't a permanent solution, and we can't reliably count on them to be available. Our supply comes from a local club. Vampires beguile humans who come and either feed on the dance floor or the human will be led to a room for donation. The blood is then circulated among the registered covens in the area, and the ones without covens can go to the club to try to feed.

It isn't a perfect system, and there are times when the supply is limited, leaving us to our own devices of preying on the unsuspecting public of Callery. Using our abilities to keep ourselves concealed is everything. If Wren can't control herself, the council will eventually take notice if she keeps killing.

New vampires are given a form of leeway initially, but she will be expected to get this under control sooner rather than later. I remain convinced the issue lies with her divided mind. This has to have been brought on by the head trauma during the accident, erasing her memories, causing her to reject the new part of herself during the transformation, and leading her to where we are now.

None of that will help me fucking fix it.

I stay up all day, watching her. Making sure she doesn't struggle in her dreams, ready to rouse her the moment she does. She is strong, determined to stand up for herself, up for

anything that comes at her. But in a way, she is also fragile—my little bird. I want nothing more than to fix everything.

I think up ideas of what we can try. The direct approach, her purposefully antagonizing her other self and trying to force a merger that way. Meditation, maybe slipping into a state of relaxation, would allow it to come together. And then there is the issue of memory. Will remembering who she is fix this? Will it be enough to force another attempt at the merger?

So many possibilities, and I hope one works.

Evening comes quickly enough, and Wren informs me she doesn't want to come down yet. I know I should respect her wishes, so I didn't press the issue, but it doesn't mean I'm not going to try to get help fixing this.

“Chandra,” I call to him from across the living room. He is a quiet fellow, turned by Leland in India when I was not with him. Rolando had gone with him on that trip, and when they returned, they encountered Zach. Chandra saved his life and they have been inseparable ever since. Everyone can tell that Zach and Chandra love each other very much. Quiet by nature, neither of them have ever confirmed that they are mates, but with the frequent silences they hold, I would place money they were speaking in each other's minds. I've never heard of same-sex couples forming a mate bond, but I can't imagine it's impossible.

He stands before me, a knowing look on his face.

“You'd like my help with your Wren.” It isn't a question and I am immediately at ease. He's always had that effect on

people. “You’d like me to see if I can help her merge with herself, or at the very least, guide her towards her lost memories, correct?”

“If you would, please. I don’t know how else to help her.”

“This is certainly uncharted territory for all of us, my brother. I am delighted to help.” His graciousness knows no bounds—a skilled fighter, deadly with hand-to-hand combat and with his blade. According to what I’ve picked up over the last hundred years, Chandra is proficient with the Khanda, a double-edged sword. He had illegally trained in and mastered Kalari, a martial art banned when he was coming up as a young man. Sparring with him can be terrifying.

I love it.

Still, with the heart of a warrior and a supreme predator’s abilities, he is a tender and gentle man. Friendly to all life, I’ve seen him soothe many wild beasts. Can he soothe my mate’s inner beast? To hear her talk of it, the inner demon might be more accurate.

“Would you mind coming to talk with her? Maybe you’ll have an idea of something that can be done?” Chandra nods at me and follows me back upstairs.



Wren doesn’t seem keen on the idea but is at least willing to try. Outside, Charlee and I sit together, watching them intently.

Chandra moves Wren's body through different stances like a beautiful dance. Helping her to control every part of herself, every muscle. Focusing her mind and teaching her to hold power there. He adjusts her elbows by a fraction, increases the bend to her knee or the distance in her stance.

Every movement must be precise.

Perfect and total control of her body.

Directly confronting her other self hasn't worked. Wren said she's tried multiple times but can't make it fall into place. She is blaming herself for being too scared of the beast within. Maybe this will boost her confidence.

"A change of scenery?" My sister asks.

I hadn't been paying attention to her. "What's that?"

Huffing her irritation at me, "What if she just needs a change of scenery? You know, get off this damn mountain and out in the real world."

"I don't think th-"

"She has been stuck here for almost two weeks, with just us to look at. No memory, only able to see her family on television. Hell, her damn boyfriend woke up, and all she knows is she's sad when she thinks about him. She's forgotten what it's like even to be human anymore. No wonder she can't channel empathy and not kill them."

A harsh laugh chokes from my throat. I don't think that's the answer, but I add it to the pile of things to consider.

The next couple of nights are much the same. Wren works with Chandra, now able to take the required stances and have him make minimal adjustments. Watching them move together in fluidity is beautiful. My coven mates seem to cycle through and watch. Rolando one night, Zach another, though he is always near because of Chandra. Even the triplets make an appearance.

So far, no one can offer insight other than what I've already considered. I run my hands through my hair, frustrated and feeling useless.

Meditation hasn't worked.

Apparently, the other part of herself is just too damn stubborn.

Or Wren is.

I am beginning to suspect that she doesn't truly want this to work. I don't blame her. Every time she speaks aloud to her other self, it seems as if the conversations shake her. Whatever it is saying to her is not instilling confidence in the merger. I want to look inside her mind, but that would mean revealing the bond, I still refuse to force that on Wren.

I have grown exceedingly fantastic at blocking her thoughts from mine. Usually, when I am distracted, she will filter through, but it seems to be coming second nature to me.

I decide to move back into my room. Being near her, kissing her, and holding her is enough. The sexual frustration is

bothersome, but we have developed ways that got us around that while still keeping that boundary I need.

I smirk as I think of it. I want to spend days losing myself in her body. I hope one day soon to do just that.

Helping Wren merge with her other self has been one massive failure.

The stress of the situation makes me feel older. If I could age, I would have acquired more wrinkles and gray hairs over the last few nights than ever before. A sing-song voice beside me makes me groan.

“Change of scenery.”

Charlee won't let it go. Her eyes, outlined in dark colors, make her look like a raccoon, and this little tidbit of what she considers genius, is the bright shiny object she won't let go of.

“I'm willing to try it if she is,” finally relenting. It goes against my instincts, but I am desperate to help my beloved.

My sister looks far too pleased with herself and is practically skipping when Wren and Chandra conclude their session for the evening.

“Just go to a bar and pick up some random human?” Wren's face screws up in disbelief. “Are you out of your mind?”

“Hear me out. You eat some donor blood before we go, so you're not even hungry when we get there. You get out of here, practice all the self-control stuff Chandra has taught you, and have a light snack. Ba-da-bing, ba-da-boom, in and out, easy peasy, lemon squeezy.” Her eyes are bright with

excitement as if everything is just that simple. “I’ll be with you the whole time. You’ll be fine.”

I take Wren’s hand in mine, bringing it to my face and brushing it against my cheek. Turning it and placing the softest of kisses, I give my oath. “I will be with you the whole time as well, lit-”

“*NO*, you won’t.” Charlee looks like an angry demoness.

Brow furrowed, I feel Wren tug her hand away, and when I open my mouth to speak, she stops me. “Charlee’s right.”

The sting of her rejection is more wounding than the sword that started the end of my life. It is as if she’s ripped my heart out of my body and holds it in her palm simply because she can. My sister’s look of victory is detestable. “Wren, I-” My words fail me.

With a gentler expression on her face this time, she reaches for my hand again and brings it to her chest, clutching it with both hands. “Oz, you’re not going to be there every time. I need to learn to do this on my own, and rely on myself.” Her eyes close, and she takes a deep breath before opening them again, a sort of fury behind them.

Ferocity.

“I am strong. I am not a weak creature that needs to be protected at every turn.”

I’ve been smothering and inserting myself into every aspect of her nights.

Hovering near her like a worrying hen over her chicks.

Wren is right. She absolutely can do this without me. If she fails, she'll fail because it wasn't meant to be yet. If she succeeds, she does because she's put in the hard work and earned it. Though my instincts tell me to protect her from the world doesn't mean I should.

They are right, and it pisses me off.

Swallowing down my pride isn't easy. It hurts like a scorching iron going down my throat. But I will do anything for Wren.

Anything.

“Very well, then I will support you from here.” Despite how hurt I had been just moments before, the smile Wren gives me now heals all of my wounds. She needs me to trust her. She needs me to let her take care of herself. They are right, a time will come one day when I won't be able to be there, and if she grows too dependent on me, she will never flourish into the creature I know she can be.

I will not suffocate her.

I will build her damn wings from my peeled flesh and bones if it means I'll see her soar.

The next night, when I watch her ride away with Charlee, looking like a haunting angel, I decide to bury myself in my art. I have been planning a new piece for some time, a surprise for Wren. She can watch me create something the next time. Heating my forge, and laying out all of my metal sheets,

already etched with the markings of where I need to cut, I began to bend and mold the metal to my whims.

All the while waiting for my little bird to return home.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE SONGBIRD

Charlee insists I should try again. Convinced that a ‘change of scenery’ will do me good. I have reservations about it and think I will kill another human again. Oz tries to assure me it is less likely since I have just fed so recently, so I decide to give it a try.

It is going to be a girl’s night.

Oz agreed to stay home, thank goodness.

I let Charlee have her way with my hair, makeup, and clothes. She chooses something I definitely wouldn’t have on my own. Tight jeans, a cropped black shirt that shows my midriff, and the makeup is her usual glam goth style. I flat-out refused the heels and instead favored some black boots. It is not me by any means, which is apparently the point?

Charlee says I will be a ‘sultry seductress’ even though I feel like anything but.

It is nice to get out of the house. She drives me down to Callery on her bike. I should have known she would drive a

motorcycle. It fits her personality. She manages the mountainside roads effortlessly, and though I'm reasonably certain we are going much too fast the entire time, I know she can't lose control.

We make it to Callery in an impressive forty minutes, stopping in front of some hole-in-the-wall bar. Parking out front, Charlee smiles at me. "I come here a lot," she boasts. "The people here don't ask questions, and the humans are super easy to compel. I know you haven't learned that yet so I'll grab one you like for you, point me to them when you're ready."

"I'm scared. I don't want to lose control again." I bite my bottom lip, hoping to find a way to feed without killing, but not confident at all that I will find that way tonight.

"You won't lose control. I know you haven't merged with your primal self, so refuse her when she demands you let her take the helm. It's *your* body, Wren. She can only come in if you let her. Use the control Chandra's been teaching you, and I know it will be fine. Once we get your memories back, I'm sure we can find a way to fix this and get the two of you into one fluid consciousness. Until then, I've got your back, Wren." Her hands on my shoulders feel like an anchor, keeping me from floating off in the current.

I take a deep breath and nod before following her into the bar.

The fact that she comes here frequently is evident by the greetings she receives from the workers and patrons alike. It

makes me feel like I am on display as eyes slide to me when they realize Charlee didn't come here alone. They are drinking me in—some with looks of interest, others with hunger.

It seems strange not to have a racing heart pounding in my chest to match my nerves.

Following the blond vampire to a corner booth, I slide in opposite her. I watch as she winks at two women standing near the jukebox. Both of them are beautiful. One has dark curly hair, and the other has straight light brown hair. They both look like they get regular makeovers from Charlee. Tight jeans hug their curves, their cleavage looks like it would spill out any minute. They are undoubtedly gorgeous. Grins wide, they make their way to our table and settle on either side of Charlee, treating her like she is a Goddess they are ready and willing to worship.

“Wren,” she says huskily, not noticing my gaping jaw. “These are my ladies. Danielle,” She introduces the woman with dark curly hair, playfully nipping at her neck. “And Sera.”

“That’s with an e,” the light brown-haired woman tells me, her tone dead serious.

Fixing my face, I ask, “So both of these lovely ladies are your....” I don’t know what to call them. Long-term reservations?

“My regulars,” she brags. “Watch.”

I saw as she takes each of them in turn by the chin, looks deeply into their eyes, and murmurs how the only thing they will remember from this evening is having drinks, sharing kisses with Charlee, and yearning to see her again. An arm around each of them, she turns her eyes back to me. “See? It’s easy!”

Easy for her, maybe. She’s walking around like sex on a stick, with people practically throwing themselves onto her fangs. I aspire to have her level of confidence one day.

“Look around, see if anyone catches your interest,” Charlee instructs.

Apprehensively, I do exactly that. Only a few people are staring at us now, most having resumed their conversations, their pool game, or taking long swigs of their drinks. I can see the appeal of this place for her. It’s small enough to have few people to deal with but busy enough to have a modicum of privacy and blend in.

The atmosphere is relaxed like the people either didn’t know or didn’t care that their lives can be snuffed out in mere moments by either Charlee or myself. I try not to stare as Danielle and Sera took turns making out with Charlee and each other. I don’t want to find something quite like that. I just want to be able to feed without killing someone.

A semi-timid-looking man in the corner is nursing a beer, and his eyes keep flicking over to our table. I meet his eyes and offer a wink, suppressing a giggle when a blush creeps up his neck and into his cheeks. He points to himself like he isn’t

sure I mean him and even adorably tries to make sure nobody else is beside him that I can be signaling instead.

Maybe this won't be as difficult as I think. Charlee made me look fierce for a reason. Allowing myself to run with it and try to fake it 'till I make it, I rise to my feet. Never taking my eyes off the embarrassed man, I stride over as confidently as I can. Shoulders back, my head high, I tilt it with curiosity. When I am standing directly in front of him, I smirk. His heart is beating fast, and he smells sweet, like pastries and chocolate.

“Hi,” I say flirtatiously, inviting him to speak with me.

He gulps. Lean and tall, with no natural muscle to speak of, his golden hair is a bit too long in the front. It keeps getting in the way of the top of his glasses, making him try to move it from his face with a futile effort. He offers a nervous smile back at me, “Hi.”

Now what?

I may be pretending to be the confident goth goddess that Charlee naturally is, but I still don't know what to do. Do I say, ‘Hey, bruh, can you hook me up with a bite to eat?’ I don't know how to compel him, but I also don't know if he will be brave enough to follow me back to my seat. I suppose it is my only real option, though. “Care to join my friends and me,” pointing my thumb over my shoulder, and I watch his eyes grow wide. I could only imagine the tangle of limbs the three women were now.

“They seem rather busy.” His blush deepens.

“That they do,” I pretend to look back. “I’m Wren. What’s your name?”

“Luke.”

“Well, Luke,” I look him in the eye and feel something.

Compulsion.

The other Wren is whispering in my ear again. I don’t trust her entirely, but compulsion is something Charlee and Oz have both mentioned to me as a standard skill all vampires have. Is that what this feeling is?

“Come with me outside then,” I said, feeling a weight in my voice that hadn’t been there before. I see something shift in his eyes, and I feel what seems to be his very will become mine. I know I have him.

See? I can help.

Irritated at her for being right, I inwardly grimace. So she helped me with this one thing that doesn’t erase what happened before.

“Okay,” He says, no longer blushing, no longer shy. He is merely willing to do as I ask. Taking him by the hand, I lead him to the back where Charlee smiles and winks at me.

“Want me to come with you?” A knowing look in her eyes tells me she thinks I have a handle on this. I am inclined to agree.

“I think I’m okay, but keep an ear out?” Biting my lower lip, I’m not sure this will work easily, but I am hopeful for the first

time in days.

“Absolutely,” She says before nuzzling her face back into Danielle’s neck, I can hear a distinct slurping sound..

I lead Luke out the side door to the alley and press him against the wall. He is pliant, trusting, and unafraid. Had fear set me off the last time? He seems almost empty. It must be the way I compelled him. Charlee’s humans are beguiled in a way that they lust for her attention. I’m not interested in a fake romance with a human. I just want him to survive this.

Stepping forward, I lean into Luke and take a deep breath. That sweet smell clings to him, and my mouth begins to water. So far, so good. Pulling back slightly, I look into his eyes, feeling that tether to me that is already present and tugging on it again. “I am going to bite you,” I tell him. “It will not hurt, you will not be afraid, and you will not remember anything about tonight.”

“I’m not afraid, and I won’t remember,” he agrees, his voice strangely devoid of emotion.

Luke is hollow.

Unnerved by the strangeness, I try to tell if my other self is stirring. She seems docile for the moment, not drawn out by the prospect of feeding. Score one for eating beforehand.

Relieved that she is absent, I line my teeth up to Luke’s neck, feeling the pulse coming off of him, teasing me like a freshly baked pie that has to cool before cutting. I moan at the deliciousness of his scent as the wind blows. My hair is a

fluttering curtain around us. The smell of cigarette smoke and hops fills the air, and I step back from Luke.

My focus snaps toward the alley opening, where a man is walking. He has a pharmacy bag in one hand, an arm in a sling, and he is talking on his phone to someone.

“Luke,” I command my friend from the bar. “Wait here for ten minutes and then go inside and forget all about me.” I can’t wait to hear his agreement. Instead, I creep to the alley entrance with the stealth of a cat. My body is moving on instinct. I am hunting.

Waiting until he is a fair ways ahead of me, I follow on the sidewalk, about thirty feet behind him, my eyes locked on his back.

Mine.

The other Wren is stirring. The thrill of the hunt pleases her. I shove her to the back of my mind, ignoring her persistence. I imagine the stances Chandra and I have been working through. I imagine controlling every inch of myself, including my mind.

While following the human for five minutes, I receive stares and appreciative glances from people as I pass them. A few attempt to make conversation, but I am oblivious to their existence. My hair spills out behind me in waves like a cape, catching on the night breeze that brings me his scent again and again.

He smells delicious.

I feel powerful.

I feel like the predator I am.

The other Wren is in there, commenting, but she hasn't tried to make a play for control or even hint at it. I am running the show and she's enjoying watching it. My confidence is through the roof.

Turning into a parking lot, I watch my prey climb a staircase and unlock the door to apartment L7. Mere seconds later, I am in front of the same door, my forehead pressing against the cool metal as I breathe in the human's lingering scent. It is rich and savory, and I give in to temptation.

Has he locked it?

The knob twists easily in my grasp, and I grin as I push the door open. Slipping into the apartment is easy and quiet. I can hear him on the phone, deeper within. The sound is coming from around the corner. I shut the door behind me and lock it quietly.

He ends his call and walks past me, turning into the kitchen. Entirely ignorant of my presence. I move quickly and silently, standing directly behind him now, my body responding to every move he makes.

My human turns, fear in his eyes as he met mine. Instead of screaming, I feel his body relax as he takes me in. He submits to my will, and his eyes give me all of him, fear slipping away instantly. "Sit on the couch," I tell him and he complies.

I follow behind him as he takes his place. I nibble on my lower lip and place one knee on either side of him, memories of my last attempt at feeding play through my mind, and I push them away. This won't be the same. I am in total control.

My human's hand goes to my waist, I haven't instructed it, but I assume it is a natural reaction. I place my head into the crook of his neck, breathing deeply. He smells like food. There is no more fear, but I can smell guilt. Pain. Sadness.

I like the smell of his misery.

Teeth grazing his neck, I hear his breath hitch as he holds me closer. It doesn't take much for my brain to shut off. I sink my fangs into him and pull his blood into me.

I can taste his soul.

His anguish.

God, he is fucking delicious.

I moan as I drink from him, and he writhes beneath me. His good arm presses me against him in desperation.

He moves his hips against me, and I can feel his arousal.

“Wren.” He breathes in my ear.

What the fuck?

I pull back from him. He is done, his heart is slowing, but I have the urge to look into his unseeing eyes. Except that they are no longer unseeing. He is breaking through his compulsion, but how? “Wren, I'm sorry, baby, forgive me? I didn't mean to leave you behind.”

He captures my lips in a kiss. Uncaring that his blood still lingers there. He forces his tongue into my mouth, massaging mine as he does. I am surprised, but I do not fight it. Does he know me? Is this the man from the accident? That would explain his arm. Apologies fall from his mouth as he abandons my lips for my neck. He burrows his good hand in my hair.

“If this is a dream, I don’t want to wake up.” Whispers into my skin send a shudder through me. I can feel something awakening. “Wren,” his voice is pleading. “I missed you so much, baby.”

We shift, and my body lowers to the couch as he pushes me down. His weight on me feels familiar. I should stop this. I’m not his anymore. I am different. I am Oz’s.

The clinking sounds of a buckle draw my attention back to my human. He is guiding my hand, slipping it around his shaft. Pressing into me, he moans. “I’ve fucking missed you so much.”

Soft hands slide over my skin with a familiarity I’m not sure I like. He has ditched the sling, and is being extra careful with moving that arm. He undoes my pants at my waist and sends his hand searching, pressing his mouth back into mine. His fingers find what they are searching for, and he groans with longing into our kiss.

I have no such longing.

No arousal sparks inside of me.

He doesn't seem to notice much or care. The way he drags his hand across my dry folds is uncomfortable. He thrusts into my hand, seemingly enjoying himself, though. "I knew you would come back to me," he whispers, his voice heavy and filled with desire. "I just knew there was no way some fucking townie would steal you away."

Townie?

A memory slips into my mind. I am standing in an aisle, plucking a box from the shelf, when I see Oz's face. Startled, I drop my item, and he returns it to me. Sparks fly between us, and I want him. I want him even before I know him. We are going to connect. We lose ourselves in each other, in the strange feeling of yearning that captures us both before Spencer comes.

"I didn't come all the way out to this god-forsaken hell hole to watch my girl eye fuck some townie!"

My human is now trying to tug my pants down, growing frustrated with the difficulty.

However, I am too busy dealing with swimming images to pay him much attention. Visions of the road looming before us. Of a speed that was much too fast. Of me crying and begging him to slow down. His refusal, and his use of the car to intimidate me. His hand, tight around my neck.. The road again, I feel worthless, I feel like nothing.

"SPENCER, SLOW THE FUCK DOWN!"

Then, the accident.

Waking up alone.

My fight to get free.

Drowning.

Everything starts to move in reverse.

I see the sadness in me before we take our trip.

I feel the hatred I carry besides my love for him. I can feel the sharp sting of his palm strike my face. Flashes of the bruises past, long sleeves, make up, excuses. I feel the fear he drives into me. I can hear the sounds of all of his berating. All of his insults. The months of trying to fix something long since broken.

The faces of my parents swim into view. The love, the family. Dinners, errands, and helping my mom with her daycare. Creating fun activities for the kids in the summer. College, high school, all of it. It is all back, and it is all mine.

The person I am slams back into me harder than the car hit the rocks.

Spencer Brown.

My ex.

The reason I was so upset that night.

I don't know how he is here. All I know is that the pure rage and despair that had filled me twelve days ago creeps into my heart again.

White hot and seething, the desire to annihilate him enters me. The blood lust screams to be satisfied. I can hear the other

Wren, and she is pacing inside of me, wild and completely feral. She wants to rip him. Tear him. She wants to consume his life as her prize. He is so vulnerable.

Spencer's frustration that my pants are too tight to pull down easily grows, and he looks into my eyes with that same look he used to have. He despises me. He will tell me if given half a chance, and it will be my fault again.

I hate him.

"Let me destroy him." The blood lust is whispering to me.

No.

I try to fight her.

But she is much too strong, and she takes control anyway.

Snarls and growls escape me as I launch my mouth back onto Spencer's neck. I use my strength to change our positions, pinning him onto the couch. My teeth clack together as I unskillfully devour him.

I am ripping, and tearing. His flesh mangles in my mouth. Spencer is screaming. His hands are clutching me to him instead of pushing me away, his brain has not caught up with what is happening. I hear banging on the door, but it does nothing to deter me.

MINE.

I drink his blood and continue tearing at his throat, the pounding grows louder, and the door is kicked in a moment later. Charlee stands there in shock.

An inhuman screech tears through my throat as I ravage him
There is nothing except me and Spencer.

The only things that exist are my hunger and my prey.

Arteries tear open, and his blood pours into my mouth, onto my shirt, his shirt, and the couch where I feed. His heart gives a lopsided pitiful beat and then stops. I pull my mouth away and lick his blood from my fingers. I suck on them to get every last morsel I can.

I feel hands pull me off of him.

Satisfied, my feral self settles and purrs itself back into a slumber in my mind.

It is done. Our enemy is destroyed.

The blood lust fades.

I freeze in place, staring at nothing. My mind is reeling.

Charlee shuts the door quickly and pulls her phone out of her pocket. She is speaking, but I can't make out the words.

I am too lost in what has happened.

My memories are mine again. I remember my mother, my father, and the family dog. I remember working at my dream job. I remember the first time I met Spence at a college party. Our first date. The first time we made love. The first time he told me he loved me. I remember how he started pulling away, so I held on tighter, all of our plans together, and how I cried myself to sleep so many times. How I nursed bruises and pretended they were nothing.

I remember going to the store and seeing Oz. I remember fighting with Spencer about the insane draw I felt to the stranger. I remember going down the mountain much too fast.

He wouldn't slow down.

I remember crying and screaming.

I remember falling, breaking.

I remember drowning.

I remember it all, and it is so clear now. No longer visions are spinning across my mind. These are mine now. My thoughts, my experiences. I am whole again.

Not yet whole.

My dark self can shove it for now.

“WREN! Miststück!”

Charlee?

Pain spreads across my cheek, and my head jerks to the side as my friend slaps me.

“Get yourself together, du blöde kuh. We have to go!”

She comes into focus, and I see the relief in her eyes as mine clear and bring me back to the here and now. She is swearing in German. Her accent is thicker than usual. I don't think I've ever seen her this upset before.

“Come on, verdammt. I need to get you home!”

She pulls on my arm, and my feet move forward. She opens the door, looks to see if anyone is around, and drags me out of

the apartment, deciding it is safe enough.

Out of Spencer's apartment.

Her motorcycle is waiting for us.

Shoving a helmet on herself and me, she yanks me onto the bike behind her. I feel it roar to life beneath us, and we are off. We speed away from my destruction. From my revenge. From Spencer's corpse.

I don't remember much of the ride. I remember feeling lost, and empty.

It happened again. I killed. I ended a life.

Not just any life.

His life.

Spencer has been the focus of my existence for so long, and I snuffed him from the universe.

His poor mother...

Suddenly Oz's arms are around me.

Surprising. I hadn't even realized we'd returned.

He is comforting me, trying to take away the pain.

Erase what I did. He can't erase this.

He can't change the evil things I have done in this world. The people I've hurt. I wish he would stop trying. I wish he would scold me, yell at me, and end the monster he's created. I hate him. I hate him as much as I love him.

I do love him.

I felt it the moment we met in the store. I was his, and he was mine. I don't know why he pretended that day didn't happen—unless?

How had he found me? Had he followed us? Is he the reason our car lost control? Is he the reason I died?

I can't take it anymore.

Breaking from his arms, I run.

I run past the road.

I run into the wilds of the mountains.

I run until I can't hear Spencer's screams as I mutilate him. I gag on his blood and bits of flesh in my teeth and cry. I cry for what I've done to him, for what has happened to me, and for the future that has been so cruelly stolen from me.

I want to die.

I *need* to die.

In just a few hours, the sun will rise.

The sun will rise, and I will be erased from this planet forever.

Just like Spencer.



CHAPTER TWELVE

THE SONGBIRD

Moonlight fades with the night sky as I sit, unmoving, on a boulder that should give me an excellent view of the sunrise. Facing East, I think about my life. About everything I wanted to do and never will. I will never run my own project for a massive campaign for a company. I will never get married. I will never have kids. In a while, after they are done trying to find me in the lake and resign themselves to the fact that the car being there means I am dead, they'll be right. My parents will mourn, but with no body to bury.

Where are you?

Words seem to whisper across my mind, but they sound like Oz. I shake my head and listen. That can't be right. I must hear him calling, looking for me.

I have no desire to see him. To speak to him.

He *lied*.

He knows more than he's letting on. I always had a feeling that he was keeping something from me. They all are. Never

did I think it would be this huge. Did he stage all of this? Was he behind my accident? Trusting he could save me in time to turn me into a vampire like him?

So many questions, not enough answers, and not enough time. I can sense dawn's approach. An hour, though it seems like weeks, has passed since I returned to our home in the mountains. One more to go by the looks of things.

“WREN!”

I definitely hear him now. He is close, too close. I instinctively want to call back, so he can comfort me, tell me this is all in my head, and mean it. I focus my thoughts on the sun to restrain myself, and I give nothing away. I will not give in to desire and reveal myself.

“Damn it, Wren! Where the fuck are you?” He sounds more scared than angry.

Scared that I discovered his plot, and that I know he betrayed me.

Just like Spence.

“Wren, *please*, it was a mistake. We all know you didn't *mean* to kill him. It was just an accident. Please, let me help you.” More excuses for my behavior. More ignoring the fact that this whole thing is a setup. He doesn't know I remember. I know he will find me. His voice is getting closer still. I can leave, but I don't want to abandon the spot I've chosen to die. It's so beautiful here.

It was a *mistake*. I scoff. How naive does he think I am?

Crashing to my left tells me he is here and has finally found me.

“Little bird.” He runs to me, hugging me, kissing my unmoving lips still covered in Spencer’s blood. “I was so worried. Please, come with me. The sun will rise soon, and you need your rest.”

He tries to tug my arm, but I don’t move.

The joy of finding me evaporates from his face.

“Wren?” He crouches before me, his eyes searching mine. “Wren, talk to me, beautiful. What’s going on?”

Beautiful?

Me?

The murderer.

I close my eyes in pain.

It isn’t right. It isn’t fair. It isn’t fucking fair.

I am a good person. I don’t deserve this. Tears stream down my cheeks, and my voice finally finds purchase in my throat.

“You *lied*.” I let acid sizzle on the words. “You told me all this, finding me, saving me. It was an accident.”

“It wa-”

“QUIT FUCKING LYING TO ME!” I scream at him, standing in my righteous anger.

His mouth stops moving, eyes wide as he rises to stand with me. Good, he is afraid I can hurt him. I want to hurt him.

No, I don't.

I only want to hurt myself.

“You knew. You knew I was vulnerable and that you could save me. You *made* us crash. So that you can play the hero.” I accuse him of it all. Every last bit of it is an orchestrated part of his master plan. I don't care how ridiculous it sounds. “And then, what joy you must've felt that I had no memory. Fear of me leaving to go back to my life was gone.”

Silence falls. He doesn't deny it. Oh, I can see the cogs turning. He is trying to figure out how to lie his way out of this one.

Oz kneels on the forest floor before me, reaching for my hand, but I pull it out of his reach, relishing the hurt look on his face.

Suffer. I think.

He flinches.

“Wren,” his voice is cautious. “I swear to you, none of this was planned. Nothing was set up. I never even saw you until I met you at the store.” Sincerity is woven through each word as it falls from his mouth. He's good, I'll give him that. “I chased after you because I saw Spencer was driving recklessly. I could hear you begging him to slow down, I could hear his rage at you, and I worried for your safety. When I heard the crash, I rushed to the lake and saw Spencer pulling himself from the water.”

I don't believe him.

It's all too convenient.

Too coincidental.

I don't believe in coincidences.

“That was when I *heard* you. I didn't just hear you shouting. I heard you in my mind. You were desperate, panicked. I hurried to you as fast as I could, and I was almost too late. Your heart stopped. You were *dead*. I was drawn to you, and I belonged to you already. I loved you the moment we met in the store. I couldn't just let you die so I saved you, knowing it could make you hate me one day.”

“What do you mean you heard me in your head?” More lies?

“Some vampires... can communicate through a bond between them. Emotions mainly, but sometimes direct thoughts. I've never heard of it happening with a human, but it did.” I can tell he wants to look away from me. He doesn't want me to see his guilt, his shame. This is something he's been holding back from me. Instead, he maintains eye contact. I enjoy his discomfort.

“You've heard me since then?” Spying on my thoughts?

Oz nods and I am disgusted with him.

“I don't try to listen on purpose. I keep out of your head as much as I can. I only heard a few things that you were practically shouting.” He is almost begging me to hear him out, forgive him, and understand him. “I didn't tell you because, in my world, this would mean we are mates. You

were already trying to figure out your past, and I didn't want to put that on you."

Well, what a fucking gentleman.

Rising from the boulder, I pull away.

I am so tired of his bullshit.

Exasperated at his constant need to protect me from what, love? I glare at him. I'm not some delicate flower that needs saving all the time.

Pacing, the crunch of old fallen leaves beneath my feet, I try to make it make sense.

Okay, he didn't want to push the relationship on me. Fine.

That tracks with his behavior. The cave. He avoided me at first.

It explains why he saved me. I had wanted to die, I had wanted to disappear into nothing. I stopped fighting and let it have me. It called to me then, like it calls to me now.

Oz rises and takes my hand with such speed that he won't let go even as I jerk it back. His other hand grasps my chin and forces me to look at him. "I would rather you hate me forever than let you slip away into nothingness."

My eyes narrow at him. He's listening again, my thoughts aren't safe. "Even if that part is true, that doesn't explain Spencer!"

Confusion colors his expression as he regards me. "I didn't know it was your ex until I found you. I didn't know who died

tonight. He was just some human passing by the bar Charlee frequents. Terrible luck.”

I yank myself away from him. I can't take the lying anymore, and it's tearing me apart.

Wren... Oz's thoughts are pleading with me.

“Get out of my fucking head!” I demand.

Wren, please, listen to my thoughts. You'll find the truth here.

So this thing works both ways. I can get in his head as well. I stare at him. I still feel such rage, like my blood is boiling. Layers and layers down, beneath that, is desperation. Desperate that I can believe him.

“Fine.” I concede and close the distance between us. I don't know how this works, but I will try. I figure eye contact and maybe physical touch can't hurt. I take Oz's face in my hands and stare into his piercing blue eyes. How can I be this mad and still want to get lost in there?

It turns out that slipping into his mind is incredibly easy.

I was intentionally keeping you out before.

His voice is a whisper that dances in my head. I can feel him. I can sense his pain as he sees how tortured I am by what has happened. I can feel his love for me, deeper and more profound than I imagined. I can tell how difficult it was for him to maintain his distance initially. Above all, I can feel the absolute pure truth in his mind now that he has given me his final secret—the mate bond.

Oz has been fighting it for so long, doing everything he could to make sure it didn't influence our time together. He is powerless against the physical draw it has on us both. The bond calls to be sealed, and the only way it can is if...

Oh.

That's why he took sex off the table but was content with other sexual acts. He didn't want to seal it until I was aware of it.

It isn't just sex that is needed. We both have to acknowledge it and share our blood and our bodies. Our minds will see every single part of each other. We would *know* every aspect of our mate, the bad with the good. He didn't want to risk that happening until I was truly prepared for it.

Until I chose it.

Until I chose *him*.

So damn noble all the time. It's incredibly annoying.

And I can't help but fucking love him for it.

Bonding isn't especially common, and Oz has been around for seven centuries, only having seen it a handful of times. When it happens, it's just once, just the one time. It's a pull you feel to the other person. A desire for closeness, for love. It's like finding another piece of your soul you didn't know was missing. You can function without it, sure, but it feels so much better to have it.

It is pure, it is true.

And it hurts me so much.

Tears blur my vision, and he pulls me to him. “I will never lie to you again, Wren. I swear it on everything.” I believe him. I believe him, and that makes it worse. I can’t stand feeling how much he loves me right now. How he sees me, not when I’m disgusting. I push our minds apart, withdrawing into my own, and my turmoil welcomes me.

“I’m a monster,” I whisper against him. He rocks me back and forth, shushing me, muttering about accidents and intentions again. It is getting so close to sunrise. “I want to die.” My voice sounds small and far away. Oz stiffens.

“No, Wren.” As if I had asked his permission.

“You can’t make me live,” I said, pulling back. “You chose this life for me, and it’s my decision if I keep it.”

He looks like I hit him.

“No, love.” His voice is calming. “I can’t make you live, but I will die trying.” I roll my eyes at him. “I’m serious, how are we doing this?”

“*We* aren’t doing anything. I am going to sit here and let the sunrise.” My eyes are on the horizon. It’s almost time. “You should get back.”

Oz settles himself on my rock, eyeing the pink beginning to form in the distance. “I think I’ll stay with you.” His voice is gentle and soothing, and he takes my hand and pulls me onto his lap. I should resist, but at the same time, there is nowhere I’d rather be than in his arms.

“Oz, please, I don’t want you to die. You’re not the monster here. I believe you. I’m a murderer. Go, go live forever.” My words are coming quickly, panicked. I don’t want Oz to go with me. This is supposed to be something I do alone. He has to live. I love him.

Brushing his fingers against my cheek, he pulls me close. “Forever is worthless if you aren’t with me.” His lips graze mine ever so lightly.

“Please,” my voice is hushed and breathy. How am I getting aroused as we sit here contemplating suicide? While I am covered with the blood of my ex? “I beg you. Please go.”

“Not without you.” I can feel the determination he has. He won’t leave me. I have to go with him.

“Why?” Why will he sacrifice himself alongside me?

Because I love you, he traces the words across my mind.

“Because what happened back there has happened to almost every vampire.” Lips lead soft kisses down my neck.

“Because the blood lust wins out sometimes, and it doesn’t make you evil, it doesn’t make you bad. It makes you try to do better next time.” He brings my hand to his lips and kisses the tips of my fingers.

“Because you don’t want to die, Wren. You tried to get out of the water. You fought like hell to live. I’m asking you to do the same thing one more time.” His exploring hands brush against the curve of my breasts, and I moan.

My eyes widen, and he presses his lips against mine. I can feel his yearning. His agony. I can tell he never wants to be without me. My heart bursts with longing, desire, and the need to be whole. His lips move to my neck as he pins me to the rock beneath us. He moans as I arch my back into him. He is tasting me and the remnants of my atrocity.

The fire he ignites in me is unlike anything I've ever felt, and I realize how fucking stupid I've been. What would be the point in staging this when just speaking to me would've guaranteed I'd fall for him? Why would Charlee trick me into eating my ex when it could freak me out like it did? She wouldn't. But more importantly...

Why die?

I am back in the car again, upside down, water rising.

Like a spectator I watch myself struggle to escape the car. I see my feeble attempts to swim to the surface. I hadn't given in to the nothing. I fought against it until I couldn't anymore. I see the mistake that cost me everything, and I die. Oz gave that back to me. He saved me.

He killed me and made me a vampire to keep me alive.

My head is spinning.

He saved me from being nothing, he saved me again from dark terror. Now he's trying to save me from the sun.

I am going to let him.

"Let's go back," I breathe, wanting to run from this place. "Quickly, before the sun comes up."

Still panting from our kisses, Oz looks to the East. “It’s too late, my love. It’s too late...”

I am terrified, but he lets me drown in him even as my fear claws its way to the surface. Lips bruise mine, and he forces his tongue against mine. We will go out together in a flame of passion. I can tell when the sun breaks over the horizon. I can feel the light creep toward us faster than I imagined possible. Suddenly, it washes over us, and I tremble, clutching onto Oz like he is my life raft.

Nothing happens.

Oz and I pull apart as I open my eyes and take in the world around me. The sun shines, and birds and other animals stir for the day, while the evening creatures slumber. I look up at Oz, my eyes searching, only to find him smiling and staring back at me.

I frown.

I want to slap that damn smirk off his face.



CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

THE WARRIOR

How beautiful my mate is when she's angry. Her ire burns within her very core, and for a moment, I think she will hit me as I smile at my little joke.

The sun doesn't kill us.

It didn't technically lie, I merely didn't correct her assumption. I need her to realize that she wants to live. Maybe kissing her helped her remember that a little, along with using the bond we share, so she could experience all the positive things I feel instead of just her pain. I tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear, waiting for what I know is coming. I won't be the first to break the silence.

SMACK!

She slapped me.

She *actually* slapped me.

I sputter then rub my jaw where she hit me. Okay, I deserved that.

“You’re an asshole,” snarls my one true love, looking dangerous with her face, throat, and clothes still covered in blood.

“I am,” I agree. That seems to take her by surprise.

“You let me think we would die.” The tone of her voice makes me worry I’ll get slapped again. I keep a close eye on her hands.

“I never said the sun would kill us, Wren. You did. I just didn’t say otherwise.”

“Lie of omission.” The amount of venom in her words could rival a black widow. She turns her back on me.

My joke was a little mean.

I place my hands on her shoulders and feel her relax. I kiss the top of her head and rest my cheek there. “You wanted to die so badly for something you had no control over. My want for you to live wasn’t going to be enough. You had to want to live.” I play with her hair, running my fingers through it, admiring how the copper shines in the sun. “For what it’s worth, I want forever with you, little bird.”

She turns back to me, letting me hold her. The pressure of her hands running up my chest is delightful. No more keeping my distance. Never again. I can tell her sorrow is still great. If I could take this pain from her, I would. I would take it a thousand times to make her happy again.

“He was awful to me in the end.” She mumbles. “Why do I feel so bad?”

Ah, the age-old conundrum we vampires face when we take life from a human without giving immortality in return. “Because you are still a good person. Wren, when we leave our humanity behind, we only leave the part that makes up our frail bodies, our inevitable deaths. Everything else, our goodness, our passions, we carry them with us to our new life. Your soul is still yours.”

I pull back from her, tilting her head so she looks me in the eyes. “Do you believe me?” I ask. It is the truth, but none of it matters unless she believes it for herself. Spencer’s death had been accidental. I don’t think Wren meant to do it on any level, even as awful as he had been. If she had been merged with herself and had her memories before she found him, he would still be alive.

“Yes.” Her voice is firm. I pull her into a kiss, tasting her. She kisses me back with ferocity and fire.

There she is.

I grip the back of her neck, holding her to me—my other hand rests on her hip. I open my mind and let my emotions pour through the bond. With time, she can learn to control it herself and block me if she wants to. It is challenging but not impossible. I’m surprised I didn’t slip up more and get caught with the secret.

It helps that the bond is useful too. When she was consumed with fear at the lake, I could sense it before she rose from the depths and I was able to be there to meet her. When she was angry with me in the cave while wanting me at the same time,

I could feel her frustration with me. Now, I can feel the love she has in her heart. She accepts the idea of being my mate without much question, having felt the same pull I do.

To cement the bond, I expose every part of myself to her. Nothing is held back. Every longing feeling I've had, every dark thought, my self-doubt. The way I crave to be near her. Each time I almost let slip that I heard something from her not meant for me. How I relish every touch, and how it pains me to stop. Every intimate moment between us that I worship in my memory.

Wren pours herself right back into me.

Her unrelenting joy with her family, and the pride she takes in her work. The terror she felt with Spencer, the sense of safety she feels with me. Her mind is naked before me. Insecurities, sadness, joy, and passion. She gives me the times she touched herself, imagining it was me. She gives me her darkest fantasies. I devour them all. Every single piece of her being is mine.

After all this waiting, I want to rip her clothes off and take her here in the woods.

Grinding my hips against her, I let her feel what she does to me. She gasps, releasing my lips, and I attack her throat the way she likes. Rewarded with a pleasure-filled moan, I send my hands searching her body. Igniting it, awakening her desire as only I can. And I feel it flood from her. Heat and wanting, she'd have surrendered to me ages ago if I had let it get this far. But no, I made her wait.

She once thought I was stupid for denying her my touch.

I have to agree.

I tear her shirt from her, shredding the fabric to expose her chest. Her perky little breasts are just enough to grab, so nothing goes to waste. I want to be on top of her, consume her, and utterly lose myself and my sanity in her. Roughly I push her down to the forest floor, trusting that her vampire skin will protect her from any discomfort. Taking a pink bud in my mouth, I suckle her, sending her back arching as she writhes under my touch. Her hands clutch me like I'm not close enough.

Yes, embrace yourself.

Embrace me.

I release her nipple with a pop and pull my shirt over my head. My lips are back on her, kissing her rib cage, and her abdomen. Lower and lower toward my goal. Jeans block me, but it doesn't matter. I pull them from her and toss them to join the growing pile of clothing. Grasping her by the ankle, I plant soft kisses back up her body. Her ankle, her knee, her thigh.

I let my breath caress her, earning a whimper of desire. She is almost glistening with how much she wants me. When I look at her face, her eyes are practically begging me. I lower my mouth to give her what she wants. I lick in a broad stroke from the bottom of her opening to her clit. Oh, how she moans with anticipation. I use my tongue to penetrate her, lapping her up. I can feel her body respond, her muscles tense. She is mine, all mine. I return to the tiny little bud, capable of so

much pleasure. Coaxing it out, drawing circles around it, luring it like a snake charmer to the most delectable cobra.

Her hands hold my head, keeping me here, her hips sway into me. I grasp her waist and force her to remain still. I am in control right now, and she will have to lie there and bear it. I tease her with my tongue, sucking on her intermittently. Her breaths are growing labored and desperate. My lips seal around her, massaging her clit as she cries out to the heavens. I gently nip at it before soothing it with my tongue. Wide strokes undulating against her.

“Oh, Oz,” she sighs, her legs shaking.

I swirl my tongue around her again, flicking her clit and then pulling it into my mouth. This time, she breaks for me. A guttural cry sounds as she comes against my face. Her sweet cunt twitches and pulses. Now is the time to make her scream.

Kicking my pants off, I stroke my length against her wet slit, coating myself in her juices. I press against her, making her shudder and her legs twitch. I smile at my beautiful angel beneath me, waiting for me, and I want nothing more than to be inside her. Positioning myself at her entrance, I press forward, slowly, gently, moaning into her neck as her warmth envelopes me.

“Wren,” I whisper to her, her name a prayer to the fates. “I will keep you forever.” I pull back and then press into her. “I will never let the world separate us.” She wraps her legs around my hips as I make my vow. Reaching deeper with my next stroke, my mind is swimming. The bond is locking us

together, we are so close, one more step. "I would tear down entire cities to get to you." Another thrust, the entirety of my length now inside her. "Because I love you."

She clutches me to her, crying out, unable to speak. She doesn't need to. Her mind is wide open to me. I feel her love and her devotion to me. She feels safe and cared for. That is all I've ever wanted for her. I can sense what brings her pleasure, which movements are just right. I sink my teeth into her neck, pulling her blood into me even as I fill her with myself. Almost simultaneously, I feel her do the same to my shoulder.

God, it feels good.

Wren's entire soul meets mine. I am everywhere inside of her. Her mind, her body, and her spirit. I can feel her within me, meeting me with passion and trust. She takes me into her, tasting me, enjoying me while I fill her thirst and cunt with my essence.

I slide in and out easily, allowing me to go as deep as I can within her. Filling her as the tip of my cock teases her womb. I stretch her, her muscles tightening on me as she takes in my entire length. Her cries are growing. She is nearing her peak again. I increase my pace, being sure to thrust just as deep and far, and she releases my shoulder. I pull back to look at her. My blood coats her lips, and she is beautiful. Harder now, oh yes, much harder. I can feel her tensing around me, and her hips rock back against mine. Closer...closer.

Her orgasm breaks over her, causing her muscles to pulse around me. The sensation is too much to bear. With a twitch

and a final groaning thrust, I release myself inside her. Hot ropes of cum shot deep inside Wren at her core. Feeling her tight walls pulling, tugging at my release to make it all her own.

I rest my head on her chest, leaving gentle kisses on her sternum as we bask in the afterglow. Neither one of us says anything. Neither of us has to. I have to practically force myself to leave her warmth. I lay on the ground beside her, holding her, kissing her, whispering my love for her. I let myself use our bond to get a better look into her feelings, searching everywhere I can for even a hint of sorrow, and I find none.

Bond acknowledged by us both, followed by our consummation. We have sealed it. Wren has accepted me, and I have long since taken her as mine. Only the unlikely event of our deaths can separate us now.



Morning moves on, and we laze in the sunshine, exhausted, but there's nowhere I'd rather be than beside her. Wren is lying on her stomach, enjoying her shadow and periodically smiling at the sky. I realize I don't know much about my beloved, since she hadn't known much about herself. Something I intend to rectify as soon as possible, though I am following her lead.

How jarring it must be to have nothing but the here and now in your head and suddenly be gifted back years of memories. Even more so to prepare for death, only to find out the one thing you thought could steal your life is something you could enjoy. Something you miss from your human life. I am mesmerized by her grace. The way her body curves, the way her mind works. The depths of her emotions are boundless.

For now, I settle myself with tracing her freckles, finding matches to the constellations, imagery, the odd letter or two. I want to kiss each and every one from the tips of her toes to the top of her head. Now there's an idea.

“What other preconceived, mainstream media bullshit about vampires is wrong?” Her question reminds me there is much about her new life that she doesn't know or understand. I have been so enamored with her that I never thought to offer. And she has been so focused on getting her memories back that she never asked.

I chuckle and run a finger down her back, enjoying how it makes her shiver. “Most of it is wrong. You already know about reflections and the sun. You just learned that we don't need an invitation to enter homes. Oh, crosses and holy symbols are just decoration.” She frowns as she ponders this information over in her head.

“Garlic?”

“Is delicious.”

“So we can eat?”

“In a manner of speaking. It doesn’t digest, so you need to make it come back up if you do. Great for fitting in, not so great as a regular practice.” She grimaces at the thought, and I laugh softly.

“What about drinking?”

“Liquids are fine. They process through like blood, but it takes a lot more alcohol to get a vampire drunk.” Is she trying to stump me? Or find something to cling to that the stories got right.

“Traveling over moving water?”

“Many of us enjoy boating.” Wren nods, taking a moment to think of her next one. Rolling over onto her back, she let the sun kiss the skin of her perfect breasts. I join the light in this venture. I love the way her skin pebbles as my lips whisper against her.

“Wooden stake to the heart?”

“Is like shooting a rhino with a pistol. It just pisses us off.” I growl and playfully nip at her stomach. Laughter fills the air. She likes that one. I let my head stay there, enjoying the feel of her fingers against my scalp as she runs them through my hair. She seems to be far away. I don’t want to pry. The bond isn’t supposed to be used to spy. It is just meant to give us a better understanding of our partners. We lay in silence for a few minutes.

“Can we die?”

I stare at her features. They seem serene, uncaring, like this is just an average question, like I hadn't found her on the brink of self-destruction a mere hour before. "Yes." My voice is flat, volunteering no further information.

She looks down at me and takes in my expression. "It's genuine curiosity, my love. I promise you, I don't want to cut eternity short." Sighing, she strokes the planes of my face, running her fingers along my brow and my cheekbones. When she runs her fingers across my lips, I kiss them.

"I was panicking and not thinking straight about the whole thing." Her voice is soft, like a whisper on the breeze. But I can hear her perfectly. "I've always been a rather emotional person, and I tend to go to one extreme or the other," she confesses, her fingers tracing my jaw now where she had struck me. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have hit you."

I am surprised she feels it necessary to apologize. It wasn't like it physically hurt me. "I know that you had a lot drop on you at once. Your memory, the accident, discovering the mate bond, and then learning I had led you on about the sun being destructive. You are a new vampire, which sometimes makes your feelings a little harder to control. I forgive you wholeheartedly, and do not punish yourself for it."

"Please don't excuse what I did."

"But-

"But, nothing." The irritation in her voice is impossible to miss. "People don't hit their partners."

“I don’t mind a little slapping around as foreplay,” I smirk at her. She can knock me around if she wants.

“I’m serious, Oz,” I love how her eyes roll at me. I want to irritate her for the rest of time.

“I know you are,” I reach out a hand and caress her face, turning serious now. “I also know it will not happen again. I forgive you.”

She seems to accept my willingness to give her a pass on the whole slapping thing. I’ll have to remember to bring up the spicier foreplay options another time. Being vampires and having the ability to heal, attempting to inflict pain can be pretty enjoyable. For now, though, I resign myself to answering her question in its entirety.

“Beheading and setting fire is the only way I’ve known one of our kind to be eliminated.” I shudder at the thought of her finding a way to remove her head and fall into a pit of flames. I push the image from my mind. If the sun was deadly, I’d have lost her. When I turned her on the lakeside, I vowed then that I would never lose her.

“Seems a little over dramatic to me,” her voice is filled with sarcasm. I watch her as she studies the sky. “I’m also sorry for scaring you.”

I reach out to her, placing a soft kiss on her shoulder. “I’m sorry I couldn’t prevent what happened to Spencer.” A dark cloud crosses her face, but it leaves quickly.

“It’s not your fault. He broke through the compulsion and caught me off guard. He started kissing me and touching me.” My jealousy flares and I am glad that Spencer is dead. “He seemed so happy to see me. And then... then he said something similar to what he said at the store.” An eyebrow arches, and I wait for more information. “He called you a townie.” I couldn’t suppress the smile. He’d been so intimidated by my proximity to Wren that he could only insult me by making me seem less cultured. So childish, so insecure.

“My memory came back with such force I felt like I was in the car again. I had been so upset, and he had been so angry with me. I don’t think anything could’ve stopped me.” My mouth forms a thin line. Am I going to get the insight I so crave? “I was with him for two years and thought we would get married. The bastard couldn’t even be brave enough to break up with me like a decent human. Then again, he was never much of a decent human being.”

My face must’ve given away my confusion.

“We were supposed to come here together to reconnect, though I don’t know why I wanted to so badly. I rented a cabin for the weekend as a last-ditch effort to save us. We’d been struggling for quite some time, and he took the first opportunity to call it quits on us. To bully me into taking the blame, so I would beg him to stay. He knew he was scaring me too, and it didn’t matter. I didn’t matter to him, and I hadn’t for a while.” The shadowy cloud of emotion returns and darkens her expression.

“What he was doing in the car, he wasn’t stupid. He did it intentionally to terrify me. For so long, it felt like I was always crying. He had a temper, and more than once, it got physical.” She reaches out and touches my face where she’d struck me. “I’ve never been the one to hit first, and I don’t like how it feels.”

Her voice is small and far away. I’ve already forgiven it, but now I understand why it is such a big deal to her. I took the hand against my face and gently nuzzle it with my cheek, planting soft kisses on her skin.

“I’m sorry he did that to you,” I am supremely glad he is dead. If I had found all this out before, I probably would’ve killed him. “While I am glad it brought you to me, I hate what happened after you left the store. At least it gave us this opportunity to be together.” What would’ve become of us if she had stayed with me, stayed within our chance encounter filled with such electricity and passion? Would I have taken Spencer’s place at the cabin, saving her from her abandonment? Would I have made love to her there? Would I have been able to turn her at her will instead of in a fit of desperation? Would her mind still be separated and broken?

“I’m happy that however it happened, I’m here. I feel more connected to you than I’ve ever felt with anyone.” She kisses me before sitting up. Raising her arms to the sky, she stretches and yawns.

“So what, does the sun just make us sleepy?”

I smile, sitting up with her. “That, and the longer we are out in it, the sun leeches our abilities until we become about as weak as humans. Some of us live full lives pretending to be human for a time. Though, most of us prefer the night and the benefits that come with it.”

Accepting my answers, Wren doesn't have any more questions for me. “I'm ready to get some rest,” she sounds more like herself. I'm sure her conscience still scolds her for Spencer, but it appears she isn't going to blame herself for what had been instinct.

Satisfied that we've worked through the necessary bits, I help her to her feet. “Then let's go home.” I will give her anything she ever wants. Everything she ever asks for. She is mine to care for, and I intend on doing a damn good job.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE WARRIOR

A week has passed since our declarations in the woods, and things are going well. Wren is thriving with my family, working on her art and reading our history. She continues working with Chandra on some fighting techniques, which she told me she enjoys because it helps get out the aggression she still feels inside her. They have moved on to wooden weapons, and she is a magnificent sight to behold.

Being a new vampire is difficult until you get a feel for it. You can forget your strength, lose your senses around blood, and cause a lot of chaos around humans. Having this level of focus is good and gives me hope that the next human Wren sinks her teeth into will walk away.

News of the B.O.L.O. for Spencer reached us the night after she got her memory back. Charlee had called some of our local coven who cleaned the scene at Spencer's place. No body, no blood, no crime. Now with him missing and Wren's body not surfacing in the lake, they are operating under the

possibility that he has done something to her. They'd never suspect it is quite the opposite.

The local news stations have all picked up the story, and neighbors report hearing the yelling, crying, and sounds of the abuse. Yet none of them could ever be bothered to check on her? To call the police? Pathetic. She insists it was a rare occurrence, though part of me wonders if she hides the worst of it. If that is the case, I'll let her keep her secret, she never needs to worry about that happening again. One less waste of space on this Earth, as far as I am concerned.

Leland has sent word that he will be returning home soon, and I am anxious for him to meet my beloved. We might as well be married. Now that we have found each other, there isn't a force strong enough on this planet other than an unlikely death to keep us apart.

There is just one thing we need to do to get our happily-ever-after.

Tame Wren's blood lust.

Charlee felt personally responsible for what happened the other night, noting that she should have kept a closer eye on Wren.

Wren, on the other hand, would hear none of Charlee's apology.

"I told you I was good. I thought I could handle it, and I think if I hadn't caught his scent, everything would have been fine." She's doing better now. She can at least talk about it

without sending a knee-buckling wave of shame pouring through our bond.

I agree with Charlee.

She took responsibility for Wren and let her down.

If something worse had happened— if I had somehow lost Wren, I don't think I would ever be able to forgive her.

Fortunately, everything has turned out fine, and I've made my peace.

We haven't felt comfortable trying with another human so quickly after Spencer. Now that a week has passed, Wren has her memory, and she drinks from blood bags every day; I want to take her out. We will go to a club in Callery to show her how we hunt humans, and there will be a more prominent vampire presence to help offset everything.

Charlee has ever so kindly volunteered to do Wren's hair and makeup and select her outfit for this evening. Rolando will come with us, and with the two of them, we should be able to clean up any messes if Wren makes one.

"I still don't like it," she says, sitting in a chair as Charlee works on her face. "What if I freak out in front of a bunch of people and eat someone?"

"Then Oz and Rolando will lock down the room, and we will compel everyone to forget." Charlee sounds aloof, like this was your average night-out contingency plan. She is *definitely* my favorite sister. I am leaning against the door frame, watching the magic happen.

Of course, I always think Wren looks beautiful just as she is. Though even I have to admit Charlee is an artist when it comes to makeup—using light and shadows to enhance the sharpness of her cheekbones and jawline, adding shimmer in strategic places so it catches the light and the eye. It makes me think of how I can always do a formal wedding with Wren and invite the rest of the coven. A long time has passed since we were all in one place. It could be a family reunion of sorts.

Wren is in my thoughts. “I think that could be an interesting idea,” she said aloud. My eyes widen, and I cringe away from Charlee. “A fancy wedding and your whole family?”

Charlee rounds on me. “You’re thinking of a huge wedding, and you didn’t want me to *know!*” Fuck, here we go.

“I am the best party planner, and I am making Wren look like a goddess as it is. Can you just *imagine* what I could do with her in a white wedding gown?” I can very well imagine it, which is what got me into this mess. I see Wren smirk at me as Charlee removes curlers from her hair. She got me in trouble on purpose. Fire fuels me as my eyes meet hers. She will pay for this later.

Promise? She whispers across my mind.

Suggestion weighs heavily on the word, and I don’t block all the ways she wants me to punish her as she imagines them.

“Charlee, of course, you can plan it. We just hadn’t discussed it yet, that’s all.” She huffs and puffs a bit longer, feigning how hurt she is about this whole thing.

Wren reaches over to Charlee, “Oh please, won’t you plan the whole thing with me? Maid of honor, all that good stuff?” She’s good. She’s getting herself out of trouble and giving Charlee her wish all in one go.

Sticking her tongue out at me, she tells Wren, “Absolutely I will. It’s been at least a century since we’ve had a wedding in this coven, and I planned the last one. Everyone had a marvelous time.” This is true, but it was also the twenties, and the bride wasn’t a missing person who is presumed dead.

“Finished,” bursts my sister, wearing a satisfied smile. “Just the dress left, and you’re all set, my dear.” Charlee helps Wren step into a red satin dress that is definitely made to draw attention to the wearer. Clinging to the curves of her body, the hem stops well above the knee, flaring outward, hinting at a peek of what is underneath. The neckline provides an excellent view of her now amplified cleavage. It cut straight across, the built-in bra pulling her breasts close and keeping them there.

Wren looks good enough to eat.

Later. She purrs across my mind.

Charlee excuses herself to finish changing into her outfit for the evening. I hear Rolando go out the front to get the car ready, and I watch Wren study herself in the mirror. I can tell this isn’t exactly her style when wearing a dress, but she does look amazing. I slip my hands onto her hips, sliding them around to rest on her stomach. I lower my mouth to her neck and kiss it gently, just once. “You look fantastic, little bird,” I told her. “You will have no trouble at all luring a tasty morsel.”

“I’m nervous.” Rightfully so. Ordinarily, I wouldn’t suggest a public feeding, but this particular establishment would have many other vampires if things get out of hand. While humans may be in danger, they won’t be the largest population. If something *does* go wrong, it is the best place for it to happen.

“I truly think a lot of what happened was a combination of events—not having your memories and not merging with your new consciousness. Having your first human feeding go wrong, then the following human being, someone who abused you, followed by the return of your memories,” In my opinion, all of these events absolve her of any guilt. “I’m sure most vampires in that situation would likely have lost control.”

“I just don’t like that there’s a part of me that’s like a separate entity. She can fight me for control and doesn’t seem to have any moral compass.” I know what she means. Each of us came face to face with a more primal version of ourselves during the change. Theoretically, it’s supposed to be what gives us all of our vampiric instincts and ensures that we survive after we’ve turned. But Wren is right. They don’t feel remorse, and they don’t care about what they do at all as long as it gets done.

Our ultimate selfishness.

Which is why the merge is so essential. We are meant to embrace it during the change. During my transformation it didn’t feel like a choice to me. Speaking with Charlee, Rolando, and everyone in our household, they all say the same

thing. We met our worst selves and embraced them with love and light.

Wren hadn't been herself during the change. It's the only explanation for it.

"You also know about the bond now. I can help you, bring you back if you slip." I pull back, slipping my hand into hers. "I will keep you safe, even from yourself," I vow to her. If I could have her live just on blood bags for the rest of time, I would. Wren nods, takes one last look at herself, and sighs.

"Let's do this."

Seeing the surprise on Wren's face as we pull up to Obsidian is amusing. Of all the places we could be going to tonight, I don't think a dance club is exactly what she pictured. Our coven owns it, managed and run by vampires for vampires. Humans get in, drink, have a good time, and if one of us wants their blood, we compel them off to the side and take it. The other humans will either be too drunk or enthralled with another vampire looking to do the same thing to them, to take notice of what is happening.

One particularly observant human picked up on it once.

That was an exciting night.

Fortunately, that many vampires meant they were compelled within seconds to remain calm and forget they ever noticed anything.

Wren places her hand in mine as I help her from the car. Vampires are always VIPs, so we bypass the velvet rope that holds off the humans. Now that four more vampires had arrived, they'd let a few more in. Having a bouncer isn't to keep the Fire Marshall happy. It is to keep us from being overwhelmed with options. He opens the door, and I lead Wren to her hunting ground.

All vampires can compel humans. According to Charlee, Wren has that under control already. I can still sense her unease about the whole thing, and I find myself deeply wishing I could allow her to feed from me for the rest of eternity. Vampire blood will keep her strong, but it will never fully satisfy the thirst.

The hall inside the door is dark, the sound of music up ahead the only directional indication. Humans will have difficulty seeing, but Wren and I can see the pocket doors tucked into the walls. There is more to this building than we let humans know, other supernatural species need a safe place, and we provide them with it.

When the hallway ends, all I can smell is sweat and blood.

The music is loud and thumping, bodies move in time with the beat, and the bartender keeps the liquor coming. But I'm not looking at any of it. I am watching Wren. She takes it all in. The shock and awe from leaving our quiet little mountain getaway and coming here has rendered her speechless.

"Come dance with me," I pull her onto the dance floor amid the humans and vampires and press her body to mine. I am

behind her, my hands snaking around her waist as we move in rhythm. The lights flash around us, a strobing effect making it look like the crowd is moving in slow motion. All I can smell is her shampoo.

Fucking honeysuckle.

Good gods, she smells like sunshine in the spring. And she is all mine.

Mine.

I can hardly believe the way things have turned out in just three weeks. From a random meeting in the store, a whisper across my mind, her cry for help, to finally finding my mate.

The idea that she wouldn't feel the same draw to me as I did her ate at me while I watched her change. Usually, one of us would form a bond with our human *before* turning them. They would want to become like us, if only so they could remain at our sides for eternity.

But she does feel it.

She felt it all along and hadn't known what to call it or what to do with it.

My fault.

I may have been foolish to miss time with my little bird, but I held to my principles, and she had understood them. She understands *me*. Some things were carved deep in my soul centuries ago that will never change. Family, chivalry, and honor mean more to me than anything else, and have for so long. I won't and can't just give that up for selfish reasons.

So many what-ifs had raced through my mind at the time. Yet, Wren has willingly given herself to me, has she not? She craves me the way I desire her. It is like we have always known each other. Our souls dance when we take each other's blood and form our minds into one. I worship her entirely. Her soul, her essence, her mind, her body... Oh, her body.

This last week I took it upon myself to explore every inch of Wren's skin and then some. I knew exactly where to touch to make her squirm or squeal. I've tasted her from head to toe, and she bares it all for me. Good God, I could spend the rest of time between her thighs, and it still wouldn't be enough.

After a few songs have played, Wren finally seems to relax in my arms.

There are a fair amount of vampires here tonight, all seeking the same thing. Each staking a claim when they find a soul they deem particularly delectable. Speaking of delectable, I turn and pull Wren to my chest, crushing my lips to hers. Her nearness is enough to stir my arousal. I grumble and pull away.

There would be enough time for me later. Right now, I need them to see her.

I need them to *look*.

A goddess graces their presence, and she hungers for their attention. She longs for their blood.

I press my lips to her temple. "I'm going to fade into the crowd. Just keep dancing, my love. Someone will approach

before long. If biting them would please you, whisper to me, and I will help you from there.”

Her arms wrap around my neck. “How do I know if I can control her?”

The inner vampire, the primal force that sometimes takes Wren over and, in all her wild nature, has taken two lives now. “She is a part of you, my love. Do not fear her. You are meant to be one, but you were here first. She is an extension, and you have the power.”

With that, I part from her, shrinking into the shadows to watch.

Teaching new vampires to hunt isn't difficult, but watching Wren try to coerce a human close enough to her is hard for me. I know it won't take too long, and if it does, we will have a lesson in fast food.

A man approaches her, his eyes coveting what is not his.

I watch as she breathes him in deeply. I can tell this isn't the human she seeks. She turns her back on him, dancing away.

Surprised at being refused, the man seethes. I reach a thought out, willing him to look my way. Proximity is essential to compulsion when you are new. My seven centuries and then some are enough to get this mortal to look at me from across the room.

His eyes flash to mine, and I can pinpoint the moment fear creeps down his backbone. Instead of pursuing Wren as he wants to, he turns away and retreats to his friends again.

I seek her out in the crowd once more. Unable to stop a sharp intake of breath when, to my surprise, I find her dancing with another man. Red colors the room as I am filled with the strong urge to rip him limb from limb.

Please don't kill him. He smells tasty...

Rage simmers with annoyance and jealousy as my mate's words cross my mind. This is the one she thirsts for. I examine him, trying to discern her type. His eyes are kinder than the last one. He seems unsure of himself, like he only worked up the courage because he had encouragement.

I smiled at him.

I begin crossing the room to them. Of course she did.

She could sense his goodness and gave him a welcoming smile.

No doubt it dazzled him until he *had* to ask her to dance with him—poor fool. I drink in her form with my eyes. He isn't wrong, though. She is stunning. The flashing lights of the club change her color with them. Each shift seems to reveal a different piece of her beauty.

A thought reaches out to her, ready to guide her through the next part. *Compel him to follow you and bring him into the shadows with me.*

Determination settles on her features, giving her a fierce look, like a warrior. I watch as she licks her lips and stares into the soul of the man before her. He stops moving to the music,

enraptured by her beguilement. He is lost in her stare. I see her lips form the words, “Come with me.”

Her hand clasps his arm, guiding him, his bewitched feet willingly obeying her commands.

First try? Charlee was right. Impressive.

Rolando had done just as well some two hundred years ago. I want to take credit as a fantastic teacher, but I only guided him in compulsion, and he was a natural. Some vampires are just gifted in the art of beguiling humans. I think it has something to do with how charismatic they were in life.

Finally reaching me, I grin at the prideful look on her face. Smug. We are hidden at the edge of the room.

“Now, when you find where you’d like to feed from, listen closely to his heart. Keep your concentration and pull until his heartbeat starts to slow, and then stop.” I lend her my expertise, hoping it would give her a much-needed anchor to focus on.

Worry pinches her perfect face. “What if I can’t stop again?”

I brush her hair behind her ear, allowing my hand to graze her cheek as I do so. “You’ll be able to stop. And if you struggle this time, I’m here to help you.”

I watch as she searches for her mark. As she breathes him in, I am reminded of a dog circling on a bed. She passes the same spots once, twice, three times. She is finding it difficult to pick. Nostrils flaring, her eyes snap open as she settles on the

right place. I am not surprised in the least when she locks eyes on his neck.

Necks are juicy, and the blood flows nicely.

I watch as she poises her mouth against this man's skin. How I long to rip him from her and string him up as a warning to others that Wren is mine. Forcing myself to accept that she is feeding and this is just sustenance, I bury the impulse to kill this man. Her beautiful fangs penetrate him, a small amount of blood dribbling from the punctures, escaping before her lips can close the seal against his flesh.

Her eyes roll back into her head as she drinks deeply. I can feel the joy he brings her. I take the man's hand and raise his wrist to my lips, sinking my fangs in, allowing the tiniest trickle to flow into my mouth. I don't need to feed from him, but I will monitor his pulse for my lovely mate.

A moan escapes her mouth as she pulls deeper still. The man's eyes flutter with pleasure. He is tall and houses enough blood for her to fill herself nicely. This makes me glad, if only so I don't have to watch this happen again tonight.

After a few minutes, I feel his pulse slow, and his heart skips a beat. I pull his wrist from my mouth and watch to see if she realizes the time has come. "Wren," I say softly, touching her shoulder when she doesn't stop.

Slapping it away, she *growls* at me.

I force my thoughts into her head. She will hear my words, whether her blood lust wants her to or not.

Wren, that's enough.

She ignores me, clasping her arms more tightly around her human. Ice fills me as I realize this man is in danger.

I can see Charlee and Rolando against the far wall, alert, ready to help if needed.

He's finished, his pulse is slowing, he's dying.

A moan escapes her lips, and she grips him tighter still. I have to put some depth behind my words.

STOP!

I shout in her mind this time.

Her fangs release the man, who crumples to the floor as her eyes flare to mine in anger. I kneel over the man, listening to his heart. He has been drained far too much, but he will live. I use my blood to seal his wounds. Before I can leave him, I need to have him drink some of my blood. He won't turn if he doesn't die, and this will help him replenish himself, plus ease any suspicion about the events of the evening.

Biting my wrist, I allow my blood to pour into his mouth. He drinks gleefully. I doubt this is the first time someone drank too deeply from him. He craves my blood like he's had it before. It certainly hasn't been my blood he consumed. I pull my wrist from his lips when he's had enough. Turning to see my beautiful lover, I can only see the predator within her. Shuddering, I take in how she still stares at the man with hunger.

So ferocious is my bride.

Prying the man's eyelids open, I force him to look me in the eye. It is no easy feat, as he still suffers from the effects of blood loss. I pull his humanity into me and take control of it. "You drank something that you think was laced with drugs. You will spend tomorrow in bed, sleeping it off. You will not remember me or my companion." I allow his soul's focus to retreat into the safety of his mind.

I rise from Wren's would-be victim and face her again. Apprehension flies through me.

Her glare has moved from the man to me.

Companion?

The question comes across my mind and is filled with her ire. Oh, she doesn't like that particular term of endearment at all.

"You may call me your little bird, your dear, your love, your mate..." each term is drenched with acid as she tries to intimidate me. I am brave enough to admit it's working. "But you will *never* reduce me to a companion again." Unsure how strong the clutches of the other Wren are, I nod, an easy thing to give. I probe into her mind and sense it is still her raw form driving right now.

That human is lucky to be alive.

My compliance seems satisfactory as she pushes me into the wall, pressing herself into me, her hands roving over my body. Indeed, I am somewhat frightened by the love of my life, but that does nothing to deter my arousal of having her body so

near mine. The feeling of my cock swelling with want and need feels good as she explores me, grinding her body against mine.

Here?

Now?

One thing is certain when Wren's other self is in control, she usually gets what she wants. I've already deprived her of a death, and I don't think I'll get so lucky with another refusal. I am still surprised that she listened and stopped. Something I am grateful for because Wren would probably refuse to eat from a human again for a month, at least, if she had killed him.

As you wish. I let my words gently embrace her this time.

My new mate wants a good fucking after her dinner? Then who am I to deny her? We are perfectly concealed in these shadows, save for the pathetic, beguiled human on the floor beside us. I can sense at least five other couples around the room doing the same thing.

My hands grasp the cheeks of her ass and turn around, pinning her to the wall instead. She moans and wriggles as I free myself from the cloth prison of my slacks. I grasp at her mound next, shoving her panties to the side. I can feel her wetness for me, her desire to be controlled. She needs her mate to fill her up and keep her in check.

Positioning myself at the hot entrance of her slick cunt I look deeply into her eyes. She is still wild, not quite in control of herself. "Forgive me," I whisper, hoping my Wren will return

soon. Nails dig into my shoulders, enough to draw blood. The pain is electrifying, and I slam myself into her warm wet sex. This won't be gentle, and this isn't meant to be romantic. This isn't lovemaking, it's rutting.

I am able to glide in and out of her sweet hole with ease. I groan as I fill her, pounding myself deep within her, giving her my entire length. I plow into her, crushing her to the stone wall behind her. She whimpers and moans in my ear, biting down on my shoulder, and muffling her cries.

No one can hear us over the music except maybe a few vampires. And if they do, they certainly won't care what my mate and I are doing. I pump myself in and out of her juicy cunt, relishing how her muscles clench against me, desperately hoping to keep me within her for eternity. My hips buck and roll, and I began grinding myself into her with each thrust, stimulating her clit.

Her cries grow louder as her body breaks around me. I feel her hips moving back against me as Wren desperately reaches her peak. She throws her head back as she cries in pleasure, getting the release she craves, letting it sweep over her as my cock slams into her with reckless abandon. Using only one hand to support her, trusting that the wall I have her pressed into will do the rest, I pin her neck against it. A fire burns in her eyes, but this time it is the fire of passion, not rage.

I fuck her through her orgasm, driving myself to the edge of madness as I do. But I want to look my love in her eyes. She may have decided to use me to satisfy her other hunger after

feeding, but that doesn't mean I will let her get away with using me like a sex toy.

I cut off her air supply. Her delicate neck feels so breakable in my hand. Of course, she doesn't need air, but it startles her at first. I can see fear flash in her eyes briefly before realizing I am her mate and there is no way I will hurt her. No, this is about dominating that force in her. I made her a vampire and I will not let this version of Wren take over. I stretch and fill her so completely that she will bend to my will.

Mine, forever.

Another wave of ecstasy takes hold of her body as I feel her tight little cunt ripple around me. She screams soundlessly, and her wetness drenches me as I fuck her. Seeing her like this is too much and my thrusts are too fast. If she had been human still, I would have broken her frail body with the sheer force of me.

With a last buck of my hips, I feel the release I've been seeking. My cock pulses and twitches inside her, filling her with my seed. The final moments of her climax tugging and pulling at me, walls pulsing in pleasure. I kiss her mouth hard and release her throat.

I don't want to leave her. No, I want to harden while still inside of her and fuck her raw.

Glancing around, I know this isn't the time. I only gave her this because of the dark version of herself that has yet to merge with her mind. She is still trying to keep her control, and if I don't give her what she wants, she will take it, likely in the

middle of the dance floor. Pulling from her, I stuff myself back into my pants and lower Wren gently so her feet can touch the floor again. She fixes herself, and I notice her eyes look back to normal. My Wren is in control again.

I kiss her temple and whisper, "Let's go home, my love." She nods, still trapped in the afterglow. I help guide her out of the club, down the street, and back to where the car is parked. Rolando and Charlee are already waiting for us so we can go to the safe house. None of us fed. The only purpose of tonight, is for Wren to learn how to feed and for the human to walk away.

Our goal is an apartment building a few doors down from Charlee's shop. The tiny five-story building is a property we maintain for sporadic use. I lead Wren to the top floor, but she grows heavy against me when we get there. Opening the door, I gather her into my arms. The sun is still an hour from rising, but she's had quite the evening.

Laying her gently on the bed, I remove her shoes and clothing as well as my own. Nestling in beside her, entwining my body with hers, I watch the rise and fall of her breasts as she takes deep breaths in her sleep.

I fall asleep thinking that one day I will lose myself in her body and never surface. This brings about the most beautiful dreams I've ever had.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE WARRIOR

Days pass by, and the house is in a state of calm serenity. Wren spends her evenings in art mostly. I spend many nights simply watching her.

Compelling a handful of humans at a time, Wren is getting better and better at controlling her wild side. With only one more notable time that she had any difficulty stopping, and she didn't drink from that human nearly as much as the last. The following time, she stopped on her own.

It is a relief.

My theory is that her first feeding experience being what it was, affected her deeply, and she had been creating a loop of self destruction that she couldn't get herself out of. Being unable to control herself a second time and ending the life of someone she knew, albeit someone who deserved it, did a number on her confidence. She couldn't restrain herself twice, so she thought she would never be able to.

With encouragement from myself and other coven members, Wren has blossomed. Sparring with Chandra and sometimes Zach helps to satisfy her physical need for exertion. I have offered to help her there, but for some reason, she insists we can't spend eternity in bed. Now, her art satisfies her mind.

Creating from nothing.

It fits her.

I watch her breathe her kind of life into this place. She sketches different coven members, capturing them when they least expect it. When their facade is invisible, she can see the person beneath. She paints scenes of our gatherings, moments when our coven truly feels like family.

Wren has bonded with everyone in some way, shape, or form. She is ours. Our family for eternity.

I can spend all night just watching as she draws inspiration from the world around her, somehow her skilled hands know how to draw a specific curve—moving with such surety, such grace. When I'm not absorbed in watching her process, I throw myself into research. Rolando and I look up everything we can about the history of vampire changes. So far, we haven't found a single record of another vampire failing to merge during the turn.

Strike one.

When that fails, I try to research why the mate bond telepathy would have triggered while Wren was still human.

Strike two.

I document what happened and what it felt like, and that my theory is the sole reason I could hear her while she was human is because her life was in danger. In a moment of desperation, she could channel the bond she didn't even know she had with me. Our initial meeting, coupled with my being near, gave her access. The circumstances, however, gave her the will to use it.

There may not be another case like it, but there will be now if this happens again.

The last thing to archive is the bond itself, its creation, and the experience of sealing it. Bonds are known, but they aren't documented well.

Strike three, I'm out.

Had I known more about what to expect, I may not have kept it from Wren as long as I did. Maintaining a distance from her had been pure and utter torture. It will be wondrous if our experience can spare another couple the same fate.

Vampire covens are responsible for documenting their history as it occurs. Back in the old days, we only had the option to journal. The printing press allowed us to create books with more longevity, and now, the internet. If I hadn't lived through its creation, my past self would've thought of it as magic.

Rolando has taken it upon himself to transcribe everything and digitize it. Better him than me. Now, our records will live forever. Having worked in graphic design, Wren helped him to create a website-style mechanic to access anything we want

quickly and easily. A damn search bar is installed at the top to help find specific entries. Each piece is carefully typed to be legible, with photographs of the original journals. It is indeed an amazing feat.

The hierarchy of vampires is reasonably straightforward—a council with representatives from around the world that set the general rules. Stay hidden. Cities across the planet hold multiple covens, one being the “leading” coven for the area. Usually, the oldest vampire will be the leader, as it is with ours, and as the leading representative, they will travel for diplomatic and disciplinary reasons.

Leland is on a diplomatic mission this time, in another state, helping a coven establish footing after overtaking another. The council cares little for who is in charge where, but they care a great deal if infighting leads to discovery. Particularly apt at the art of remaining hidden, my maker has gone to ensure the transition goes smoothly. The coven that had been removed were troublemakers, leaving bodies as they pleased and risking our anonymity as a species.

Before he left, I had wished I was going along to assist him, but eying Wren in the corner, engrossed in her latest project, I am grateful I was left behind.

As the second oldest and Leland’s first creation, I have taken the role of second in command. I can’t go with him everywhere, even though I long to ensure he stays protected. If he has one weakness, it is his damn honor.

Old fashioned, he's never adapted to using more modern methods to deal with rogue vampires, sticking to his sword. I think it is stupid when we have plenty of assault weapons lying around. Guns may not kill us, but they can mangle a body enough to get it out of commission until you have time to take the head. Leland doesn't think it is a fair fight and refuses to use them. It worries me. It always worries me.

"Tell me about your human life," I hadn't even heard Wren come up behind me. She wraps her arms around my middle, and I turn in her embrace.

"It was pretty boring. Medieval times weren't filled with much to pass the time." I touch her face with the back of my hand, relishing the softness of her. She takes that hand in hers and gives it the gentlest of kisses.

"Come with me." She leads me to the part of the living room that she's claimed as her workspace. The corner with the best view of the city. She positions me in front of a chair and then pushes me down. I reach for her, expecting her to climb into my lap. Instead, she pulls away and sits across from me. "Describe your life for me. Tell me what it was like to be a knight."

I am a little disappointed not to have her sitting with me, but what my lovely wants, my lovely gets.

Reliving my human days isn't the easiest. Those memories are foggier than the ones I have created as an immortal. After seven hundred and thirty-two years, I have plenty of memories, but I do my best. I explain how and why I became a

knight, describe the training it took, the honor it brought me, and the battles I faced. I give her the clearest memory I have, the day I died. For some reason, our deaths stuck with us easily.

I watch as her hands move across the paper, a pencil between her fingers. I imagine what she is drawing. Will it be some imposing battle scene? Will I see myself with armor?

“What about your family? Did you return to them at all after you turned?” I sense this question holds more weight than it seems to. She misses her parents. Is playing dead going to be too difficult for her?

“I never saw them again.” I study her face, though she doesn’t look up from her paper. The words smooth over her, and I see no change, no reaction. I try to reach out to her mind and see what she is feeling, but she volunteers nothing. Wren has learned the intricacies of our connection in a way that surprises me. Maybe having her memory has something to do with it.

“I’m fine, Oz.” She insists, eyes still focused on her work.

I don’t believe her.

“Don’t cut your eyes at me, *Oswald*.” The audacity of learning my full name. Let alone *using* it?

“Where in the *hell* did you learn that name?” Her pink lips curve in a smirk as she continues, ignoring me. Her slightly too-large front teeth are visible, making her look like a

chipmunk up to no good. How had she gotten this little nut of information? “Wren...” I want an answer damn it.

“Sir Oswald Hurst, born in twelve ninety-one, died in thirteen seventeen.” My mouth drops open, and Wren looks incredibly smug. “Rolando digitized the records, remember? I’ve been reading while helping with the archive website.”

Irritation flows through me. I hate the name, Oswald. Even as a human, I despised it. I was so grateful when the times progressed, and I was able to adopt a nickname. I could’ve just changed it, but that didn’t feel right. It was a gift from my parents and my only connection to my human family. “Don’t ever call me that,” I grumble.

Light dances in her eyes, so pleased to have a way under my skin. “Only when you’re in trouble then.” Laughter tickles the edges of her voice. I relax my shoulders, no one calls me that, but if I have to hear it from anyone, there is no one better. I will be her Oswald, her Sir, her *knight in shining armor* if that’s what she needs me to be. I’d rather be the evil stealing her away and keeping her to myself, but we have centuries for role play.

“Do you wish there was a way to have your parents in your life?” I ask, finally digging at the wound she doesn’t want to show me. I won’t let her hide from me. She knows I won’t.

Something resembling pain shines in her eyes for the briefest of moments and is gone just as fast. I feel guilty, but I want to know so I can help.

“Yes, and no.”

Well, at least she's straightforward.

"I know I could have them for a time. Pop up in a few days, weeks, or months, and pretend it was just memory loss that kept me away. But I would always have to leave eventually. How long would I have? A couple of years, max? Better to rip the band-aid off and let them mourn now than hurt them with distance later." I study her. She says this, but her heart wishes it is different. She's right. If we keep her family in her life, we can get married and invite them. We can move away. They would still be in touch, but the distance we'd have to maintain would hurt them slowly until they died.

This way, they can mourn now. Then they can move forward and find happiness again.

Hopefully...

Wren doesn't care if it hurts her more to do it this way. She'd rather her parents' grief be as smooth as possible. Her selfless compassion truly astounds me sometimes.

"Done," a tone of pride fills Wren's voice as she turns her sketchbook towards me. I take a sharp breath as I revel in her creation.

It's me, but not in the way I expected.

There is no armor, no sword, no battle.

Just me, in ordinary clothes, leaning against a building. Just a typical day. A shadow of bruising, wrappings around my knuckles. Proof that I had been no more special than any of

my knighted brothers. My birth and nobility mean nothing. Only my dedication and work give me the status I earn.

“You truly have a gift,” I stare at it in wonder. I’d thought she’d romanticize the time and title and make me out to be more than I was. Instead, she depicts me as an average man, taking a break after scrimmaging with the other knights in training. Flashes of laughing through broken noses, drinking ale, and singing songs to honor the heroes that came before us. It’s like I am home again. “Thank you,” I whisper as she hands it to me. I can’t stop looking at it. I want to frame it and keep it forever. “It’s just missing one thing.”

Frowning, she hurriedly moves to stand behind me, peering over my shoulder, looking for what’s missing. Brows knit together as she scans the piece, finding nothing. I reach for her hand and kiss the inside of her wrist. “Your signature, love.” I enjoy few things in this world more than the sight of her rolling eyes at me. One is how she whimpers my name, and the other is the place between her thighs. Scrawling her name in the bottom right corner, she completes her work. “There, now it’s perfect. I’d like to frame this in our room.”

“Really?” Surprise colors her voice.

“Absolutely, *you* made it for me. I want to keep it in a place of honor.” I carefully close her book and guide her to sit on my lap.

Stroking her hair away from her neck I nuzzle closely. I love the way she smells after drawing or painting. Like fresh paper, and the way it mixes with her honeysuckle scent is divine. I

kiss her neck softly, closing my eyes and allowing myself to get drunk on her nearness. I scrape my teeth across her skin, and her fingers desperately clutch at my hair as she gasps.

How she reacts to my touch sends a wave of arousal through me. As I twitch in my pants, I know she is experiencing something similar. My hand slips up her thigh, getting closer to its goal. It is hard to tell if she's bending to my presence through the fabric of her pants. Grazing my hands against the apex of her thighs outside of her leggings, I gently suckle on the skin of her neck, intermittently running my teeth across her flesh. Rewarded with the softest of moans, I sent my hand searching.

Slipping under the waistband, I stroke against her core. Her panties are wet already. I quietly laugh against her skin, happy I have the same effect on her as she does on me. We aren't exactly concealed here in the living room, and while that does have a tempting sort of danger to it, only Wren's more feral side seems to enjoy having sex in public. My Wren likes a little more privacy.

Can I entice her into a mixture of both?

I don't have to reveal her body at all. I slide my fingers under the soft cotton covering her mound. My knuckles brush against her hot folds, and she quietly moans into my ear. Maybe I won't fully take her, but I can certainly, covertly, give her pleasure. "Oz," she whispers, questioning, no doubt because of the nearness of other coven members. No one is so close that they can hear if she remains ever so quiet.

If anyone looks over, it would just seem like we are kissing and cuddling. Nothing out of the ordinary. “Shhh,” I breathe, circling her clit with a finger, trying to coax it out. “Just stay quiet. That’s a good girl.” One of her hands remains tangled in my hair, and the other clutches my thigh for support. Leaning forward, my lips find hers, and my middle finger teases her entrance. Softly, quietly like I told her, she moans into my mouth as I sink the digit into her.

She was so hot inside, her body yearning for my touch. I move my finger slowly, stroking her walls for that one particular place. My thumb presses into her clit. She releases my lips and whispers, “Yes, oh please.” I love it when she asks me for it. I sink a second finger into her, still torturing her most sensitive bud. She wants to sway and buck her hips and instead is trembling with the exertion to remain still.

My free hand slips up her shirt, caressing the underside of her breast as my thick fingers pump in and out of her. I clasp her nipple tightly, rolling it as she mewls under my touch. A third finger enters, and her body begins to tense beneath me. “Oh!” she cries, a little louder than she should.

“Shhh,” I remind her. “You must be very quiet if you want me to let you come. Do you understand me?”

She nods, eyes closed as I continue to take what I want from her. She enjoys surrendering to me, letting me fully control the situation. Commanding her is divine. Her moans are no more than gasps and sighs as she regains control of her voice, but her legs are trembling.

“You look so beautiful, squirming under my touch,” I whisper to her, increasing the speed of my thrusting fingers, paying attention to the small rough area inside her. My thumb moves against her clit, stroking it, getting faster to match the pace of my hand. “Who does this belong to,” I breathe in her ear.

“You.” Her voice is barely above a whisper. She has given in to me completely, letting me control her body and loving every second.

“That’s right, me. Have you been good?” She nods against my chest. “Should I let this little cunt of mine come?” I pull back off the pressure, keeping her shy of the release she wants. She whimpers.

“Beg me for it,” I demand, undulating my fingers inside her. She gives in.

“Oh, Oz. Oh God, please, will you let me? *Please.*” The sound of her begging is almost enough for me to pull her pants down and take her there in the living room. I resist because this is for her right now.

“Look at me when I let you come, my love.” Her beautiful gray eyes open and look up, locking on mine. Kneading her breast, I reach forward and pinch her nipple again, simultaneously pressing down firmly on her clit, massaging it back and forth. Faster and faster, I pump my fingers inside of her and then feel her walls tighten and pulse around them, and her body begins to tremble with each stroke. Her wetness

practically gushes over my hand as she orgasms, and her lips open in a silent cry.

I take her mouth in mine and slip my tongue against hers. I hold her there for a moment longer, not letting up, dragging it out. Finally, I remove the pressure from her, and my fingers stop their movement. I feel her hips twitch against me, and I release her lips, hearing her pant as I smile.

“You did so good, Wren,” I whisper into her temple before I kiss it. A satisfied laugh escapes her, and I hug her tightly as she recovers. I remove my hand from her clothes and lick her essence from my fingers. Glancing around for a sign that anyone noticed what we were up to, I find none. It seems we’ve gotten away with our private little session. Not that anyone here would probably care if we decided to fuck out in the open. The shadows of the club are one thing. Wren’s personal feelings aside, I don’t think my jealousy would be up for quite such a public display, either. But this? This I can do.

We clean up, then I am content to just hold her. She’s curled in my lap, and we’re oblivious to time. The sun will be up soon, and I contemplate all of the ways I can take her in the light. I am already planning the things I want to do to her. Watching the sun kiss her skin while I do them is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

Rolando comes bursting into the house, more boisterous than usual, and I turn to see what the commotion is. “He’s back!” Excitement fills the entire house as the rest of my family pours into the room from wherever they’d been before.

Leland.

Grinning, I kiss Wren's forehead. "Ready to meet my maker, little bird?"



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE SONGBIRD

Leland. Still reeling from Oz's attention, I don't know how to react. I am nervous, and this is basically Oz's father. What if he doesn't like me? What if he doesn't want me in the coven?

In walks a man who appears to be in his mid to late forties. His face seems jovial but has the weathered look of a man who's seen his fair share of trouble. He is from Oz's time, or before. I haven't quite gotten to that part of coven history in the archive. No, I am particularly drawn to a specific coven member and focusing my research there.

I watch as Leland hugs each of his children. His ashy blond hair is pulled back into a low ponytail. A few wisps have escaped, and he tucks them carefully behind his ears. One falls forward as he hugs Rolando. He looks up and locks eyes with me.

The sensation of being this nervous without a racing heart is strange. Instead, I feel a strange pit in my stomach. His brown eyes stare for half a second before he smiles wide and strides

over to Oz and me. I watch as he takes Oz's head in his hands, and they both lean forward, foreheads touching.

“Gone and got yourself a bride, dear boy,” he claps Oz on the shoulders in a fatherly gesture. Leland's voice is warm, with a crackle of gravel behind it. Wafting off of him are scents like smoke and something metallic I can't place. His presence is dominating, and I can see why it is easy for him to command a coven. He exudes confidence and oozes charisma, so as he turns and regards me, my breath hitches.

“My dear,” he beams, reaching out and taking my hands. “What a pleasure it is to meet you finally. Come with me. We have much to discuss, you and I.” He gives a gentle tug and leads me away, Oz following closely behind. We reach Leland's study, which is currently in chaos from Rolando's work. He is almost done digitizing the archive, but boxes of journals that still need transcribing litter the floor. Hundreds more line the shelves, their information meticulously recorded and saved forever.

“Oz,” Leland says paternally, turning and blocking the entrance to the study. I peek over his shoulder and see that Oz seems surprised. “I must ask that you remain out here. Leave me to tend to your lovely mate for a spell. You and I will catch up shortly.” Why can't Oz come in with us? What is happening? It doesn't make sense, and my nerves aren't settling.

“Of course, Leland,” Oz accepts. I can see he is as confused as I am, but he does as he is bid by his coven leader, creator,

and mentor... His father. Leland pushes the French doors shut, the blinds are already drawn over the glass.

“Please, my dear, have a seat,” Leland gestures to a chair by the fireplace. Nodding, I do as he requests and sit down, still nervous and tugging at my fingers. I watch as Leland points a remote at the fireplace, causing a fire to roar to life before my eyes and immediately casting me in warmth. “Oh, come now,” he says, looking like he’s laughing at me. Sitting in the chair beside me, he adds, “I’m not that frightening, Wren.”

I gulp, wishing I could be a little bit invisible. I force a smile. “Just nerves, I guess.”

He looks at me with a hint of understanding but a teasing smile just the same. “I, for one, drink when my nerves begin to act up. Would you care for a glass?” He indicates a well-stocked bar cart beside his chair.

“Please,” I nod. “I’d like gin, neat.”

Pouring the clear liquid into a crystal glass, Leland hands it to me before fixing himself a bourbon. Turning back to me, he raises his glass in a toast, I do the same, and they clink together. “To new friends and family,” he declares before tossing back a third of his drink.

Deciding I need to get my shit together, I down the whole damn thing. His brows raise, but he extends the bottle, pouring me another without asking. I’m grateful and sip on this one. “Wren, I can’t tell you how glad I am that you’re here.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. My Oz has never looked happier, and from what Rolando tells me, you helped pull the stick out of his ass.” I almost spit out my drink, sputtering just a bit as Leland laughs. It reminds me of the laugh a Santa Claus actor would give. Full of belly.

“He was wound a little tight?” I muse, picturing the man who jumped into a lake to save me. I can see it. He is always so careful, and so attentive. What did he do before he met me?

Eyes wide and mouth in a straight line, he tells me, “Tighter than a fresh pressed spring. When I left, he would brood everywhere. I think the last couple of centuries have been hard on him.” Leland stares into the fire, the flames dancing around the gas log. “I thought he would go off alone for a while, but then I realized he didn’t know where to go or what to do. It was like he had no purpose, like he was waiting for one,” Leland looks directly at me.

“You’re his mate, I understand, as in he heard you in his mind while you were human and continues to hear you still.” nodding, I continue sipping my drink. “You hear him as well?”

“Yes, but I didn’t hear him until after the turning.”

A grimace flies across his face. “Ah, yes, your turning. A gruesome thing to have to be pulled back from the brink of death and wake completely different. I am truly sorry you had to experience your new life that way. There’s usually a bit more... ceremony.” I know most vampires are turned, knowing what they will become—knowing that they will wake with thirst, with strength, with all their memories intact.

“I turned Oz very similarly. I found him on the side of the road, and he lay dying in his own blood. But he still knew what was coming.” He finishes the rest of his drink and pours himself another. “Oz called me while you were changing and told me everything. The crash, drowning, resuscitation, and then turning you ultimately to save your life. The mind bonding while you were human. So curious,” he looks at me with eyes that are searching.

“We sort of assume it happened because I was in danger,” I explain. “I was heading to a nearby cabin, and we think if we hadn’t met in the store, Oz would’ve likely sensed me there that weekend.”

Leland nods. “Oh, very likely. He loves brooding about by the cabins.”

I snort, picturing Oz being sullen and withdrawn. It’s an Oz I’ve never known. I feel at ease around my coven leader and slowly drink the rest of my glass, declining a third.

“I also heard about what happened with that man from your past.” I can sense myself growing distant immediately, wanting to disassociate from anything to do with Spencer. Leland’s hand rests on my forearm, and I stare into his soulful brown eyes. “All of my children have killed more than one human on accident, Wren. I can see your pain about it, your pain about leaving your life behind. I truly wish I could go back and make sure you were given a choice.”

A sigh escapes his lips, and he places his other hand on his first. “Unable to fulfill that wish, however, the best I can offer

is comfort and companionship from our coven. We are here to support you, and I hope you find peace here.” A tear escapes my eye, and I quickly wipe it away. Leland is kind enough to pretend not to notice.

“I hate to get deeper into the pit of despair,” He pulls his hands back from me and reaches into his pocket for something. It is small, a folded piece of paper, and he extends it to me. A newspaper clipping? I take it from him and carefully unfold it, only to see myself staring back at me. “We need to decide what to do about your death.” My face is listed as a missing person, and the article that goes with it speculates that I survived the crash. Due to “missing personal effects.”

Fuck.

My wallet.

My duffel.

My phone.

I could kick myself.

“Do I need to let them find my things?” I ask, unsure what he means by deciding what to do about my death.

“Oh no, not at all. No, my dear, I mean, if you would like to return to your parents I can make that happen. We can easily develop a cover story if you wish.” I take a deep breath. Oz’s apple didn’t fall far from Leland’s tree.

“I’ve decided to remain hidden and let them assume I didn’t survive.” My throat clenches and hurts as pain constricts my chest. It is so hard to say out loud.

Leland nods and reaches his hand back to my arm. He gives it a quick rub and fatherly pat. I like him, he is kind. I can see why he has everyone's respect and loyalty.

“Why did you make Oz stay outside?” I whisper, still confused about that matter.

A loud, boisterous laugh thunders from his belly. “He hovers.” He smiles at the fire and adds, “I wanted to meet you without the pretenses. Get to know the real you, and not the girl enthralled by the bond.”

I am briefly offended, but then I feel the truth of his words.

He isn't wrong.

We have been all over each other and around each other. We've had very few separate moments since I first woke up in Oz's room. It is like we can't help it. I need to be near him, and when I'm near him...

“Is it normal?” I wonder, unsure if Leland will know the answer.

“The obsessive compulsion the two of you share?” Throwing me a knowing look. I nod, embarrassed. “Entirely.”

A massive sigh of relief.

“When vampires find their mate, they are drawn to one another. Eventually, you will be able to stand being apart as long as you need to be, but when it's new, all couples I've met go through a period where they might as well be glued to one another.” He smirks. “I imagine it's worse in your case?”

“Why’s that?” I ask, confused. Then it dawns on me.

“He hovers,” we speak in unison, both laughing.

“So the more we practice distance, the more we can control the pull we both feel?” I am so incredibly relaxed. The drink has done me good. That, and Leland is just enjoyable to be around. I find it hard to imagine now that I had been afraid of him before.

“Bingo.” He gestures towards the door. “Eventually, the bond pull settles. You’ll still be enamored with one another, certainly. But you won’t feel like it’s something else driving you anymore.”

I smile, pleased that I wouldn’t lose these feelings that have grown, but also glad we will find a better balance.

“What about my other self,” I ask, biting my lip. “We didn’t merge.”

His face takes on a serious expression. “That is something I am unfamiliar with as well. I agree with the others that it was due to your memory loss upon turning. It can be corrected, but not until you learn to trust her. She is also you, you know.”

I frown. “She’s killed two people and wants to kill more.

Leland pats my arm again. “She won’t be able to control herself without you. And you won’t realize your full potential without her. No rush, it seems like you’ve got a handle on things for now, but it’s something to think about, Wren.”

So it is my fear of her that is causing the barrier to continue. Of fucking course it is. It doesn’t help that she is legitimately

terrifying. Maybe I can find a way of communicating with her more directly.

It's unspoken, but we both know our meeting is all but complete. Rising together, Leland embraces me and, when he lets go, he holds my head to his as he had with Oz. "I am pleased to call you daughter. Welcome to your new family Wren."

Family...

They are exactly that, a family.

It looks different, but it feels the same, if not better.

Because they are *mine*.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE WARRIOR

My maker and my mate are behind closed doors. It shouldn't worry me, but it does. I pace a concerned line in the living room. Rolando tries to distract me, but I wave him away. I hadn't expected Wren's first meeting with Leland to be solo. She is so shy... Anxiety pits my stomach. I can't hear much beyond the door. Most of our home has been fitted with additional layers of soundproofing. When a lot of us gather in one place, it is quite necessary. Something I'm sure the rest of the house is glad for now that I have Wren.

This is as much her home as it is mine. I'm sure Leland would welcome her to it, he is ever the man of chivalry and honor. The times we come from are so ingrained in him that sometimes I wonder if he truly realizes how much the world has changed. I try to slow my thoughts and reach out through the bond to see if I can understand what Wren is thinking. She isn't closed in concentration now as she had been earlier.

Anxiety.

Mild terror.

I sigh, going slowly insane.

Rolando places a solid hand on my shoulder. “Oz, she’s not such a delicate thing. Relax, she’ll be fine.”

He’s right, I’m being ridiculous. I sit on the couch and run my hands through my hair. “I don’t know why it’s like this. I feel like I need to be there, protecting her.”

“From Leland?”

“No.” Not from Leland. He would never harm someone important to me, especially not someone I’ve bonded with in such a way.

Rolando doesn’t press the issue, but I can tell he’s annoyed with me. My son isn’t usually one to hold his tongue. I’m not just being ridiculous, am I? I am *enthralled*. Groaning, I force my body to lean back and relax, one muscle at a time. It takes focus, I close out everything else in the room. There is just me. Forced silence deafens me, and I take a few deep breaths.

I can hear a loud bout of laughter coming from the study. Leland and Wren laughing together. The last knots in my back release. She is doing fine, I’m worried for no reason. I shouldn’t be surprised in the least. Her compassion, ability to see into people for who they are, and sense of humor are the three things I love most about her.

Well, most about her personality.

Christ, what is wrong with me?

Rolando sits beside me in silence for a long while. His presence is a reminder to keep my shit together. It’s working,

and I am much calmer now than I had been when they went in. I hear the door handle jiggle as my maker and mate came out, smiling.

I'm on my feet in less than a second.

Leland has his hand on the middle of Wren's back as he guides her into the living room. He takes her hand and bows, kissing the back of it. "It was a pleasure speaking with you, Wren. Now if you will indulge a very old man, I'd like to have a few words with Oz before I return him to you."

My turn.

"Of course." Her tone is warm and happy, and it fills me with contentment to see her this way. I don't like the darkness when it clouds her view of herself. Turning to me, she places a quick peck on my cheek. "See you in a bit," she says before taking my spot on the couch beside Rolando.

Not soon enough, I whisper in her mind.

Entering Leland's study, I take in the glasses on his liquor tray. That's not a bad idea. I help myself to a scotch and sit in the chair beside Leland's. It smells like Wren. My father tops off his bourbon and folds himself heavily onto his chair. He pinches between his brow before taking a deep swig of liquor, then another.

He seems older.

"What's wrong?" I don't like seeing him weak.

"I'm tired, Oz. Being the leader of the ruling coven here has taken its toll, and I'm afraid I have to set out again in a day or

so.” He stares into the flames. The cheerful mask he so carefully crafted is missing. I’ve known Leland longer than anyone in our coven. I’ve been at his side for almost an entire millennium. He lets himself go when he is with me, trusting I will keep his secrets.

I am his most trusted.

His most loyal.

“There’s a rising coven from out of town causing trouble nearby. Sources tell me they’re due in our city tonight. Likely trying to challenge us for territory.” He frowns. He doesn’t like decimating covens unless necessary, but his demeanor tells me he already thinks it will be without meeting them.

“I haven’t heard any rumblings. You’re sure they’re here so soon?”

Finishing his drink, he turns to look at me. “They’re from out of state. They’re coming here specifically because I’m back, and my coven is here. I’ve had my eye on them for some time because their leader is…” He threw his glass into the fire, shattering it into dazzling pieces as the fire flares from the alcohol still stuck to its sides. “It’s Emerson Holt.”

That pit in my stomach is back.

Emerson Holt is my brother, Leland’s second-turned-vampire, and he is bad news.

“I didn’t even know he’d left Europe.” Surprise colors my voice. We haven’t seen him in at least three centuries, not since there’d been a major disagreement on proper vampire

etiquette. I close my eyes, remembering the bodies. The things he's done.

“He slipped out two months ago, and I only heard about it a week after he'd left. Another week after, a new coven popped up in Delaware of all places.”

I snort.

Fucking Delaware?

Emerson must be desperate.

“I sent Naritaka to infiltrate and join the coven some time ago to see if Emerson could be tracked and stopped. They never met before, so it seemed like the perfect fit. Taka told me last night they are coming. Emerson knows there's a mole and didn't tell the group until the last possible second.” Lines tighten around his eyes. “I'm going to finally kill him, Oz.”

He has to kill his son, my brother.

Good.

“I'll go with you. I can help protect-” Leland cuts me short with a stern glare.

“You will do no such thing. You will remain here and keep our home protected. You know what he's capable of.” I nod. There is no use arguing about this.

“Fuck me.” I down my scotch, and we sit silently, studying the fire. I may not be able to go, but I can send the next best thing. “Take Rolando with you. And please bring heavy armament. Some *guns* this time, Leland.”

A grimace flashes across his kind features. He hates guns. “Rolando can bring as many as he and the others like, but I’ll be fine with my sword.”

“You won’t always,” I caution. We haven’t been around Emerson in so long, and I doubt he will pause before using automatic weapons against our creator.

“Fine,” he concedes. “I’ll bring the damn guns.”

We’ve acquired a decent-sized armory over the years, so we might as well put it to good use. I need to send someone for another haul as soon as possible. I like having many backups should the occasion call for it. With Emerson around, who knows what will be next?

“When are you going?”

“Leaving tomorrow just before sunset. We’ll feed on the way and arrive fresh.” I feel much better knowing that Rolando will be with him. No doubt, several of my brothers and sisters would be assisting as well, but I know Rolando will make Leland his priority. It seems business has finally concluded, and the sun will rise soon. I want to make sure he gets plenty of rest.

“We should all settle in for the night. Recharge before you head out.” He sighs unhappily. There are usually celebrations when he returns from his trips, but now he is going off to slaughter one of his own making. I can’t imagine the pain that puts him through.

“I suppose we shall. But before we do, we have one other matter to discuss.”

My ears perk up, sensing this is going to be about Wren.

“Oz, you have certainly found yourself an enchanting creature,” His eyes have that glint in them that I am so used to seeing. I beam. She is precisely that, enchanting. “The matter of your bond, though,” my smile falls. “It’s bordering on obsession, and I know you can’t help it. It’s already in your nature to worry over those you care for, and the bond has exponentially increased those tendencies where she is concerned. I already explained this to Wren, and I’ll explain it to you now. It’s normal. The compulsion and obsession will ease, and you will ultimately be left with something pure and strong.”

Obsession.

That sounds about right.

“Quite comforting because I was beginning to think I was losing my grip. It’s like I can’t bear to be away from her for no good reason. I left to get compelled humans and do some business for a couple of hours, but I was distracted the whole time I was gone.” I can think of nothing but her. I haven’t been so single-minded since I was human.

“It will be easier, especially the more you force it. I know it goes against your nature to leave the side of someone precious to you, but do try a little. She’s tougher than she looks.” He smiles broadly now. My beloved has warmed him over effortlessly, it would seem.

“I’m glad you approve.”

“Aye, and when this mess with your brother is finished, we will give her a proper welcome. She may not have had the pomp and circumstance we usually turn humans with, but we can throw her one hell of a party.” Leland rises from his chair, I follow suit, and he pulls me into a fatherly hug. “Congratulations, my boy. She’s exquisite and seems perfect for you.”

I return the embrace, and as we pull apart, I feel at peace.

My family is thriving.

Wren is not waiting for me on the couch where I last saw her. Sensing sunrise is only an hour away, I make my way to our room, running into Rolando on the landing. “Perfect timing,” I clap him on the shoulder. “Remember your uncle? The sadistic one?”

His expression darkens.

He remembers.

I try not to think about the bodies again.

There were children.

“He’s in town tomorrow, and Leland intends to put a stop to him at long last. Take what you need from the armory, ensure Leland has something that can fire many bullets quickly, and watch his back.”

“Of course.” Rolando is just as loyal as I am. I trust no one more than him to do this for me. “When are we leaving?”

“Just before sunset tomorrow. Get some rest, and don’t forget to eat before you massacre the miserable lot of them.”

Rolando snorts. “Yes, Dad, I’ll remember to eat my breakfast, promise.” Laughing, he clamors downstairs, likely heading to see what sort of weaponry they will need and get the specifics from Leland before hunkering down for the day.

Opening the door to our room, I see Wren stretched on the bed, eyes closed. She looks peaceful and relaxed. When she had been gone with Charlee the night she got her memories back, I made her a sculpture. One I haven’t yet revealed to her. I didn’t want to bring it up that night, because she had a lot more on her mind than a little trinket from me could help with. I can tell it still distresses her greatly.

Though I can’t deny my selfish desire to give her my present. Now that she’s had success in feeding, her memories are returned, and our bond is acknowledged and strong, I feel like it is finally time.

Sliding open the middle drawer of my dresser, I reach into the back where my small gift is tucked and hidden. It has been carefully not thought of and locked inside my mind in a place Wren wouldn’t find it. I haven’t wrapped it, having only completed my project shortly before they’d arrived back home.

Taking the sculpture in hand now, I set it silently on the bedside table next to Wren. Sliding behind her so she would have a clear view, I gently stroke her arm, plant a soft kiss on her shoulder, and breathe in her luscious scent.

Turning her head and opening her eyes, a smile reserved just for me crosses her beautiful lips. “There you are,” she whispers to me. I lean over and kiss her. While many of our kisses are full of heat, passion, and a yearning for one another, we have finally reached a point that allows us to share softer moments—full of sweetness and the promise of something solid and lasting.

“Here I am,” I stroke the side of her face with my thumb. “I have a present for you, little bird.”

Confusion settles on her face. “A present?”

“You created for me, so it’s only right I give you something I created for you.” I point beyond her head. She turns and follows the path, eyes settling on the little sculpture.

Bronze is a complex material to work with, but the only one that seemed right when I created the tiny wren settled on a branch—poised in such a way that it stood by itself, perfectly balanced. A quiet gasp escapes my beloved as she reaches for my work. “It’s a wren.”

“A bit on the nose, I know, but I wanted you to be represented among my other creatures,” I gesture to all of the sculptures she once admired when she arrived.

“Oz, she’s lovely,” I can hear her voice thick with emotion as she gingerly takes my work in her hands. I watch intently as she sits up and examines every angle of her gift, turning it in the light.

“I am glad you approve, my dear.” Unable to help myself from grinning, I welcomed the sight of her amazement. The way the light dances in her eyes. Casting in bronze isn’t easy, but having vampire senses certainly helps. It is a very delicate material once it’s been heated in my forge. The risk of melting is high if it gets too hot. It could break entirely as I hammer, incredibly brittle. Though it is sturdy once it cools and forms into the shape my hands instruct it to take.

My Wren is strong.

It is something that reminds me of her, how delicate and fragile she can be, but only beneath my hands. Reminds me that when she is independent of me, she can stand firm on her own.

Selecting the perfect spot for her gift, on a table near the windows, Wren hurries back to the bed, pushing me against the mattress and tangling her legs in mine. “Thank you,” she whispers, peppering my face with her sweet kisses.

I pull her into me, losing myself in her touch, her scent. I’ll give her everything she wants, anything she asks for.

I give her all of me.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE LEADER

Killing one of my children doesn't sit right with me, though Emerson is my failure. Every life he's taken since Roanoke weighs heavily on what's left of my soul. He is evasive and cunning. It seems we are always one step behind when it comes to finding him. Part of me thinks I could have tried harder to find and kill him, and I hate myself for it. I could have made it my life's mission instead of growing my coven.

I used to think he might be able to be redeemed one day, but he has done nothing but prove me wrong. He is evil, he is vile, and now that we finally have a strong beat on him, we are in a position to stop him. I worry that I'll choke when push comes to shove.

Emerson is perhaps my greatest weakness. Oz may have asked for his life, but I took the risk and turned him. He was an unknown, a stranger we'd never heard of. If I had let him die, the entire course of history might be different.

Time for my wayward son has run out. He has invaded my city, likely with plans to attack, and through fortunate circumstances, I have an inside man.

Thanks to Oz.

We found Naritaka in Japan in nineteen eighty-three. He was despondent, addicted to drugs, and an outcast from his family. He wanted to die, it seemed. But when the moment came, and he faced what death truly meant, he cried out for help.

It is no coincidence that we set up blood houses near areas with less than reputable inhabitants. In part, if someone makes a mistake, it's usually not with someone who will be missed. Oz and I prefer it this way because we can sometimes make a difference. A human who feeds on a vampire and does not die will be healed of their ailments quite fast. Several vampires have gone into medicine for this very reason. We have to be careful about who and how we treat.

Rehab centers are the easiest. Our blood can help the human in question bypass the worst parts of getting the drugs out of their system and heal much of the physical damage done by them. The one thing it can't do is cure the addiction. That piece of the brain that drives someone to seek joy from whatever poison they fancy remains. Still, it helps.

Taka had tried rehab multiple times before his family gave up on him. He was thin and frail, having almost fallen over in an alleyway near the blood house we were heading toward that night. Tokyo had a bad amphetamine problem then, and Taka had fallen victim to it. We heard his pleas and gave him a

choice. We could heal him, and he could try to fight his drug problem on his own, or he could join us and never feel the need to touch them again.

He'd chosen the latter.

He was only nineteen years old at the time.

Still, as one of the newer members of our coven, he was someone that Emerson didn't know. He separated from us about thirty years ago, at my request, intending to track and infiltrate Emerson's organization. Going by different aliases in the cities he followed him in, before finally joining his ranks two years ago in Europe.

Check-ins were quick and far apart, but he'd done it and gotten intel on a crucial move that put Emerson in reach at long last.

That means it's finally time for me to end this.

I wish I had ended it back when it started...



Emerson, Oswald, and I traveled the Atlantic together in Fifteen Eighty-Six. The small province of Roanoke was still growing but becoming more and more of a foothold in the unknown lands of what is now North America. We wanted to help build something for our coven, for our kind. A small town, isolated from everyone else, could sustain us

indefinitely as long as we compelled them to forget and fed with caution.

For a small settlement, it was thriving when we arrived. Farms were bountiful, and the dutiful Christians welcomed us with open arms. Our official cover was that I was a widower, and Emerson and Oswald were my sons. It wasn't exactly a lie, I suppose. But I had been a widower for a few hundred years, and my sons were the family I'd chosen.

We fit in quickly enough, taking a small plot of land to build our home on, tilling and farming the soil in the daylight like everyone else. Oswald became an apprentice to the local blacksmith, and Emerson took up carpentry and woodworking while I tended our crops.

The food we didn't need went to the hungry or was traded to the indigenous tribe some ways south of us. Croatoans. Of course, the story is well known in Roanoke. Colonists mysteriously disappeared, possibly moving and combining lives with the local tribe. It was easy to believe, an answer that made sense, and it is a lie we never bothered to correct.

I believe the insightful members of the tribe knew more or less what the three of us were. They regarded us cautiously and were always highly alert during our dealings. It took many months for us to gain their trust. They saw the human colonists were happy with us. That they were whole, healthy, and entirely ignorant of our otherness. If it hadn't been for that, they'd have had nothing to do with the strange men who ate so little it seemed like nothing.

Through their folklore and magics, they could guess close enough. Closer than the myths that followed us from Europe. They did not try to ward us off with garlic cloves or drive wooden stakes into our hearts. Instead, once they realized we meant no harm, they broke bread with us, accepted our trades, and made fair bargains as if we were no different than the colonists who sustained us.

We determined that our indigenous neighbors were off-limits as far as feeding and compulsion were concerned. I did not want to risk any part of the arrangements we so carefully cultivated.

Our way of life was working, and we could've stayed there for at least a decade before sailing back to Europe. We had two years of peace. Two years of not having to travel and move around were ruined in one night.

The night we decided to meet our Croatoan friends on their land, trade, and dance and share stories. If Oswald and I hadn't both gone... If we had insisted Emerson joined us. So many things would be different.

We had developed quite a lot of stock from Oswald's smith-work. Several things had been asked for, and several more we thought could make a good trade. Emerson had work to do for the church, pews that needed tending, so he remained behind.

Our trip was a success. We had materials and various foods, jewelry, and baskets for the village, and our spirits were high as we returned home from our long journey.

Approaching Roanoke, we saw smoke high in the clouds. Afraid to risk using our faster abilities and be seen for what we were, we maintained pace and continued onward. It wasn't until we were close enough to hear the screams and cries of our neighbors that we abandoned all pretenses.

Reaching the outskirts, we could smell the blood coming from everywhere.

A building was burning across the settlement, and many bodies were in the street. Men, children, and women alike. The ones who were dead already were the lucky ones. He'd left some half-mangled and flayed. They held their long-gone loved ones and sobbed. Women clutched their children, evidence of the liberties he'd taken with them still showing. They held onto their babies and wailed.

Screamed.

Cried.

Cursed a God that wasn't listening.

The first face I truly saw was that of kindly Mrs. Goodwin. Her dress was tattered, her breasts exposed, and blood dripped down her neck as she held her poor six-year-old son. My stomach lurched, for the poor child was not only dead but brutally mutilated. His innards spilled out of him, and scrapes and marks lined his back like he had been dragged. I could only assume what his assaulter had held onto while he was tugged across the rocks and dirt.

She couldn't even look at us.

Oswald tried to go to her, to help her home, to help her cover herself. It was like she couldn't see us. She only had eyes for her poor son.

The town held more screams, more sounds of terror and despair the further we made our way in. We could tell by the punctures in the necks of our friends that it was a vampire. In my stupidity and denial, I had pictured *another* vampire, not Emerson. I imagined my son lying dead, having tried to defend his people.

Not Oswald.

His shoulders were tense, back taut, and jaw clenched.

I think he knew.

At least had an inkling that something wasn't right with Emerson, that this had been his doing. If he knew it before that day, he had never spoken of it to me.

Further down, we could hear the sounds of an active assault taking place. A woman screaming and crying, a man grunting.

I knew what that sound was.

I was enraged.

I was vengeful.

I was filled with a righteous fury to end the monster who dared attack my home.

When I discovered it was my son who ravaged and raped his way across Roanoke, I went cold.

He turned to face me, his blond hair falling loose from his queue. Scratches on his face from the poor woman beneath him were already healing. A girl of twenty-one. Her neck wounds wept freely, his mouth covered in her blood. Bite marks covered her upper torso, and tears made lines through the blood on her face. Emerson stopped raping her for all of three seconds to acknowledge us.

“Brother, Father! Join me!” He sounded joyous over the whimpers of his victim as he resumed his violent assault. “She’s got two more holes you can fill!”

I snarled and wrenched my despicable son from her. My claws dug into his neck as I flung him away. Oswald was immediately at the girl’s side. I heard his compulsion, filled with compassion. He told her not to think about what happened, to go outside, cover herself, and wait for us to find her. He told her she was safe now.

Lunging for Emerson again, he danced out of my grasp.

“What the hell have you done here? What is wrong with you!” I moved my feet, and he moved in sync with me. He wanted to run. He didn’t want to fight me because he knew he would lose. I wasn’t about to just let him go. “What kind of monster are you?”

The bastard fucking *grinned* at me.

“I’m the monster that goes bump in the night, Father, right into their tight little cunts.” He laughed, mocking the pain he caused. “Come now, what is the point of having all this power if we can’t enjoy ourselves? I’ve tasted every woman in this

village since you left. Not a virgin remains to be found.” I wanted to heave as he relished in his torment. “Their men tried their absolute best, I’m sure. I had to kill them. That would be them burning in the church right now.”

Still smiling.

“You’re twisted, demented, wretched. An evil that will be expunged from this Earth mark my words!”

“Oh, Father, I did try to compel them first. Some even gave themselves freely when I threatened their children. Unfortunately, I found fucking the willing to be a tad boring, so while I still had my cock inside them, I made good on my threats and shredded their babes before their very eyes. Their terror was so sweet, and I wish you could’ve seen it.”

I spat at his feet. Our dance of steps had him backed into a corner. In my peripheral vision, I could see Oswald standing with me, ready to help me take this demon down. The fireplace beside Emerson roared. One quick slice across the neck, then we could burn his fucking corpse.

“You’re disgusting. You have no honor, and you don’t deserve to live.” I could hear the calmness of my oldest son’s voice, and it was cold and unfeeling. It didn’t sound like Oswald at all. Good, I needed a knight who wouldn’t stand for this depravity, even if it came from his brother.

I don’t think Emerson expected we would turn on him and take the side of our human town over him. I don’t think he even considered that we would want to kill him.

His eyes darted between us, and I saw his fear. He knew we would end him if given half a chance.

What we didn't anticipate, what neither of us noticed in our rage, was that he had managed to get his hands on a large iron stoker, now red hot from the flames. He swung it with speed and force at Oswald's left side. He tried to block it but was caught off guard. His sword was drawn, but even so, this had given Emerson the opening he needed. Feet bounding up the stairs, we gave chase. I thought he was trapped in the hall, but he didn't stop running.

When I saw the window ahead, I realized his plan and knew he'd be lost to us if we couldn't catch him before he reached it.

I put all the force I could in my pace, mere inches away from him as he crashed through the glass and wood, tumbling through the air to the ground and landing on his feet like a cat. Without glancing behind him, he was racing off into the forest. Gone.

Tracking him was possible, but we would have to leave Roanoke unguarded to do so safely, and I wasn't willing to abandon these people again. I had already failed them once and needed to see to the living to offer peace.

Slowly we gathered the survivors, and there weren't many. Most of them had died with the horror of the atrocities they lived etched on their faces. We gathered them in the square. Compelling them to cover themselves, to forget their plight for now, and to be still. It was the best comfort we could give them at the time.

We then set out to gather the dead. Children and men who were murdered in their homes instead of in the church, elderly, and women who bled so deeply that they didn't clot and just bled out wherever he had left them. We dug a mass grave two miles into the woods.

Deep and wide.

We gently placed every single person Emerson mutilated and harmed in neat rows. We were keeping families together as best as we could. There were gaps, the men he'd burned in the church and the survivors. So we smartened up their loved ones, tucking away the horrors, wiping away the blood, making it look like they could be sleeping.

Oswald and I did the same with the living. They were cleaned and given back their modesty. We led them to the grave and gave each of them a choice. We could heal them and spare their minds or send them to be with their loved ones who were ready to be put to rest.

Each woman chose death.

The weight of what happened was too heavy for any of them to bear.

I judged not a single one of them.

One by one, we took them gently into our arms, compelled to be unafraid, and took their lifeblood. After placing them with their families, we covered them all. Burying them didn't need to take all night, but we didn't use our excess speed to fill

the grave. No, we dug like mortals and suffered with our guilt for bringing this fate upon them.

Croatoan leaders came by with their mystics as the sun rose, and we finished our task.

They saw us covered with blood, the townspeople gone, and Emerson was missing.

Understanding colored all of their eyes. They knew he was the reason, and they knew he wiped the town out. Their magic and elders told them what was passing in Roanoke after we left. They knew they couldn't reach us in time to help, but they came to support us.

It was a comfort we didn't deserve but deeply appreciated.

We had an agreement. They would never speak of us or the grave and would let what happened die with the town. We would leave, never to return, and we would one day find the monster that did this and give him his due.

That's what I intend to do tonight.

As Rolando and the others prepare for our fight, I look inward and vow to all of Roanoke that their justice would soon be served.

Rolando once asked me why the council didn't intervene with Emerson, and the truth was darker than he'd expected.

They didn't care.

When Roanoke happened, the world was much larger. No one even noticed the little town was gone until years after it

happened. Emerson wasn't stupid, he didn't do anything on such a large scale again, at least not that Oz or I heard about. Isaac, head of the council and a slimy power-hungry vampire, deemed it unnecessary to deal with Emerson. He insisted it was my responsibility to deal with him and wasn't willing to help in the search or dispatch of my progeny.

Oz and I had almost caught up to him in Brazil, Spain, and India. Once we caught sight of him back in France but we were around a slew of humans and unable to act on the sighting itself. He'd disappeared and used the cover of the crowd to hide his scent.

Our contacts quit seeing him, our other coven members had similar experiences. We tried for centuries before we decided it was best to position someone to keep their ears open. Taka knew all about Emerson, what he'd done, the things he was capable of, and the company he kept. He chose to go in anyway, wanting redemption for his own mistakes and seeking to earn a place of respect in our coven.



Pulling up to an abandoned house on the outskirts of town we arrive at the last place I expect to be.

Emerson, here?

My assumption that he lives in comfort, believing himself untouchable enough to take up someplace that would allow for

him to live out his grandiose fantasies, proves false.

Perhaps he has changed his tactics because he entered a city with two highly motivated people who want to kill him. Two people who, along with the rest of their coven, would be more than happy to carry out a death sentence as quickly as possible.

I hold the gun Rolando insists I carry. It feels foreign and wrong in my arms. I did promise, though. After all, this is Emerson I am dealing with.

Resigning myself to use the monstrosity, Rolando, myself, and eight coven mates that stay in Callery make our way silently up the walk, the shadows of the dilapidated craftsman looms above us.

Uphill.

I don't like that they have high ground from the start, but we make it to the half-rotting porch without incident. The sun set ten minutes ago, and the occupants should be stirring if they haven't already. Scouting the building reveals that only the entrance is un-boarded for access. All other windows and external doors are nailed shut with plywood and two-by-fours.

I hate the idea of all of us heading in through the front, but if we want to go another way, we'd have to alert the house to our presence before we're ready. Cursing in my head, we take position at the front. I see Rolando toss a concussion grenade into someone's hands, ready to throw it in the door immediately. We all signal that we are prepared. Standing back

so there will be room to throw the grenade, I kick in the door and step aside.

Rolling into the pitch-black darkness of the house, the grenade makes its way to the center. I pull the door shut again. A loud explosion forces the remaining glass in the windows to shatter. We're here, I think to myself. *Ready or not, here we come.*

My ears aren't ringing with the force of the grenade, but my sense of danger is piqued. Something isn't quite right about this.

Taking my first step into the house, I am met with a fist to the gut and another to the face.

Rolling to the side to allow my other coven members entrance, I swing the butt of my gun into my assaulter's skull, forcing him to stagger backward. Rolando is next in, raising his rifle and firing at two of Emerson's men entering the hall. We filter in and spread out, but each room floods with assailants. There are more people here than we realized.

Two of mine are down, bodies riddled with bullets preventing them from continuing the fight. I spray down a man with a monstrous look in his eyes, then duck into the parlor.

I don't have time for this fucking gun.

Allowing it to drop to my side, the strap still around my shoulders, I unsheath my sword and cut down anyone who isn't mine.

Much better.

Rolando is at my back, and I am quickly losing sight of the others. We are being swarmed. Something is more than wrong here. More men pour through the front door, meaning our driver and lookout are dead or incapacitated.

Growling, I push through the house, trusting my back is covered. One of ours slumps against a wall in the dining room. I yank him to his feet and steady his weapon in his hands, getting his back up to ours as we move. We need an exit, the front door is a non-starter now, and this isn't a fight we can win. I have to return to the house and come back in force with heavier artillery and more bodies.

Perhaps just RPG the damn building.

Naritaka must have been discovered because Emerson is ready for us. Using his men to fight his battles for him, he doesn't even have the balls to show his face.

The kitchen tiles beneath my feet are slick with blood, but in the distance, I see the door I am searching for. It will lead outside. We just have to break through. Slicing through the next man who charges me, I raise my gun and fire through the door—the quick pop of bullets shreds through the wood. My coven members with me keep the others back.

Our exit.

We won't all make it.

The man from the dining room. I think his name is Chris. I didn't know him well, but he is severely injured. No way he can outrun them.

Rolando is good with a weapon. He can keep them off me as I flee, but what kind of leader would I be if I allow such a thing?

There is only one decision to be made.

Bruised, bleeding, and still going strong, it has to be him.

I yank Rolando by his shirt and fling him at the door. He burst through the remaining wood like cobwebs. Substantially sharper, more dangerous cobwebs, but at least it gave way. "GO!" My voice is unrecognizable even to myself. I am filled with rage, fear, and tiredness that I feel deep within my soul.

More are coming. We must have seen at least fifty men so far, I have no idea where the rest of mine are, but if I don't make a stand here, they will catch Rolando, and he won't make it home. I pull the fridge down and stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Chris. Using my gun and sword to hold them off for as long as possible, it has to be enough time.

It *will* be enough time.

Chris falls, and I am fighting them from every side.

Their attack slows, they have won based on sheer numbers.

Those who have fallen will be restored, and my coven members destroyed. It is over.

I keep at it until the gun runs out of bullets. There is no time to change the magazine. I brandish my sword and cut down three more before they overtake me entirely. Breathing heavily with effort, I try to pull myself from the restraining arms around me. Heavy steps advance from the front of the house.

My wayward son steps from the shadows with a bemused expression. “Now, Father, what kind of welcome is this?”

Emerson has shown up after all.

He takes my sword in his hand and places it on my neck.

“Do it,” I dare him, wanting my death to be faster and clean, rather than the torture I know he is capable of. Unashamed of my fear of undue pain at his hand, I try to goad him into hurrying my end along.

“Oh, not yet. We still need a certain other family member to join us for a proper reunion.” His smile is wicked, and evil gleams in his eyes.

He wants Oz.

Emerson wants to kill us both.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE SONGBIRD

Leland is gone. Rolando and a few others from the city left with him taking a variety of weaponry. After they left, Oz told me what is happening. He told me about his brother and what our leader has gone to do. I feel awful for them all. Family isn't supposed to be fleeing, with the type of animal Emerson is, I can't blame them for wanting to end him. If he could turn his brother and father against him and do the atrocities that Oz accuses him of, then Leland is doing the entire world a kindness.

I can't just wait around.

Oz and the others were antsy, and when Oz feels he lacks control of something, he likes to plan.

The study I sat in just yesterday has turned into a war room—planning routes in case they need to aid their family.

I have to get out of here.

Police are bringing a team to Goose Lake later this morning, and I want to watch. Charlee told me it's depressing,

masochistic, reeks of angst, and that she hopes I have a lovely time. Oz, of course, worries but understands that this is important to me. I told him I am leaving to set up early. I want a good spot and to make sure I remain hidden, and I want to get away from all of the stress in the house. He takes my hand, presses it to his face, and says, "I'll be waiting."

Of course, he will.

Leland has him pegged all right.

Oz is a genuinely good person, kind, tender, and attentive. Even though he tends to hover, I have seen a rougher and darker side to him, and knowing it exists beneath the surface is exciting. I feel safe with him like I can breathe, and he respects my need for space.

The sun crests over the horizon as multiple vehicles arrive. Most are marked with police or state logos, a couple are unmarked, and my stomach drops.

A maroon-colored S.U.V. is with the group of official vehicles, the front bumper bowing from kissing something quite solid. The rising sun catches the small crystal pendant hanging from the rearview mirror. Light takes advantage of being able to send rainbows dancing and flashing in every direction as it spins from momentum.

Coming to a stop where an officer directs them, a couple emerges from the car, and I get the first, and probably last, look at my parents as a vampire.

Heart aching, I long to go to the kind-faced woman with deep-set wrinkles around her eyes. To see her wide, eye-reaching smile, one more time.

Bearded and unsmiling, my dad stands beside my mom, trying to keep his emotions in check.

I didn't know they would be here.

Of course, they would come today. They couldn't stand not knowing if I am truly gone. Though I am presumed dead, until there is a body, they will cling to hope. I pray that they don't hope for too long.

Making sure there is enough tree cover, I creep as close as I dare. Conversations between the police and the dive team as they gather around, sipping coffee, filter through the air. Seeing my mom wrap her arms around my dad after he whispers something in her ear makes me want to cry.

They are hurting.

I am hurting.

Eyes filling with tears, I force myself to choke back a sob.

If it wouldn't hurt them more in the long run, I would have as normal a life as possible with them. If I thought they would even hurt a little less, thinking I grew apart from them rather than that I am dead, I'd be holding them right now.

It *would* hurt them more, though. To think I never wanted to see them anymore. No visits, and rare phone calls, just so they quit pressuring me. I'm sure my mother would cry herself to

sleep if that happened. Many more nights than if she thought I passed on, still loving my parents.

I am doing them a kindness.

The dive team has something rigged up to pull the car out of the water.

Here I am, thinking the lake is going to be dragged. No, they want the car for evidence. They want to know what happened to me that night. Silvery paint covered in muck rises into the air several minutes later—waterfalls cascade from every nook and cranny it can find, and I am reminded of drowning.

The second time.

Suppressing a shudder I redirect my attention to my parents, and instantly wish I hadn't.

Mom buries her face into my dad's chest. She can't bear to see the car as smashed, dented, and twisted as it is. To imagine me inside it while it became that way. My dad looks like he is close to losing his grip. I love that he is her well of strength right now. Though my father is never afraid to cry at home when he needs to, I think this determination to keep his emotions at bay is just him putting my mother first. I think he accepts that I'm not returning. She is all he has left.

Police gather around and secure the car to a flatbed truck. They will take it back to the lab, run their tests, and find little evidence due to the water. Maybe some of my DNA, maybe fingerprints. I don't know how those things hold up in a lake,

but if they are there, they will be all that is left. There is no evidence of Spence doing anything to me like they suspect.

The worst he did was leave me there.

The news said they were looking for him as a person of interest and had searched his home. Charlee's clean-up crew ensured nothing was found. The neighbors, however, had outed his violent tendencies. It must have made them suspicious about the nature of the car accident. Maybe they think it was intentional. Maybe they suspect he used it as an opportunity to be rid of me.

Whatever the police might think, I hope this will be enough to give my parents a sense of closure so they can move on.

There's a flurry of activity as they prepare to leave, no search today. Goose Lake is large. Since my body hasn't surfaced yet, I expect they doubt it will. Right now, they're focusing on the homicide angle.

Guilt rips through me.

I'm right here.

I want to show myself, and I almost do.

I have to be gone for my family, even though I am still here. I am gone in the way that matters. Gone in a life they will never understand. I don't deserve their tears.

My parents are the last people remaining. With his arms wrapped around my mother, I watch my dad study the lake's surface. I like the idea that he is saying goodbye to me. After a while, they leave to make the four-hour drive back to Staley.

Folding my arms around my middle, I trek down to the road and stand in the last place I saw them.

“Goodbye,” I whisper to the wind.

This is the best goodbye I’ll ever get. I wipe my tears from my eyes and stare out over Goose Lake. Watching as the wind blows across the lake’s surface, causing the tiniest waves to shift along the water. As the deep currents swirl beneath the surface, I think about the pain I endured to see my parents today.

Worth it.

Entirely and utterly worth it.

Whatever suffering this has caused me, I had wished I could see them again. I got that wish, and no one can ever take it away.

The distant roaring of an engine tells me someone is heading this way. I step off the road and tuck myself into the tree line as the car comes around the curve. As the car stops in front of me, I swear under my breath. I’ve been seen. Hopefully, they don’t recognize me from the news. The driver rolls down the window to speak to me.

A stranger looking for directions?

The face that looks at me is almost too perfect.

A vampire.

I don’t recognize them. Maybe another member of our coven that I haven’t met yet?

“I’m looking for the house,” he calls, and I step forward. No use in hiding now. “I haven’t been there before and I got a little turned around. Am I close?”

I nod, “It’s about ten minutes that way,” I gesture higher up the mountain peak. He smiles, and I catch a toothy flash of fang.

“Need a ride back?” His smile seems overly friendly, putting me on edge. Ice settles in my stomach as I shake my head.

I smell a whiff of Leland coming from the car and my instincts tell me to stay calm. There is something wrong here. He isn’t one of ours, he is Emerson’s, and I need to play dumb right now.

“No thanks,” I say, trying to keep the nerves at bay.

“What are you doing out here, all by yourself?”

Fuck.

I need to lie.

“I’m not alone,” I say lightly. “A few of us are going swimming, you’re just in time if you’d care to join.”

“Oh I think you’re very much alone.” His face turns dark quickly, and from either side of me, multiple vampires come clamoring out of the forest.

Shit.

I drop down and dodge the first one that lunges for me, trying to remember Chandra’s training. I use movement to avoid being hit and to position myself better to attack.

But I am still a novice, and I'm outnumbered.

The next assailant throws himself at my midsection, tackling me to the ground. Kicking him off me, I bring my elbow around and swing it hard at the next attacker. Behind me, someone brings their arm across my chest, gripping my shoulder, their other arm yanking me off balance by my neck.

Sputtering, I send my hands behind me, digging my claws into flesh and ripping with all my strength.

A feeling like the one that overcame me the night I killed Spencer sweeps into my body. Rage is a pale word compared to it. It is wild and raw, and I embrace it without question, desperate to do whatever is necessary to save myself and return home.

Red.

My vision sharpens, my senses seem to go into overdrive, movements become more precise, and fear evaporates from my body.

Lethal.

I will rip, tear, and destroy anyone I can touch.

I will sink my teeth into their necks and mangle them.

That little voice that has been inside me, encouraging all of the violence, is driving. It is like I am stuck watching a movie in first person with no control again. It terrifies me.

The vampire that holds me releases his grip out of pain. I clasp his arm and maneuver behind him, hearing it break with

a satisfying crunch. He screams, and I enjoy it.

Two more came barreling at me. I duck the bigger one and drop down, then use my new angle to send a fist into the smaller one's gut, sending him flying from me. He crashes into a tree, and I hear something break.

I hope it's his fucking spine.

The big guy isn't done.

He is ready for me to dodge this time, and unfortunately, he manages to latch his arms on me. We tumble to the ground, rolling. I am nothing but claws and teeth, trying to find purchase on any flesh I can like a feral cat. We stop, and he is on top of me, pinning my arms down so I will stop clawing at him.

I still have my legs.

Rocking my hips back, I hook a foot around his neck, and the other comes around to join it. I lock them together and this angle to flip him off me, but he has achieved his goal. The ones not currently recovering from injuries circle me now.

Where the fuck did they all come from? I know they will be smart this time, and will all make a move together.

Fuck.

I snarl and slash at each one as they come near, trying to reach out to Oz through our connection. I'm not sure if I am near enough that he can hear me, but I pray that he can.

Someone rips at my hair, distracting me long enough that my hands go up to free myself, and a second vampire dives into me, forcing me to the ground. I struggle against the vampire on top of me, but another is right behind him, taking my wrists and clamping chains to them. I kick out to no avail, and the one with missing parts of his face repeatedly kicks me in my gut.

I can taste blood in my mouth, and it feels like my nose broke during the scuffle. I spit to the ground at my side, red puddles in the sunlight.

What is happening?

Why are they here?

Where is Leland?

“Oh my, this little kitten smells like my brother.” A voice came from the back of the car. “I wonder what he would do to get you back.” A man with blond hair steps out, thick, clunky boots loud on the pavement. His hair slicked back, and he has the air of someone who likes others to do his heavy lifting. No wonder he didn’t bother to fight me himself.

I snarl and thrash to get away, but whatever the chains are made of is too strong. This must be Emerson. This means either Leland has been murdered, and this bastard came to gloat, or he had planned to lure the fighters away so he could attack while our leader is distracted.

Fuck.

He places a booted foot on my chest. “What a pretty little thing you are.” he licks his lips. “I’ll enjoy making you suffer for my brother’s crimes against me.” He kicks me in the head once, and all I can hear is ringing. The focus in my eyes blurs.

I have failed.

I am unable to keep us safe.

Another hefty kick and I spat even more blood out of my mouth, a tooth came with it.

What is he wearing?

Steel-toes?

Why?

A third kick and everything goes black.



CHAPTER
TWENTY

THE WARRIOR

E *merson Holt*. I spend the night anticipating. It is the only thing I can do to keep my head from exploding. My creator is out there dealing with the most vicious of our kind I've ever met.

Perpetrator of the most unspeakable things since Leland turned him, not to mention the sort of things he'd done before. He is an excellent liar, his innocent face makes people think he is a kind soul, and we quickly learned he wasn't. It was right when we came to America that he flipped the switch as far as we know. He'd hidden it well if he'd done anything evil and demonic while with us in Europe.

But what he'd done when we turned our backs for one night...

It was disgusting.

He is disgusting.

Wren looked ill when I told her, and I'd spared her the details, but the broad stroke of what happened was enough.

This is the kind of monster Leland had made a vampire.

What's worse is that I had practically begged him for it.

I rub my temples. Vampires don't get headaches, but whenever my mind is pulled in enough directions it sure seems like I will. I don't blame Wren for avoiding me most of the night. I am certainly not a joy to be around, and everyone who remains in the house is on edge. Even if they don't know Emerson, they'd all heard the stories.

Hours pass, and Wren leaves to watch the lake in hopes of closure. Even if I want to protect her from everything, she needs this. But my mind can't stop wondering why we haven't heard from Leland. Something isn't right. He's not dead, Emerson would've gloated about that by now, but Emerson isn't dead either, or Leland would've checked in by now.

No, something is wrong.

Madness will settle in soon if I don't hear *something* from someone. I should have insisted Leland take the whole coven for this, that we go in heavy and hard. I know he is hoping he can go in with the element of surprise and that a smaller team is better for that, but Emerson is not a stupid man. He will be prepared for Leland's wrath this close to us.

Light spills into the living room and stretches across the floor to the study.

Dawn.

Morning came on too quickly, and my stomach pits. There is definitely something wrong. He should have checked in by

now. Say he went there and decided to wait a night, he'd have told us. We would have to go when the sun sets in the evening. I would arm and take everyone. Another hour passes, I look for Wren in the living room, but she isn't there. Turning to Charlee, I ask, "Have you seen Wren come back yet?"

Shaking her head, "No, but you know police, it's probably taking forever."

With my worry for Leland and hatred of Emerson, I have already forgotten about the lake. I should be there for her. She likes to think she can handle everything on her own, but as separated as she is from herself, she is vulnerable. I don't want any harm to ever come to her if I can prevent it. That is my duty as her mate. Even if she can protect herself, I will always be there to have her back.

I decide to wait a little longer, there is no reason to panic. Dredging up the lake could take hours. Even then, she might want some time to process. Since she learned she wasn't doomed to darkness forever, she'd been getting up earlier and staying up later, enjoying the rays of sun she thought she had lost forever. I make a mental note to get a phone for her as soon as possible. We've been so *involved* with one another that it hasn't been a priority.



Eleven in the morning, and I am officially losing my mind. "I'm going to go look for Wren," I tell everyone, unable to

contain myself anymore. Charlee wordlessly joins my side. I nod, and we make our way outside. Keeping to the trees in case the humans were still around slows us down, but we are still making decent time.

Silence forms between us, and that unsettles me even further.

Charlee is a quiet woman only when she is deep in thought. The fact that she is silent now speaks volumes to me. She and Wren have grown so close that sometimes I wonder if she's as protective of her as I am.

A jolt of fear, pain, and anger forces its way into me. The whisper of words edge my mind, but they aren't clear enough to make out what Wren is saying. I get the distinct impression that she is in trouble, but where?

I freeze in place, and Charlee doubles back, waiting.

My awareness reaches into the sensation of Wren's emotions, and I try to see if I can use it to sense where she is. I have a strong urge to go straight to the road, ignoring the risk of humans. Pointing my feet diagonal to our position, I take off, "This way!"

Running at full speed, we reach the site of the accident in minutes. My eyes run wildly through the trees, searching for any hint of Wren. There's no sign of anyone, human or vampire though her scent lingers. Her sweat, the smell of sweet honeysuckle, and... her blood.

A small puddle on the ground, of what is definitely Wren's blood. Sitting in the pool are small white rocks. Compelled to

pluck one from the ground, I hold it up and examine it closer.

A tooth?

One of Wren's *fucking teeth!*

There are two others on the ground as well.

Forcing my panic from my mind and into my gut, I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

Wren, blood, and... gasoline.

Something else, something familiar. Flashes of a blood-crazed maniac ripping into any human he could sweep across my vision. Emerson.

“FUCK!” I yell, my hands going to my head in distress. Emerson had come for us, found her first, and taken her. Pride that she fought as hard as she did swells within me. She slowed them down enough that they had retreated instead of continuing to the house for a larger fight. That means I can find her, and I can save her.

Certainly, it couldn't have been his goal to steal Wren. He wouldn't have known she was out. No, it is a sick coincidence that she was on this road when he and his henchmen arrived. I look towards our home. This road gives great cover for vehicles and would have allowed Emerson and his men to make their way to the house undetected.

No, this was an impulsive reaction.

Emerson had seen an opportunity, and he took it. Hell, he could probably smell me all over Wren, which undoubtedly

made it all the more exciting.

Charlee examines the plant life around us. Broken branches, strange sliding marks in the dirt, blood that smells distinctly vampire but isn't Wren's. There had been a fair number of people with Emerson. They ganged up on her like the weaklings they are. "We're going to get her back, Oz." I watch my sister's face reflect anguish similar to mine. "We'll find him and tear down everything he's built. Watch as it falls around his head. And then, we'll make him suffer." Through her tears, I can see her seething rage. Nobody hurts our family and gets away with it.



Returning to the house doesn't take very long, and we relay what we learned to the others. Everyone is on board to follow me into the city and take back our family. If they are dead, I don't even want to think about that possibility. Though if they are, I won't rest until I carve Emerson up the same way he carved up Roanoke.

We load up on weaponry. Everyone has a fully automatic rifle and a pistol or shotgun, depending on their style. I will rip holes through every last one of them to get to Wren and Leland.

Rolando bursts through the door, looking like absolute shit.

Charlee jumps and rounds on him. "What the fuck?"

He looks like he is about to fall over.

“Nice to see you too.” He doesn’t fall so much as slides down the door. I close the distance between us, biting my wrist and offering my blood to him. He doesn’t hesitate and drinks deeply.

Taking the blood of a well-fed vampire healed our kind quicker than regular human blood. It doesn’t satisfy hunger the way human blood does, but healing is what we use it for the most anyway. Immediately Rolando’s wounds begin to close, and strength returns to his form. I would be a little weaker, but I intend on eating before we attack.

“What *happened?*” I pull Rolando to his feet, my eyes search his for an explanation.

“It was a setup,” he says. “He must have known he had a mole because they were ready for us. Taka was nowhere to be seen when we got there, but a whole bunch of big nasties were. I didn’t ever see Emerson though. Leland shoved me out at the last second, and I ran the whole way here.”

A smug smile crosses his lips. “Had to take out a few of his guys on my own. They won’t make it back to tell him I got here, but in a few hours I’m willing to guess he’ll know.”

“He’s got people reporting to him. None of them are exactly stellar citizens. I recognized a couple of serial killers. I’m sure there are other murderers and rapists in there too. The kind of company he likes to keep, you know.”

I nod. It's not surprising that he would find the scum of the earth to rule over.

"He's also got Wren," I say, watching as his eyes go wide. "Signs of a fight, her blood and teeth." I have to choke out the last bit, rage beginning to consume me. How dare he touch Wren. She is mine. I know that's precisely why he took her, to lure me. I had to play this smart.

"Let's go," I call to the rest of the house. "We're heading out."

The sun is up, and though it isn't like us to move at noon, I still need to find the bastard. We leave for the city, grabbing some all too willing food and set up shop at one of our many safe houses. A few calls from contacts throughout the city let me know where Emerson is really hiding out. A factory near the outskirts of Callery.

He is smart.

I'm smarter.

The run-down house ten blocks from there had been a decoy to lure us in. This is perfect though. We are less likely to have to deal with human police when the shooting starts. Hardly anyone lives out there and those that do have no care what goes on around them as long as they aren't involved.

I manage to get my hands on the blueprints for the building as the afternoon wears on, and we plan our attack—a group in the front, a group in the back. Our best marksmen set up to take snipes at any windows they could, and a final team will

start on the roof and work their way down. Finding Leland and Wren and getting them out is the top priority.

We aren't taking any prisoners.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE SONGBIRD

Stirring, I'm not sure how much time has passed, but I am still the wild thing. My arms are chained behind my back, seemingly shackled to the same chair I sit on. Blinking slowly, I realize we are in a concrete room. The door to my right is the only entry point. The only source of light is a bare bulb above my head, not even a single window along the walls. I toe a broken tile beneath my feet and see the dinginess of the entire floor. In the center of the room, metal crosses over a hole into darkness, a drain that produces the sweetest blend of blood, sweat, and fear that makes my mouth water.

At least they didn't fucking gag me.

Finally, taking in the chair across from me, my heart jumps when I see Leland alive and well. He is staring off into nothing, probably trying to think of a plan. We desperately need a plan. The wild thing doesn't do the whole 'planning' thing, and she wants to get her freedom by force. I feel my—*our* arms tug at the bindings. I try calling out to Leland for his

wisdom and comfort, and she is having none of it. Growls escape our throat as we thrash and fight against our bindings.

His eyes fly to mine now that I am moving. Now that *we* are moving.

Studying me, absorbing the change in my behavior, I see realization blooming in his eyes. He can tell I'm not in control, that I have given in and let the darkest part of me take over.

“Wren.” Leland’s voice is filled with authority, and I watch as our gaze snaps into focus on him. The growling ceases. “Struggling right now is useless, and we’ve been drained. You would do better to conserve your strength.”

I feel our body relax.

“*Emerson,*” she grumbles in question. I didn’t even know she could speak separately from me. Snarl and roar, sure, but speak? We’ve only communicated in thoughts before, but I suppose I thought I would still maintain control of my speech.

“Yes, it is. Wren, I’m so sorry. I am a stupid old man, and I think it will cost my children everything.” Despair flows through him, so strong I can feel it. Something has gone terribly wrong, and he blames himself for it.

I don’t know his mistake, but I know he would never endanger us willingly.

Other Wren didn’t seem to care much about what had happened. She only cares about what happens next. “*I will shred him.*”

I try to sense if the sun is still up. It could be. Maybe it is setting. Our eyes wildly search the room for anything useful but quickly become distracted. The drain's scent is almost overwhelming us.

She is hungry.

We are hungry.

A low grumble escapes our mouth. She's annoyed, and I am busy trying to put it all together. Was it a set-up? Had Emerson discovered the mole? Where is the rest of the team?

My heart sinks.

What happened to Rolando?

I don't want to think about what happened to him. About why he's not sitting here with Leland. I'm happy that I'm not driving my body right now.

Somewhere nearby, a door opens. Heavy footfalls sound down the hallway, echoing and growing louder as they approach. Emerson comes into view, and my eyes narrow. He attacked me in the middle of nowhere. I had been completely outnumbered and already the weakest link of our coven.

He is a coward.

I can use that to my advantage.

My primal side agrees as she begins to throw herself against the chains again. The screeches she makes are predatory and animalistic.

He smiles but it is cold and doesn't reach his eyes. I study his face as his focus moves from us to Leland. Excitement crosses his features when he looks at me and a dark hatred when his attention lands on Leland. I hope to wipe that look off his face.

“My guests,” he says, extending his arms as if to welcome us and ignoring the failing attempts of escape that have overcome my wild side. “I do hope you're finding your stay comfortable.”

We spit at him, and his attention is ours as he quickly turns his sharp features our way—blue eyes, deep as the ocean, and pale skin that looks like porcelain. Almost angelic-looking, I can see how he draws people in. But I know what he is capable of. He stares into my eyes, trying to dominate me, but I refuse to look away. I can't tell if he is bothered by it or if he enjoys the challenge.

His hand clashes against the side of my face. I'm not surprised he resorts to using physical force to win the stare-down. Fingers grip my hair near my scalp. The crown of my head burns. What is with men wanting to rip a woman's hair out to prove themselves? “You didn't even merge with your primal self? Pathetic.”

“What are you, a child? Hair pulling, really?” her voice is hollow and mocking.

Oh, he loves that.

Hand to our throat, he puts his face inches from ours. “I will break you,” he threatens. “I will dig into your soul and rip it

from you. Bring you back into your body, and then, then you will beg me. You will cry for me.” His voice is a low growl in my ear. A spike of fear darts through me, but I feel our lips turn into a twisted grin.

We stare right back at him. *“I will hear you beg for mercy before sunup.”* She threatens. *“I will fall asleep remembering the sound of your pitiful whimpers for years.”* As she says the words, I feel it. She is pulling from me, using some of my will to control herself as she controls our body.

“You are nothing.” She says the last part softly, just for him. *“Just a stupid, scared little boy who didn’t get enough attention from Daddy.”*

He hits us again, and we smirk. Throwing our hair back from our face she laughs. My wild vampire will not back down, and we will die knowing we got under his skin if he kills us.

Leland’s eyes are mocking as he smirks and says, “Wren is amazingly observant, wouldn’t you say, Emerson?”

We watch the man before us stiffen, and he crosses behind our chair where we can’t see him. His rage pours off of his body and it’s easy to tell that he’s unhinged. His mask is slipping. Just knowing that he failed to control us, failed to fill us with nothing but fear. He’s coming undone. We did hear the sharp brush of metal on metal and a high-pitched ringing sound as the vibrations made it sing. When he comes back into view, our body goes cold. A sword in his hands, Leland’s sword. He points the blade at the throat of his creator. “She’ll be less amazing with your head at her feet.”

We jerk in our chains again, willing them to break so we can go for this bastard's throat. This time I join with my wild side in the effort. I want to shred Emerson alongside her. He rounds on us, looking sickeningly pleased with himself. He wants to get a rise out of us, and we give it to him.

I don't care. He has no respect for life, no respect for his origins, and it is maddening. "Look who can rattle after all," he uses one hand to trace the planes of our face. We try to jerk and bite his finger, but he just laughs under his breath. Bringing his lips at our ear, unbothered as we thrash against our bonds, I hear him breathe in our scent. Sounding like he had just inhaled the best dessert, his voice grows husky and fills with desire. "So full of fire," he whispers, soft lips brushing over our ear.

Disgusting.

Starting at our collarbone, Emerson drags his tongue up our neck and sinks his fangs in just behind our ear.

We gag.

Shuddering from the sensation of him feeding from us, bile rises in our throat. He moans as he draws our blood in deeply. We feel sick. Emerson stops drinking from us and instead, he takes a hand and places it suggestively on my thigh. "Maybe I'll keep you for a while. Make Oz watch as I carve you up. I'll chain you to the wall and rip through you, always letting you heal. So I can do it all over again and again while he screams." Kissing that place behind our ear, he pulls his hands from me.

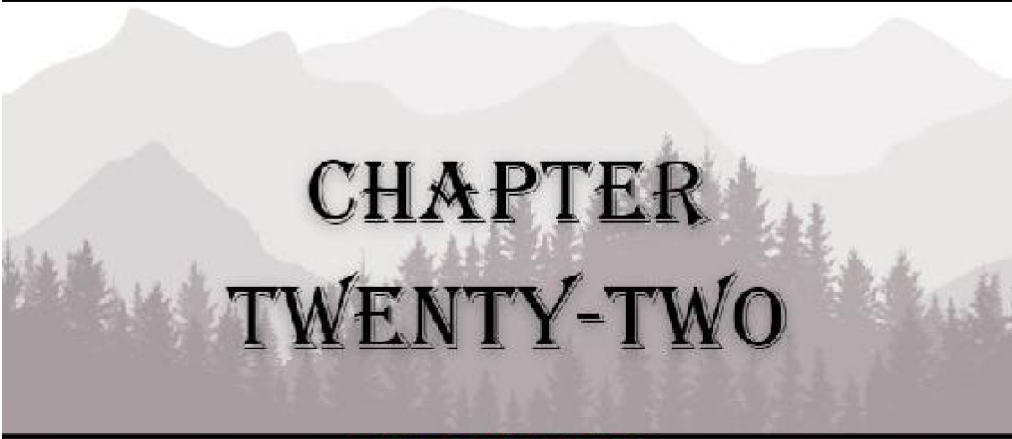
I still feel sick, but the other Wren is pissed. Oz belongs to us, and we won't let this scum hurt him. We agree on one thing, that we will die before we allow him to use us against our mate.

“You are weak, Emerson. You fucked up. You fucked up bad. You never should've come here. This place will be your tomb. This will be your undo-” The room fills with the ringing sound of a blade slicing through the air at enormous speed, cutting our words short. Our eyes widen in horror as the life is snuffed from our leader.

Leland is gone.

Our body is still. I can feel her reaching out to me, seeking comfort. We are going to work together to get out of here. She needs my reason, and I need her ruthlessness. Together we will make sure we get this fucker. One way or another, he will feel pain at our hand.

Leland's blank expression unsettles me as his head falls from his shoulders. Emerson doesn't say anything else. He doesn't need to, he thinks he won. He may have achieved one of his goals, but I am damn sure going to ruin the rest. *With my help*, the other Wren whispers to me. Yes. This will take everything we have, but we can do it.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE SONGBIRD

Leaving us with our coven leader's dead body for who knows how long, is meant to hurt us. Eying the blood that pools from the gaping wound in his neck before making its way down the drain makes us drool. I can feel hunger taking hold. I haven't eaten in two days unless you count munching on Oz when things get frisky. No, a larger amount of blood is what I need. Vampire blood will work if I can just get it.

If the chair wasn't bolted down, I would knock it over just to get a taste.

It wouldn't be so bad if you would accept me.

Other Wren is trying to make a point. I've been fighting her for so long, but here I am, relying on her strength. Sure, I've been 'trying' to merge us the way we should be, but if I am being honest, I could've tried harder. Part of me is afraid to let her in, to lose that level of control.

I've lost it anyway.

Sensing my agreement and apprehension, I can feel her almost soften towards me. *I am not the enemy. I am you. We are one soul separated and will not be our strongest until we are united.*

Everything is right.

So why can't we merge now?

I want to. She wants to.

We are stuck.

I worry that the raw unstoppable urge to kill, rip, and destroy— the one that consumed me on my first several feedings. Will it worm its way back to the surface and take control of me?

It's your fear.

My fear is what is stopping us?

Well, we are royally fucked then. I can't just make my fear of losing control go away. I've killed far too many people and don't want to be a murderer anymore.

With me, you will have that control. We don't have to kill.

Everything I've seen so far tells me otherwise.

A pit forms in my stomach. I don't like where this is going, and it won't get us any closer to merging. If we can't do that, then we need to plan. We need to come up with some other way to get out. We can't just rely on me clinging to the darkest parts of my soul.

He's going to torture us.

I shudder, remembering the bare description Oz gave me. I can only imagine what Emerson has planned for me.

Oz will be here soon. I know it. We can make it out of here.

You're weak.

Excuse the fuck out of me?

You think this darkness is to be feared, that it is evil, but it's your fault we can't stop ourselves when we feed. I need you to keep me grounded, and if you don't merge, we will just keep killing. It doesn't bother me, but if it bothers you and you won't do what you must to stop it, you're weak.

I ignore her. I am done with this conversation.

Our arms are sore from being locked behind us all day, the thirst is taking over, and I am arguing with myself.

I don't see how the fuck we are going to make it until Oz gets here.

Oz.

I tried calling him at the mountain, and I try again now, but I can't sense anything. I am so weak, maybe he can hear me even if I can't hear him. I am doing my best not to give up. She doesn't want to help me plan, and I don't have the energy to convince both of us that this is our way out anymore.

A door slams shut, and Emerson's heavy steps grow closer. We straighten our posture, trying to hide the weakness brought on by our separation and hunger. We won't give him the satisfaction.

“I trust my guest had a nice relaxing day.” A sadistic smile spreads across his face as he takes us in. He can tell that we are wearing down.

Turning to Leland’s body, Emerson fingers the hilt of his creator’s sword. “It seems rather poetic that I took his life with his weapon.” Pulling it from its sheath, he places the point at our throat. “Would you like to have fun with it too? I’ll rip you open with it if you want.”

He is truly despicable.

Squaring our shoulders and jutting out our chin, we silently challenge Emerson. We are going to do our best to keep it together. Show him that we aren’t afraid of him.

Even though we are.

“Don’t say I never offered,” Emerson sheaths the sword and grips our neck, getting in our face. His hand grabs us by the jaw, squeezing hard enough that I could hear our bones straining. “Come on, sweetheart, show me a little fear.”

We lash out and bite his cheek.

Pulling away, shouting, skin tears from Emerson’s face. The flap hanging in our teeth still, we spit it on the ground and lick our lips of his blood. Eyes filled with fury, I can only watch as he raises his hand and slams the back of it against our face as hard as he can. Head swinging from the force, our vision is now trained on the hallway.

“You’ll pay for that, bitch.” Holding a hand to his cheek, he stalks from the room. His heavy footfalls are music to my ears.

Denying him power over us is magnificent.

Two of his coven enter and undo some of our chains, leaving the ones that keep our wrists together nice and tight. We are dragged to a different area. Part of me is grateful that I won't have to look at Leland's body anymore, and part of me is mad as hell because I want a sip of that blood. We are so hungry...

Our stomach rolls.

They take us down one hall and then another. I don't see a single window. Are we underground? There is an industrial feel to the place. Probably somewhere on the edge of Callery, where a lot of noise can be made, and no one around will give a singular fuck. Finally reaching a small room with a drain and nothing else, they shove us inside and slam the door shut, locking it.

I fume.

Are we no longer a threat?

They've bled us and starved us. I guess they think we are too weak to fight back.

One thing that has always irritated me is being underestimated by men. We lower our arms as far as we can and slide our legs over the chain to at least have them in front of us. The muscles in our arms relax, though they are still sore and very tender. Grateful that at least we have healed from our initial assault, even if the lack of blood is slowing the ability to heal from our current wounds.

We need to focus and come together. Begin to plot our next move. At some point, one of Emerson's men will come through this door, and we need to ensure they don't leave here alive.

Wren, can you hear me?

Oz's voice echoes in my thoughts.

Relief pours over me.

Yes, I can hear you.

My coven is here, they are going to get that motherfucker, and I won't be brutally raped and cut open.

Probably.

Hopefully.

We will start the attack soon. Where are you? Where's Leland?

Pain swells in my heart...

Leland is dead. I show him the whole bloody scene. *I'm downstairs, in the basement, probably. There are no windows I've seen.* I recount the path we took from the original holding room to this one, hoping they can find us if we can't get ourselves out. Not having seen the upper floors, or anything other than the first room and a couple of hallways, my account of the layout is lacking. It isn't much, but it is better than nothing.

When we get in there, fight like hell.

Nodding, even though he can't see it, I know he can sense the feeling of agreement.

We can do this.

I can do this.

But we need a plan for when they come for us.

My creature purrs and stretches, almost like she is gloating. I am going to have to merge with her soon. I have to get over my fear of the unknown and embrace myself, but I don't know how to let go of the things holding me back. So until I can, we need to do something else.

Anything else.

We devise a plan. It's not without risk, and there's a good chance it won't work, but we have to try.

I refuse to rot down here.

Ten minutes pass before I hear the first shots come from above. The party is starting. Glass is breaking, men are shouting, and I hear someone call over a radio outside my door. A guard must be out there, getting the order to fetch us. It is time to put our plan into action.

We watch as the door handle turns and a surly-looking broad-shouldered vampire enters. "Get up," he demanded, poking his head into the hall to see if anyone is coming. "We're moving you."

Slipping a purr into our voice, we say, “*But I’d rather stay here with you....*” He turns to face me, and confusion covers his eyes before he sees me and my hands. I rub my nipple, allowing the nub to harden. He can see it perk under the thin fabric of my t-shirt. “*I’d rather touch you. I’d rather feel you.*”

Lowering his gun, the guard shut the door behind him. The lock automatically engages with a loud click. “What are you doing?” He may be asking, but he knows. An involuntary step forward urges us to continue.

Spreading our legs wide, we slowly slip our chained hands into our pants. We are reaching, tracing, rubbing. We close our eyes, throw our head back, and moan as our fingers brushed against our clit.

His eyes are wide like he doesn’t believe what is happening. Not yet. We have to make him feel it. We have to make him want it. Standing, we shimmy out of our pants, revealing that we have no underwear on.

“Fuck,” he groans. I can see him harden under his pants. He wants it. He wants our body.

Stepping toward him, still touching ourself, sighing as we continue stroking, watching his eyes slide from our hands to our face. Another step, biting our lower lip, letting a quiet moan escape. He is losing his resolve. He has to be. He hasn’t demanded we get dressed, and he hasn’t grabbed us and dragged us out. He is ours, and we are so hungry, so ravenous. Not for his touch, but for his blood, and we will claim it before long.

We are in his face now, our hot breath tickling his skin, mingling with his own heavy breathing. Oh, so close to his mouth, his lips slightly part, we tease our lips against his. We press our breasts and body into him, letting another quiet gasp slip through. His mouth crashes down on ours. His hands slide over our bare ass as we sigh into his kiss. We use our hands to grope him through his trousers. He moans with longing.

Men are predictably easy.

Taking our hands and sliding them into his pants, we reach for him, stroking him. “God, that’s good,” he breathes in our ear. He pushes us against the wall, grinding himself against us as we move our hands up and down his length.

“Please,” we say, our voice quiet and begging. *“Please, won’t you fuck me?”*

He shudders under our touch. He wants to and he is so close to biting the baited hook. He is almost distracted enough.

He starts kissing my neck and reaches a hand down to touch our pussy.

Perfect.

I have to force myself not to stiffen at his touch. To pretend to want this, to want him.

We gasp, encouraging him.

“I’m gonna fuck you so hard, so deep,” he growls into our neck. His other hand wraps around the small of our back. We lean against it under the guise of capturing his lips with our own. Our grip on his cock tightens, and he thrust against us.

We tighten our hold more, and he cries out. It has to hurt a little, but he apparently likes a bit of pain with his pleasure. He tries desperately to run his fingers over us, hoping to ignite more passion.

We quietly moan into his ear. He is butter beneath our touch. All melted and pliable.

Poor thing.

We pull hard.

He screams loudly.

Our claws tear into him, and we quite literally dis-member him.

His hand is still pinned behind our back, and his other goes to his bleeding crotch as he yells in pain. We shoved the remains of his dick in his mouth to get him to shut up. We quickly pull the rifle he has draped around his shoulder from his writhing form. Safety is off, and one is in the chamber. We unload it in his face and it is pretty effective. Without a head, he won't be doing anything.

If we don't burn the body, he can technically regenerate. Though in this state it would take days due to the level of destruction. He will be long dead by then, having had his corpse thrown onto a fire at the first opportunity we get. We take this moment to drink from him, feeling strength return where weakness once existed.

Digging in his pockets, we find a set of keys. It takes some doing, but we eventually get a good angle to unlock the chains.

I release my hands on the fourth key.

Freedom.

Ready to get to the party, we almost left without putting our pants back on.

I think about how easy it is to do things with the other Wren. Is this what it will be like when we merge?

Not quite. We will be one consciousness, part of each other, less of this we stuff.

Above our head, there is more gunfire, more yelling. The death of our guard happened quickly, just a couple of minutes. Emerson would be expecting us soon, though.

We aren't done yet. We have to get to Oz. We have to destroy this evil that has come for our family.

Oz, I think to him. I'm free from my cell, I'm armed, and I'm coming.

He may be too busy to respond at the moment. His determination is dripping into our mind. He is concentrating hard. There is a brief flash of relief though, and I know he heard me. Keeping hold of the gun, sure we will need it, we run down the hall. Peering around the corner, we see it is empty. Turning right, aiming for the double doors ahead, an explosion sounds from above.

That's concerning.

Walls rumble and the ground shakes beneath our feet. Pieces of plaster fall from the ceiling but thankfully it holds. We

steady ourselves and manage to keep our balance.

Pushing through the doors, we come face to face with the room that held Leland's body just an hour before. He is gone, smoking ashes where he had been. We are too late. Emerson made sure his maker will never walk the Earth again.

No time to mourn. To the right is a heavy door, and to the left is another maze of halls. We go right because Emerson always came through a loud door. We need to find the stairs. There has to be a way up to the main level. While there might be better routes to hide from his men, we know in our gut that this way will get us where we need to go.

Pushing through the door, there is indeed a staircase waiting for us.

There are also two men heading for the hall I just came from, no doubt trying to see what caused the holdup in getting us from our cell.

Fuck.

Raising the gun, we begin firing.

Sharp vampire sight made our aim true, and this weapon's automatic firing capacity left the two men without their faces.

I like guns.

Other Wren purrs in agreement.

We are going to get low on bullets.

Checking pockets, we find a few extra clips ready to go. We also remove one of their pistols, stuffing it at the small of our

back. Nervous and excited, we climb the staircase, padding lightly on the balls of our feet. The gunfire from above is getting loud. We peer around the corner on the next floor, unable to tell if this is the ground level.

We reach for the door to the stairwell, creeping forward only for something cold and sharp to be pressed into the back of our skull.

FUCK!

Emerson, how in the hell had he snuck up on us with his heavy ass steps?

“Let’s call your boyfriend, shall we? Drop the gun.” His voice is cold. Doing as instructed, I release my hold on the gun. He lowers the sword as he trains the rifle on me. “I know that you’re Oz’s mate. Call him with the bond. Do it now, and tell him not to keep me waiting.”

Letting a thought slip out to Oz, we start thinking about a plan to get us out of this. The sounds of gunfire have quieted, and there are only occasional popping sounds, but they grow further apart.

Oz, I made it to the top of the stairwell on the ground floor. Emerson is here, and he wants you to come.

“Done,” we say to Emerson.

He sneers at me and motions toward the wall. “Sit down,” he commands. We do as he says, sliding down the wall carefully so as not to dislodge the pistol at our back that he seems to know nothing about.

This is almost over, but not for me, not for Oz.

Emerson is as good as dead. He just doesn't know it yet.

He crouches before us, brushing hair out of our face. "So beautiful. Let's make a portrait for Oz, shall we?"

I watch in horror as he pulls a blade from his boot and I cringe as he touches it to our cheek. Hot searing pain accompanies the gash as he drags the sharp metal down our face. Blood pours out of the wound, and we hiss in pain. "You know, Wren. It's almost dawn, and I'm still not begging."

"There's still time," we snarl.

Brow furrowing, lips curling with scorn, he cuts down the center of our shirt, exposing our chest to the air. Taking the blade, he starts at the top of our breasts and presses the blade into our skin, following the natural curve into the center. Not getting the reaction he wants, the frustration is evident on his face. He presses on, reaching my stomach and pushing hard. Screaming in pain, we feel how deep the damage goes. An evil grin crosses his lips, and we want to wipe it from his stupid face.

We think about all the ways we want to kill him. All the ways we want to shred him. Using the aid of a deep breath, we allow laughter to escape our mouth.

Emerson doesn't like that and the smile immediately disappears.

It doesn't matter. His focus has to shift, Oz is here, and we all turn our attention to the door.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE WARRIOR

Knowing that Wren is alive gives me all the motivation I need. I won't let Emerson hurt her. I will make her safe or die trying.

Basement.

I didn't see a basement on the blueprints. It's not surprising to me that Emerson has had this planned for a while and added one off the books. If he weren't such a sadistic prick, I could admire his work ethic.

With my M4 Carbine in hand, I prepare to go in with the group starting at ground level in the rear of the building. Everyone has a mic and earpiece so we can communicate anything meaningful. If it isn't explicitly necessary, we were to be silent. Our goal is to incapacitate, extract, and then we will burn everything to the fucking ground.

We are positioned at the back entrance, waiting for the roof team to give the go-ahead. They have quietly dispatched two lookouts that weren't particularly good at their assignment.

“Top clear,” Charlee calls on comms. “All teams are go for breach.”

Hand already on the handle to the door, I twist it quietly until I meet the resistance of a lock. It is nothing to force the lock to break as I keep turning. The crunch of the mechanics failing is louder than I would like. I pull the door open, and Rolando enters first, keeping his back to the door.

He sidesteps to make room for the rest of us. “Clear.” He says to us, not on the mic. I come in next, Chandra and Zach are right behind us. We are in a back hall, an old employee break room to one side and offices and closets to the other. Splitting into groups of two, we move to clear the back.

Turning right to check an office, I come face to face with a rather large man. He seems vaguely familiar. No doubt one of the more infamous criminals Emerson turned. He slaps the barrel of my rifle, trying to make sure it won't tear into his face.

I pull my pistol from my side and fire five rounds into his skull.

I hear rapid fire in the next room as Rolando takes out another guard.

For being his security, they were doing a shit job of protecting Emerson's assets.

The other half of our group sounds like they found a few others.

Easier than expected, the back hall is now clear.

Sounds of gunfire come from the front. The four of us converge on the door leading to the main section of the warehouse, confident that they will be distracted by our other team. Rolando mans the door this time. I step into the room and see men tucked behind the old machines of the factory for cover. But they aren't paying attention to their backs. I sidle to my left and begin firing.

A man to my right picks up on what is happening and repositions to return fire at us.

Ducking down and rolling, I put a large cement pillar between me and his bullets. Rolando made it out and is tucked by a machine to my right. Chandra and Zack are pinned at the door.

Fuck.

I peer around the corner fire, pulling back in time to save myself from getting a nice gaping head wound. While the attention is on me, Rolando takes his turn to fire. I hear the sound of several bullets colliding with flesh, but none of them are the money shot to drop him.

Zach fires from the door, forcing the gunman back around his machine.

The sound of breaking glass from behind him, and a pool of blood begins to seep from behind it.

One of our sharpshooters got him.

Wren reveals her escape in the middle of the gunfight and is trying to get upstairs to us. I can hear Charlee descend, killing

stragglers. Emerson has yet to make an appearance.

My attention shifts to the remaining enemies attacking my front team. They are unable to advance but holding their own. Zach and Chandra join us now, and we put pressure on the remainder of Emerson's men until they are overwhelmed by our numbers and our angles.

An old machine, damaged in the reign of bullets, explodes and I feel searing pain as shrapnel catches me in the chest. It may heal, but it still hurts like a bitch. I see one of ours get knocked backward, likely with some matching metal in their flesh. I know they will be fine. Thankfully the damage to my team isn't extensive, and we continue to put pressure on the last of Emerson's lackeys.

A round from above slides into a man I am exchanging fire with. His skull is practically blown apart before me. Looking up, Charlee offers me a jaunty little salute. The rest of my coven joins me, and just like that, the main floor of the warehouse is clear.

Gunfire sounds from below, and I eye the walls for the stairwell. A door at the far side catches my attention and I see a flash of movement. I think I see Wren's face for a second.

Her voice in my head tells me I did.

"Fuck," I whisper, and Rolando looks at me. "He's got Wren behind that door," I gesture. "He wants me to join. If he hurts her...."

Rolando nods. "I've got your back."

“Stay out of sight. I don’t want him to know you’re there. You’re just back up to get her out if something goes wrong, understand? I mean it Rolando, if you have to choose between us, choose her. She never asked for any of this.”

With a grim face, Rolando says to me, “I will get her out or die trying.”

I call to the rest of my coven on our comms, “Nobody else follows me, just secure the building and hold off any reinforcements.”

A chorus murmurs “copy” on my earpiece. I signal for Rolando to follow and we quickly make our way to the door.

Adrenaline settles into me as I stalk towards the door. If I had a pulse, it would quicken. I’ve never been more nervous about anything—if he hurts her, if he so much as harms one hair on her head, oh, the things I will do to him.

Like he can hear the dare, Wren cries out in pain, sending my blood boiling. Rage turns my world red until I register Wren laughing maniacally.

That’s odd.

Examining the door hinges, I note that it will pull open. It’s heavy, and metal, I can see through the window. Wren is propped against the wall on the floor, blood pouring from her cheek, chest, and gut. She sits with a smile on her face. Her expression is a distorted echo of my Wren, and I realize then that her dark half has control. Emerson’s enraged expression

turns to the window and pierces through me. He doesn't like this at all. No, he prefers to hear women begging.

Placing my hand on the cool brushed steel of the door handle, I twist and pull.

The second the door is open just half an inch, he calls to me, "Drop your weapon and leave it outside the door." I remove my M4 strap from my shoulder and lean it against the wall before passing my pistol to Rolando. Every movement is slow and calculated. Showing one hand through the window, I use my other to pull the door again.

Gently, oh so gently.

Having to awkwardly hook my foot around the door to finish opening it, I ensure Emerson can see I don't have a weapon. Entering the stairwell, I have no choice but to let the door swing shut behind me. The weight of the door pulls it closed with a thunderous clunking sound. The look on Wren's face is unsettling, though I suppose I should be grateful that the harder and darker part of herself is getting her through this. The smell of the blood that covers her is intense. Some of it is hers, some of it belongs to others. I expect her dark side to be more wild.

Instead, she seems in complete control.

Is she resolved to what needs to be done?

A flash of something primal in her eye told me not exactly, and one false move on Emerson's part will send her into a frenzy.

Good.

Her wild vampire is indeed driving, and she still hasn't merged with her other self. Part of me is grateful that she hasn't combined yet. Having her darker half in control gives her some measure of protection.

Wren's eyes don't even move to mine. She studies Emerson. She wants to kill him, and I want to let her. I just need to give her the opportunity.

Emerson keeps the gun pointed at Wren, though his eyes shift back and forth between us. I need his concentration on me. All it will take is a brief moment where he doesn't see her as a threat, and then she can go for the throat.

"You finally did it," I said, disappointment coloring my voice. "You killed your creator and got your revenge for him not letting you ravage and rampage like an animal. Happy?"

The scowl on his face tells me that *happy* isn't the right word. No, he is proud. "We are superior to humans. There's no reason why we shouldn't take what we want."

I laugh at the insanity of his logic. We come from humans, we still have humanity inside of us. Emotions, logic, love, empathy. Emerson never had empathy while he was alive, that's his problem. "That didn't stop you in your human life. What was your excuse then?"

That throws him off guard.

He studies me, probably curious about what and how I know the details of his life before Leland and me. Likely thinking I

am bluffing, he says, “I was the perfect gentleman until the pair of you came along.”

“Is that why we found you half gutted in some back alley behind a brothel?” He blanches. I remember the way he tried to stuff his intestines back inside his body. Someone had very much wanted him dead, and I do not doubt he deserved it.

Pretty stories of heroism spoke to our naivety then. That’s why Leland agreed to turn him at my request. I saw myself in him. A man dying undeservedly, with only the blood of the immortals able to save him. I thought he was like us. I thought he was good deep down and the unfortunate victim of an evil out in the world. I thought he could join our family.

I thought wrong.

I didn’t know until after Roanoke, but Emerson had been the disinherited son of a nobleman. He lost his titles, money, and legacy when it was discovered that he was raping and mutilating the servants in his home. He’d killed a few, able to cover it up at first, but apparently, his father walked in on him in the middle of the act and refused to overlook it, so he removed him from his will and told him to leave their home. His father’s love and influence only went so far as to not have Emerson arrested immediately.

I close my eyes momentarily, trying to force the image out of my brain. The journals I found told me Emerson had become exceptionally good at skinning his victims and keeping them alive while he forced himself on them. He would even consume their innards from time to time.

Fucking cannibal.

Rumors of his next atrocities are all I have to go on after he was rejected from his home. Fortunately, his father included the rumors in his journals as well. If they were accurate, Emerson spent his time carving up prostitutes, attacking women at night, and a few break-ins where he'd assault the servants and noblewomen alike. Less mutilation, probably pressed for time. He is disgusting.

“Your family found out you were a monster and abandoned you. You got off on hurting women and girls, and one night, you messed with the wrong one. Was it her brother, father, or husband who got revenge on you? Do you even know which woman was able to identify you? Do you know how they found you? Do you still feel their blade as it ripped into your stomach?” He trains the gun on me.

Finally.

“Shut the fuck up, Oz.” He screams at me. I've broken through his mask, his cover. He loves doing the deed, but he hates being judged for it. “You don't know shit. All of them deserved it. All of them as they wriggled and writhed. They were using their bodies to control men and I made them feel like the nothings they were. I was doing a service.”

“A service?” I step to the side ever so slightly, which makes him almost turn his back to Wren. She is reaching behind her. Does my lovely have a weapon he doesn't know about? “You take your sick and twisted pleasures in any way you can because you feel entitled. When faced with the reality that you

aren't, you break down like the worthless and pathetic piece of shit you are."

He shakes with anger.

"That's why you ran at Roanoke. You weren't afraid Leland would kill you. You were afraid of his judgment."

He puts his finger on the trigger.

In a flash of movement, Wren leans forward and presses a pistol to Emerson's knee. As she fires I jerk forward, gripping his hands and angling the gun away as a spray of bullets releases and he screams in pain. Overpowering him with my strength isn't too difficult, but Wren wants to have all of the fun.

She latches onto his neck. Her snarls echoing in the stairwell, harmonious with the sound of her teeth clacking together and his flesh ripping apart. There is blood everywhere and I yank the gun away from him. He tries to shove her off, but it's useless.

His hands swipe at her hair, her face, gripping and pulling but not doing a damn thing to deter her. Emerson's scream is incredibly satisfying.

"Stop, you crazy bitch," he yells, his eyes finally looking scared as Wren spits some of his flesh on the floor and resumes tearing into his neck.

Every single muscle in her body is focused on feeding right now. To get her to stop, I'd have to kill her and I obviously have no intention of doing that. They slide together down the

wall. Whatever blood isn't pouring out of his gaping wounds is in her mouth. I crouch beside them and watch his eyes begin to lose focus. I run my fingers through Wren's hair, soothing her as she takes her fill.

"Please..." his voice is getting quiet now, begging.

My mate moans in pleasure at the sound, letting him go for just a second. "*I told you that you would beg me.*" Amusement colors her words before she latches back on. Emerson's movements slow, and he is dead in minutes.

When he quits twitching, Wren pulls back. Her nose, mouth, and chin are covered in his blood. She uses her hands to wipe some of it off and suck it from her fingers, focused on getting every drop possible. I untie Leland's sword from Emerson's waist and unsheath it. In a swift motion, I swing and separate his head from his body.

There will be no regeneration, and we will set fire to this building as we leave.

Wren looks up at me, still being held onto by her wild side, though I can't tell if she is returning. It doesn't matter. They are the same inside. When she can finally merge the two of them, they will be whole and one. I push her up against the wall, kissing her blood-stained lips, pressing myself into her to feel as much of her as possible.

Nothing terrifies me more than the thought of losing her. Her hands snake up my chest, and she wraps her legs around my waist. We stay like this for a few minutes, kissing and holding one another.

I finally break the kiss and rest my forehead on hers, panting.

“Oz,” she whispers. My eyes lock on hers, she isn’t back to her usual self, but I can see the flicker of them both in her eyes. “Oz, *let’s get out of here.*”

“Of course, little bird. Let’s go home.” She doesn’t want to let go of me, so I carry her as she is. Clinging to me like it is the only way for her to stay safe. Exiting the stairwell, I say calmly to Rolando, “Burn it all down.” A few members of our coven stay behind to do just that. The rest of us pile into the cars and begin the trek back to our mountain home.

Back to peace.



**CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR**

THE SONGBIRD

Journeying from the warehouse to the mountain feels like forever. Overwhelming silence settles around us. We are victorious, Emerson is defeated and dead, but this isn't a celebration. Our leader is gone. Our brother, Naritaka, who had embedded himself in Emerson's coven, is missing, presumed dead. We got our payback, but the mood is somber.

Oz still hasn't let go of us.

We don't want him to.

He nuzzles his face in our hair, pressing gentle kisses to our skin at every opportunity. We are precious to him. Hands stroke our back in comfort, hugging us to his firm chest. Present with him, but also far away, we confront one another.

Other Wren is a rugged, wild, and pure vampire. She possesses the strength, the speed, and the willingness to exist in this life that I don't have.

I am cautious, clinging to the remnants of my human life.

None of it is fair.

Like all the other vampires, we should have merged during the transformation process. Instead, our memory loss caused us to be separate, and fear kept us that way. I want to accept her, join our minds, become one, and finally embrace my path. I just don't know how...

Inside my head are two separate entities, staring at each other, vying for power.

No.

No?

Not power.

What then?

Peace. Unity. Completion. We are stronger together and weaker apart. You should not fear me...

Peace, unity, and completion? She is untamed, ruthless, and capable of such destruction when not checked.

So keep me in line.

She sounds demanding in my head.

I can't control myself because I'm missing your essence. I need you to keep me grounded, and you need me to fully live. You keep pushing me away, and it's killing us.

She's right. I am pushing her away and don't want to face the darkest parts of what I've become. I pretend it is all eternal life, sunshine, and love. There is just blood, chaos, and...

There is still love.

Our eyes focus on Oz, clutching us like we would float away without his touch. Our anchor, our lifeline. We both love him deeply. I can feel the truth of it, of her. I feel the longing to become one with me and finally be whole.

Completion.

In my mind's eye, I see her. It is my face but sharper, etched with a cruelty that had once scared me. That cruelty isn't for me, my coven, or humans... it fuels the ferocity with which I will protect what is mine. It is white hot and indestructible. It is the absolute confidence of my strength.

And it is beautiful.

She is beautiful.

Her face swims closer to me, blurring at the edges as we grow closer. My mind grows fuzzy, and it feels like something is crawling inside me. Slowly the edges of the puzzle fit together and settle into one coherent picture of myself.

Peace.

Unity.

Completion.



Gently swaying in Oz's arms as he carries me inside, I stir. I didn't even realize that I had fallen asleep. My head rests against his shoulder as he silently maneuvers us into our room

and bathroom. Sitting me down on the tub's edge, he steadies me, making sure that I won't keel over the second his arms leave me.

I sway but remain steady.

We both frown at the blood covering the entire front of my body.

My clothes look like they've soaked up about six different people's blood. Thinking about it, that is probably a pretty close measurement.

Water spray sounds behind me as Oz twists the handle. He is so big, towering over me like a great protector. "Arms up," his voice is soft, smooth and caring.

I obey and let him undress me. There is nothing sexual about his touch as he examines me—nothing resembling lust is in his eyes as he takes me in. The blood of our enemies, having soaked through my clothes, stains my skin. Oz guides me into the shower, removing his clothes and joining me.

Rough hands, calloused from centuries of working with them, glide over my skin. His touch sends electric pulses of sensation down my back. He helps the water rinse the dried blood from my skin, cleansing me of what happened. He scrubs my back, arms, shoulders, breasts, and stomach using my favorite soap. He kneels before me and gently washes my legs, his hands stopping just before the height of my thighs. How I want him to keep touching me.

Satisfied, he turns his attention to my hair. The water has rinsed out all the dried rust-colored flakes, so he lathers my hair and massages my scalp. He works his fingers through my hair, preventing any tangles from forming. It feels fucking incredible.

He isn't nearly as filthy as I had been. The smell of gunpowder is more potent than anything else. Still, I run the soap over his form, allowing my fingers to delight in the sensation of his packed muscles and the veins roping in his arms. Tracing the hard outlines of his chest, his abs. I wash every part of him with as much tenderness as he's shown me, and despite wanting to turn this into more, I focus solely on our bathing.

I love his hair.

Working shampoo through it is challenging with our height difference, but he helps. Caging me with his arms, and bracing against the shower wall, Oz bends his neck forward, providing the access I need. Once thoroughly rinsed, I wrap my arms loosely around his waist, enjoying the feeling of the scalding hot water pounding into us.

Lips lower to my ear, and he whispers, "Wren, are you okay, love?"

Stupid question.

Of course, I'm not okay.

I have been kidnapped, hurt, threatened, witness to the murder of our coven leader, tortured...

Despite all of that, I am home, and I am safe. I have the love of my life is at my side and my mind is whole for the first time in weeks. I am doing far better than I have any right to be.

“I’m fine,” I whisper, burying my face in his chest.

Turning off the water, Oz grabs me by my hand and helps me from the tub. He wraps me in towels and helps me dry my hair. I submit to him and let him take control. I let him take care of me like he wants.

I love the way he tends to my needs. Each action is filled with love and tenderness that show I am his and always will be. I stare into his eyes, thinking about how everyone who had played a role in this is dead, how our family came together and put an end to those who would harm us. I think about how I relied on the darkest parts of me to keep myself safe, and how it led to me finally accepting myself for who I am.

Can he tell?

Does he know?

Oz carries me back into our bedroom and lays me on the bedspread. Climbing beside me, I feel a stillness as he rests his head on my abdomen, fingers absentmindedly tracing where a gaping wound was just hours before. Feeding from Emerson restored me and made me physically whole again. I feel strong, but I am tired, so tired from everything.

Tangling my fingers in Oz’s chestnut hair, I relax as his hands search me. Like he is looking for injuries that aren’t on the surface anymore. Given the sort of people I was held

captive by, I know what he wants to ask. He takes a deep breath, and I notice he doesn't want to look at my face as he probes for the answer.

“Wren, did they hurt you, my love? Did anyone... violate you.” His muscles are tense. I move my hand to his neck, working the knots at the base.

“They threatened it and worse. I was drained, smacked around, and you saw what Emerson did with his knife. There was one...” I have to tell him about the guard. I'm sure that he can smell that someone placed their hands on me. My breasts, my center. That someone had kissed my lips, my neck... I should shudder at the memory of him pressing into me.

Why doesn't it bother me?

The face of the cruel woman swims in my mind's eye, and I know.

She took it.

She took it all.

An emotion I can't name swells inside of me and I continue my story. “My guard, outside the cell... I lured him in with the promise of my body.”

Oz stiffens but says nothing.

“He took the bait. So he kissed me, touched me, and I slid my hand into his pants. I grabbed him and...” I can feel him holding his breath. “I ripped off his dick and fed it to him.”

Oz's arms reach for me and pull me to him, rearranging our limbs so I can put my head on his shoulder as he wraps himself around me. "I'm sorry you had to go through that, love. He had it coming. And the way you made him pay? It sounds like just desserts to me." He kisses the top of my head and holds me tightly.

"I'm glad you're safe now."

I gently kiss his neck, wanting to tell him about the ride home. About me. About what happened with "Other Wren." The words are hard to find but not impossible to come by.

"In the car, on the way here... I was lost in myself for a while. Trying to reconcile everything that happened, everything I did, who I am, and who I want to be." Biting my lip, I turn to look at Oz directly. "I did it. We finally merged, and I'm... I'm whole now." My fingers trace the lines of his face, my thumb running across his lips. He places a gentle kiss as I do, rolling so I am pressed down into the bed, and he is on top of me.

"How do you feel now, little bird?" Piercing eyes bore into mine.

How do I feel?

"Fucking amazing." Wonder fills my voice with the truth of my words. "It's like I was half a person before, and now it all just... fits."

Gently, Oz presses his lips to mine. But it is too tender, and I want more. Nipping at his lips, I hear a rumble grow in the

back of his throat.

Careful, little bird. He uses the bond to place his thoughts directly into my mind.

No. I think back at him, biting him harder. He opens his mouth, allowing my searching tongue entrance. Massaging his with mine, I can feel excitement rush down to settle in my belly.

I want this.

I want him.

I want to erase what happened with something good and pure.

My fingers grip his hair tightly, tugging as I press my lips harder against his. He stirs exactly as I hoped he would. Strong hands follow the curves of my body until one reaches my neck. Gripping just beneath my jaw, Oz breaks the kiss and uses his thick thumb to force my chin upward, exposing my throat to him. His teeth graze against the side of my neck, and I sigh deeply.

Yes.

This is what I need.

He hesitates for a moment, a question burning through him so brightly I can feel it through our bond.

“Make me forget,” I whisper.

That is all of the encouragement I need to give my mate.

I can feel wetness pooling between my thighs as I spread them and allow Oz to settle himself there. A hand slides down my hip, over my thigh, and cups the back of my knee, forcing it to bend so he can prop it up. His kisses trail lower, over my collarbone, and between the valley of my breasts. My nipples harden, and I moan as Oz takes one into his mouth.

Teeth and tongue torture me, nipping bit of pain here, soothing warmth there. Kneading my other breast as he did so causes me to arch my back into him, seeking more, yearning for him. His hands settle at my waist and push me back against the bed, his strength putting me where he wants me. His lips forge a path down my ribs, over my stomach, and to the junction of my thighs where I want him most.

Hot, moist breath tickles my curls, a shiver zips up my backbone with anticipation of him. Oz taunts me with a soft kiss against my clit, using hardly any pressure, and then his knuckles drag against my opening. “Baby, you’re already so wet,” he croons, his voice low and husky. “I haven’t even touched you yet.” I hear him chuckling, pleased with how he makes my body react to being near him.

“Do you want me to kiss you here?” Brushing his fingers against me, I moan with wanting and nod.

“What was that, precious? I thought I heard you say something....” Oh God, he is torturing me.

“Yes.” I breathe.

“Yes, what?” He purposely avoids my entrance and clit, massaging just to the side. I feel myself pulse and twitch with

desire.

“I want you to kiss me there.”

“Good girl,” is a whisper before the warmth of Oz’s broad tongue strokes the entirety of my slit. I throw my head back, my fingers tangle in his hair again, and I want to hold him to me as tightly as I can. One finger circles my clit as his tongue enters me, massaging and manipulating my folds. A gentle pinch above, and I buck my hips against his mouth.

Jesus, he knows exactly how to tear me apart.

With expert precision, he moves his mouth upward, focusing on the center of my pleasure. A thick finger enters me, giving me something to grip as his tongue swirls delightful patterns on my clit. Lips closing over it, he sucks me into his mouth. My hands press his face harder against me, and my hips began to move in earnest, chasing what I want.

“Oz,” I moan. “God, yes.”

Another finger joins the first, moving against me, hooking inside of me to reach the place that will send me over the edge. Teeth graze against me, and my body locks in place. I am lost to the wave of pleasure crashing over me, drowning me in Oz. He vibrates against me with the satisfaction of bringing me to my release. It sounds like I am the most delicious thing he’s ever tasted.

Removing his fingers from me, he laps at my opening with his tongue, taking my new rush of desire in his mouth. Gently he brushes his fingertips against my lips, coercing them open.

Sliding them in my mouth, I taste myself and suckle my essence from his fingers. I feel empty, and I need him to fill me, to make me his again.

He crushes his lips to mine, and I moan into the kiss, my pleasure still lingering on his lips. My need grows desperate. “Oz,” I call as he abandons my mouth for my neck again. “God, fuck me.”

I felt his grin on the side of my neck. He brushes his lips to my ear and grasps my throat again. “Ah-ah,” he teases. “What does a good girl say?”

My patience for his game is practically non-existent.

“Now,” I demand, watching as his brows raise upward in surprise. That cocky smirk I both love and hate settles on his face.

“As my little bird commands,” he breathes, sliding his cock against my slickness. Oz places the head of his length at my entrance and presses forward smoothly until he is buried inside of me completely.

The sensation of my mate joining me in this way is undeniably the best thing I can ever hope to experience.

Oz slides himself back until just the tip remains inside me before pressing forward again with a forceful and unhindered thrust. My legs wrap around his waist automatically, arms clutching him to me and nails digging into his back harder with each thrust. I move against him, moaning at the sensation of being joined with him.

“Fuck, Wren,” Oz breaths as he considerably increases his pace, groaning into me as I tighten around him.

So close already.

His thrusts are deep and hard, pulling me apart from the inside out. I am soaring higher and higher until it feels like I will crash into the stars.

Crash, I do.

Breaking apart at the seams, I came completely undone. “Oz,” I breath in an almost silent cry. My muscles clamp down on his cock as he thrusts into me. I can’t think, breathe, or see anything other than his eyes. I pull him in to kiss me, our lips bruising with the force of our passion. As the waves of my orgasm calm, I realize Oz slows his pace and has not yet met me at the height of pleasure.

He pulls himself from me instead, forcing a whimper at the loss of him. He presses my hand to his face, then kisses the inside of my wrist, my palm, and my fingers. He places my hand against his chest and grabs me by the chin, forcing my eyes to focus on his. “Turn around, and hold on to the headboard,” he commands, and something stirs in the depths of me.

“Yes, sir.”

Quaking with excitement and expectation, I obey. Gripping the top of the metal headboard, it was firm, unyielding in my grasp. I can feel him behind me, placing himself at my entrance. This new angle lends itself to fantastic potential. I

groan as he fills me. He has to know what he's doing to me and how much I like it.

Oz doesn't waste time letting me acclimate. He pounds into me with vigor and determination. Like he wants to crawl inside me as far as he can, and I beckon him with my cries of pleasure.

I don't know how much longer I can last like this. I am a broken marionette, held only by my strings as my lover takes what he wants. As he gives me what I need. He clutches my hair and pulls my head back. It feels fucking incredible. Slamming into me with all the speed and force he could muster, my hands grip the metal frame for dear life. I feel his hand lace around my neck, squeezing and cutting off my air.

Good God.

My eyes roll back into my head, and I let out a feral cry to the world as I am overcome again. Sounds of twisting metal groaning under my grip are all but a whisper in the background. My orgasm seems to freeze time around me, and nothing exists outside of us. Oz is the only other person on the planet, and he is here, giving me all of him. I gladly take it.

Every last bit.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE WARRIOR

Hearing Wren command me to start fucking her is possibly the most arousing thing I've ever heard. While I enjoy controlling and bending her to my will, the ferocity with which she delivered her order is unlike anything I've ever seen. I am more than happy to oblige and will never deny her anything.

It takes everything in my power to hold on as she comes unglued. I just want one more moment of pure unadulterated bliss for the woman who is my everything. When she calls me 'sir' as she obeys my direction to grasp the headboard... It had almost been enough to get me to erupt right then.

Her hands grasp the metal bar and the sight drives within me, a primal need. Groaning as I fill her, I pound myself deep within her, giving her my entire length without hesitation. I know it won't be long before her tight cunt ripples around me again, and that thought has me slamming into her with reckless abandon.

Tangling my hand in her hair, I pull her head back. Her throaty cry when I do, releases a growl from me. Christ, she is intoxicating as she writhes for me.

The warmth of her pussy enveloping me is addicting. The bond we share is exhilarating, and I'll be damned if I don't think she is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. Her sexy mewls of pleasure are enough to drive me insane. I feel my sack grow heavy, and I grunt into her.

Fuck.

With each thrust, it's getting more and more challenging to hold on. But I want her to come for me one more time, just once more, before I can let go. Her cries are growing more desperate, and she tightens around me. This is it. I fuck her rough and fast like she likes, tapping into my vampire strength and speed. God, I'm so hard that I'm about to burst.

Releasing my grip on her hair, I instead bring my hand to her neck, squeezing her, and groaning her name. As her climax peaks, I shudder and feel my body pump my seed inside her, bucking my hips until she milks every last drop from me. My hand on her neck blocking her breath, she tries to pant, but I don't let her until I pull myself from her.

A deep gasp of air and quiet whimpers meet me when I release her. Sliding from her, I notice the twisted metal and smirk—unashamed of the pride that I feel for making her so thoroughly lose control of herself. I lay beside her, turning her so she lay flat on her back, and place my head in the valley of her breasts.

Heaven.

Nothing is better than the feeling of satisfaction that intimacy with Wren brings me. She is *mine*. Just as I am *hers*.

We lay there resting and she plays with my hair. Everything outside of this room, outside of *us*, fades away, unimportant.



The day passes, and the sun sets before we stir again. I have such a strong desire to stay like this forever, but unfortunately, it isn't possible. I kiss Wren's temple, trying to rouse her from sleep. She's grumpy, mumbling and muttering about ripping my arms off. I laugh. My little bird has talons, and I like it. "I'm sorry, gorgeous, but I want to meet with everyone and discuss what's next."

Wren's expression darkens as the total weight of everything that happened returns to her. Leland is gone, and we'd had one hell of a fight.

Reluctantly, she dresses alongside me, and we walk out to the landing.

Everyone is scattered, still somber. Rolando and the rest made it back, and it looks like everyone had the chance to clean up and rest a bit. Good, we have a lot to do.

Covens aren't monarchies. I don't have the automatic right to take Leland's place. While I am the official second in

command, I won't stop anyone who wants to go off alone. If they stay, I will do my best to carry on our maker's legacy.

I won't preach to them from the top of the stairs. No, I go into the kitchen and fix everyone a blood cup.

We still have plenty of donated blood on hand, and I heat it on the stovetop. Warm is best. Wren helps me distribute the cups to our family, and I raise mine in a toast. "To Taka, his loyalty and sacrifice were not in vain."

"*To Taka*," everyone says together—a sad chorus of pain.

I raise my cup again, "To Leland, his kindness and honor will not be forgotten."

"*To Leland*," they mutter in unison. Their sadness washes over the entire house, and there is no room for anything else.

Drinking deeply, I look at my family. They seem so broken, desolate, and filled with an insurmountable grief. I know we all had dared to think that we could save our entire family, but we lost two instead.

I raise my voice to be clear and do my best to channel my father's wisdom. I am leaning on the strength cultivated by years of watching him create a group of people who care for one another. A family that cares so deeply that all felt the pain of losing one of our number. "We lost very important and very dear members of our coven. Including our leader and the vampire, without whom, none of us would be standing here. Our revenge has been dealt, and let it serve as a warning to anyone trying to take over our city."

I spare a fleeting glance to Wren, I haven't discussed this next part with her, and I hope she doesn't mind. "I plan on moving back into the city as soon as possible." Surprise colors the whispers that are traded around the room. Wren frowns but says nothing and thinks nothing at me.

At least I get to keep my limbs.

"I would like to take up the mantle left by our father, but I propose we make it an official vote. Speak now if anyone else wants to throw their name in the ring." Nobody even looks around. Their choice is me, and it was always going to be me. "All in favor of me becoming the new coven leader?"

"*Aye*," I heard in unison.

"If any of our family would like to remain here, in the mountains, you are welcome to. I want a larger presence in the city to prevent any other covens from trying to move in and take over. Naritaka told us Emerson was coming, and we won't be so lucky next time. Knowing he was coming didn't stop him from planning ahead for years."

Confusion surrounds my family.

"The basement add-on wasn't in the city blueprints, which means it was built after the building. I don't know how he pulled this off, but he did. Right under our noses." I down the rest of the blood in my glass. "I won't let something like that happen again. I want to be there, protecting what's ours and keeping our humans from harm as best as we can. We owe it to Taka, to Leland, and ourselves."

Taking a deep breath, I prepare for the moment of truth.

“All in favor of returning to the city?”

“*Aye.*” A chorus rang out, and while I can still hear the sadness, it seems lighter somehow.

Wren’s voice is notably absent this time. Turning to my mate I take her hand in mine, brushing it to my lips before leading her outside with me. Curious to know what is going on in her big beautiful mind.

“Are you angry?”

“No.” Her voice is soft.

I don’t think she’s lying, but something seems wrong. I want her to tell me, but I don’t want to pry it out if she isn’t ready to share.

“I’m, of course, going with you,” she said, leaning against the deck’s railing. “That’s a given. But I’m worried. Worried I’ll get recognized, worried I’ll lose control again. Worried that I’m causing more harm to our family by being here than if I wasn’t.”

“Of course, you’re not-” she didn’t let me finish.

“I am your *weakness*, Oz. You’re not so great and powerful if they can grab me and drag you into a war.” Her voice is strained with guilt.

“Wren,” I wrap my arms around her and lay my cheek on her head. “You didn’t have control before, but you finally merged your consciousness. That’s not going to be a problem again. I

will make certain of it.” I see doubt flicker in her eyes, and I refuse to let her do this to herself anymore. She is perfect. She is a vampire, and a little setback that caused an unforeseen issue with the change won’t destroy the future we could have together.

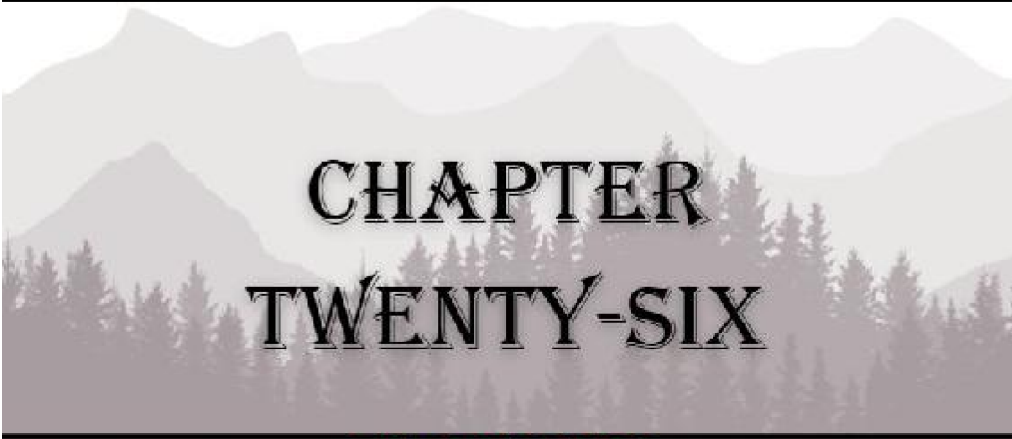
“We will deal with recognition if it comes. And as far as people using you against me... You seem perfectly capable of holding your own. You’re new but not incapable, and my love, I guarantee you will be a fearsome creature to behold before long.”

Her arms entwine around my waist as she holds me close. I can feel the warmth of her body through her clothes. And as she presses her lips to mine, my muscles relax beneath her touch.

Soft.

Familiar.

Mine.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE SONGBIRD

Our new home is lovely, albeit quite different from the house in the mountains. It is far more traditional. There have been updates to the plumbing and decoration, but there is no open concept, and much of the original woodwork remains. Restored and given new life over the years, it is beautiful.

We all have homes on the same block, making getting together effortless and enjoyable, but it is nice not being on top of one another all the time.

Charlee lives a few doors down with her live-in vampire girlfriend, a solo traveling vampire who has stayed in the city for three months longer than planned. Something Charlee takes credit for and makes her very proud.

Rolando is across the street and currently romancing a young lady who works at a coffee shop around the corner. We have a theory that she is his mate, but he can't hear her yet and hasn't hinted at a mate bond.

The triplets share a house at the end of the street and are as rowdy and goofy as ever. Zach and Chandra moved in right next door and are the best neighbors.

Oz and I have our place to ourselves, though coven members come and go as they please. It isn't unusual for me to find at least two or three randomly strewn about. It is kind of like having the kids come home to visit.

As our new leader, Oz is quite impressive. He made it official with the council representative who came by. Apparently, it is common for someone to go into a city and address the coven leader to get information on changes in the area. It isn't frequent, though they do make a point to stop by when rumblings reach them about a death or, in this case, many deaths.

His name is Nathaniel, and I feel tense around him for reasons I can't quite explain. He praised Oz for removing Emerson, a feat he'd admitted they should have undertaken long ago. Something about that bothers me. If the whole point is to keep our existence a secret, why had they not moved against him at any point in time since Roanoke?

Was it because he was Leland's? Did that grant him some immunity? Is there an unspoken rule about letting makers take out their maligned children?

It tickles the back of my brain and makes me wary, and when I'd shaken Nathaniel's hand, he gave me chills. I haven't voiced my concerns to Oz yet, wanting more information before I bring it to him, but I did ask Rolando to look into it.

He's agreed to keep it between us for now, at least until he has something to report about it.

My fears of being recognized so far have prove to be unfounded. I didn't grow up here, and my parents live two hours away. My work was in the next town over, and while some of the people I worked with might live here, I doubt we'd interacted enough for me to leave a lasting impression.

Today I have a meeting with someone, and I'm not sure if I should be doing this. Instead of talking to Oz about it, I decide to ask for forgiveness rather than permission. A week ago, a letter told me to be at Lorenzo's, a local Italian restaurant at one o'clock for lunch.

Sneaking out while Oz had been sleeping was easy, and I've resigned myself to telling him about the meeting when it's over.

Stupid?

Probably.

Approaching the host, I reference the letter I was sent for a name. It may be the millionth time I've read it, but I still have no idea who it is. My research in our archives didn't find them, and I hesitate to ask Rolando to keep another secret from Oz.

"Do you have a reservation?" the hostess asked, all chipper and filled with sunshine. Her bronze-colored name tag reads, "Becky."

“Yes, I’m meeting someone. It should be under Leblanc.” I try to keep the edge out of my voice. My nerves are firing all over my body, and as the hostess leads me to a table, I shudder involuntarily.

At the table sits a beautiful woman. Her skin is sun-kissed and tan, and she has a Mediterranean look. Dark thick hair twists behind her head, and her full lips are painted red. She stands to greet me, and I see that her clothes are casual but nice. Dark linen pants that flare at the knee, swallowing her calves. A plain white blouse tucked in neatly. She’s wearing no jewelry beyond a sun-shaped pendant on a gold chain around her neck.

“Miss. Butler,” she greets as if this meeting has been planned for ages. “How lovely to see you!” Turning to the hostess, she adds, “Please bring us some water. That will be all for now.” As Becky leaves to fetch our water, Ms. Leblanc gestures to the table, indicating I should sit.

“Ms. Leblanc,” my voice is plain, void of warmth or recognition, and I sit warily. Her smile seems forced now like she’d rather be anywhere but here.

“Please, call me Sophie.”

“Okay, Sophie. Who are you, and what the hell am I doing here?” I want to get to the point. I want to get back home. Something is gnawing at me, and I don’t like the feeling I’m getting from this woman.

“Wren,” using my first name since apparently we are so well acquainted now. “I want you to know that I, and my coven,

mean you no harm.”

Coven?

I look her over. She definitely isn't a vampire. I can hear her heart beating. At the same time, she gives off the vibe of a predator.

“You're not like me,” I state. “But you're more than human. What are you?”

Whether she means no harm is something I will find out later, but right now, I want to know more about Ms. Sophie Leblanc.

Becky returns with our waters, and Sophie sips hers. My impatience for an answer must be plain because Sophie seems to scramble to answer.

“I am, for lack of a better term, a witch.” Her voice is low enough that no nearby patrons can hear, but I can hear her perfectly fine with my heightened senses.

Air hisses into me.

Reading the archives, I learned that many supernatural creatures existed—demons, fae, werewolves, witches. Pretty much anything humans ever feared going bump in the night is real. We are all trying to coexist and keep our presence a secret. Despite the common goal, all the texts and journals I've read make it seem like our kinds don't mix much. I'm still not sure what being a witch means, but I can guess.

“So why ask to meet me?”

Ask isn't exactly the word. She'd more or less commanded me to be here. Curiosity and the unease I felt about the council are why I came.

"I have a proposition for the vampires, one I think you are in a unique position to listen to, given who your mate is." Ah, the crux of it. She wants the vampires for something. Likely, she doesn't think Oz will meet with her at all. Me, the newborn mate of the vampire coven leader, is a much safer bet to invite and at least be heard out.

She's not wrong.

"What would that be," I can't hide my interest. I have been eating up all the knowledge I can about my new world. Magic and supernatural things fascinate me. If my childhood self could see the things I just happened to stumble upon, she'd be squealing with delight.

"A chance to re-imagine the vampire's existence and condition. A chance to change the fate of vampires everywhere and keep up with the rise of werewolves and demons."

"And witches," I add, noticing she purposefully omitted her own kind.

Nodding in agreement, Sophie leans in. "The demons are becoming a problem. We cannot stand against them individually but united, and we stand a chance."

So she wants an alliance?

The demons I've read about are dark and evil, on the run from their realm and hunted by their law enforcement, I.M.P. The Inter-realm Magic Police. They come here and cause mayhem until their side catches up with them. It's quite a lot of red tape, and demons live forever, so it's not like time is a concern. Why did she mention the wolves? From what I can tell, there is no direct animosity between us.

“Why do you want to unite with us? Why vampires?” Sophie is holding back. She has a card that she wants to play when the time is right. I am anxious to get to that time, to have it all laid out in front of me.

“We can't offer the wolves anything that they don't already have. They will probably agree to join us for safety, but why would vampires? Unless your kind has something to gain, you'd leave the rest of us to it and keep your own necks safe.” She's annoyed. She thinks we should be helping out of the kindness of our hearts, and we aren't.

I cross my arms and lean back in my chair. “Fine way of asking for help.” I don't hide the irritation in my voice and watch her face as she tries to backpedal.

Good witch.

Smart witch.

Don't forget I have the power in this situation.

“I just mean that demons haven't been as large of a concern for your kind as they have been for the rest of us. You're the most difficult to fight and kill, and so you are afforded a

certain protection from them. They don't come after you the way they come after us. And make no mistake... They are coming after us."

We are getting to the meat of things.

"In the last five months, seven witches have gone missing. Some are from my coven, and some are from other smaller local covens. We have evidence that it's demons and filed a formal complaint to I.M.P. So far, they've done nothing."

Gotta love that red tape.

"What about S.P.E.L.L.?" I ask. Surely the Supernatural Police Enforcement of Laws and Lore would be more useful than vampires.

"Not their jurisdiction, and as such, they refuse to make a move against anything demonic." Red tape and territorial pissing matches. Fun.

"So, as a last resort, we've come together to make you an offer that could sway you to assist witches *and* werewolves when needed." She does want an alliance. I don't speak for all vampires, though. She knows this, but I suppose she was focusing on the local coven before trying to take her plan, whatever it is, to the next level.

"I'm listening," I lean back, relaxing in my chair, intrigued. I can see her excitement as she realizes I'm not going to blow her off and that I will seriously consider her offer. What does she have that vampires want? Why is she so insistent that werewolves play a role in this?

Sophie opens her handbag. It looks like it's a designer brand and probably is. She pulls out a small glass vial with a shimmering purple liquid. A potion?

"It's well known that vampires are, and should be quite picky when expanding their covens. A fact I think you're all too aware of, given recent events." Ah, yes, Sophie, I get it. You are up to date on vampire affairs. I try to ignore the jab at Leland's death, but I can't control how my nostrils flare. Sophie isn't paying enough attention. Her eyes were on the bottle. "But what if there was another way to bolster your numbers? Werewolves can turn others, and they can breed. Witches can seek gifted humans and help them develop their magic and produce children naturally, but you... You can only turn."

I want to reach across the table and claw her stupid face.

She could not know that I desperately want to be a mother.

If I could have this life or the life I'd dreamed of, I would choose the latter.

Preferably still keeping Oz in the process somehow.

I eye the bottle in front of me. There's no way— no possible way this can give me what she claims.

"What if you could do both? What if you could have biological children the same as we do?"

I stare the witch down, asserting dominance and looking for even the slightest hint that this is all bullshit. She looks at the potion with such pride. Sophie seems to sense my eyes on her

and leans back in her seat, finally looking at me instead of the shifting glittering swirls inside the bottle. I detect nothing but honesty.

“It’s impossible. We’re dead. Dead things don’t birth life.” Glaring at the potion she placed in the center. She wants my attention on the vial. “What’s in the bottle?”

Smiling now, she takes a deep breath. “Life.”

A shaking hand reaches out and grasps the potion, it feels cool in the palm of my hand. I turn it over, staring as it curls around itself and continuously shifts in the bottle. Life?

“If you drink that Wren, your heart will beat again. Your blood will flow, and you’ll remain everything you are now, but more. If you and your mate drink it, you could have children together. The child will be like you, though I admit, I don’t know how the aging or immortality part would play into it....”

Children?

In the mountains, I accepted that it would never be possible. I accepted that I had my life and a man who loves me. I decided that it would have to be enough. What if I could have more? The cost is simply standing against a foe all supernaturals share. Joining with witches and wolves against a common threat to the entire world.

The temptation to uncork the bottle and down its contents is overwhelming. I force myself to place it back in the center of the table.

“How do I know it would work?”

Becky returns to check on us and asks if we're ready to order. "No, thank you," I mutter, but she turns to Sophie instead.

The witch extends Becky's hand toward me, puncturing her palm with a sharp nail. "Becky here was my first test subject. Taste her blood, and you will see she remains a vampire." I am studying the hostess now, my skepticism waning.

Pressing the pad of my index finger to the drop of blood spilling into Becky's palm I raise it to my tongue.

It's fucking *vampire* blood.

I can hear her heartbeat and see the flush of her cheeks.

"Listen deeper," Sophie urges.

Deeper?

Closing my eyes I tune out the restaurant, focusing solely on the hostess, this vampire with a beating heart. A flutter comes from her midsection.

No.

Fucking.

Way.

"I'm due in five months," Becky's voice is filled with pride. "It's growing at the same rate as a normal human baby. I still drink blood, and the pregnancy is healthy so far."

I know my mouth is wide open in shock. Sophie grins and thanks Becky for her time. I laugh, feeling light-headed.

History books will remember that a hostess named Becky was the first vampire to ever get pregnant.

Sophie pulls an identical bottle from her bag and sets it with the first. “My gift to you, regardless of your decision to help. One for you, one for your mate. All research indicates this is permanent.” I stare once more at the shimmering purple liquid in disbelief, despite all of the evidence to the contrary.

“How is this possible? What sort of magic...” I can’t even find the words.

Eyebrows raised, Sophie sits back and lists off the process. “Necromancy magic was the jumping-off point. We had to blend it with earth and blood magic. Then we needed a binder. That’s how I found Becky. She volunteered, so we used her and her mate’s blood to quicken the potion. I have another young vampire lady who is also with child. She drank the potion that used Becky’s blood, as will you. If we have a vampire to make the initial donation, it should work on any other vampire who drinks it.”

I want to cry with joy.

Of course, Oz and I have never discussed kids, simply because it wasn’t an option. Though I can’t imagine him denying me anything. “Thank you,” I whisper, tucking the bottles into my bag, ensuring they aren’t in danger of being crushed.

Sophie didn’t have to give me this outright. It symbolizes the witches being willing to work with us, that they trust us more

than demons and will help us obtain dreams that many of us have.

A symbol of good faith.

A symbol of our future.

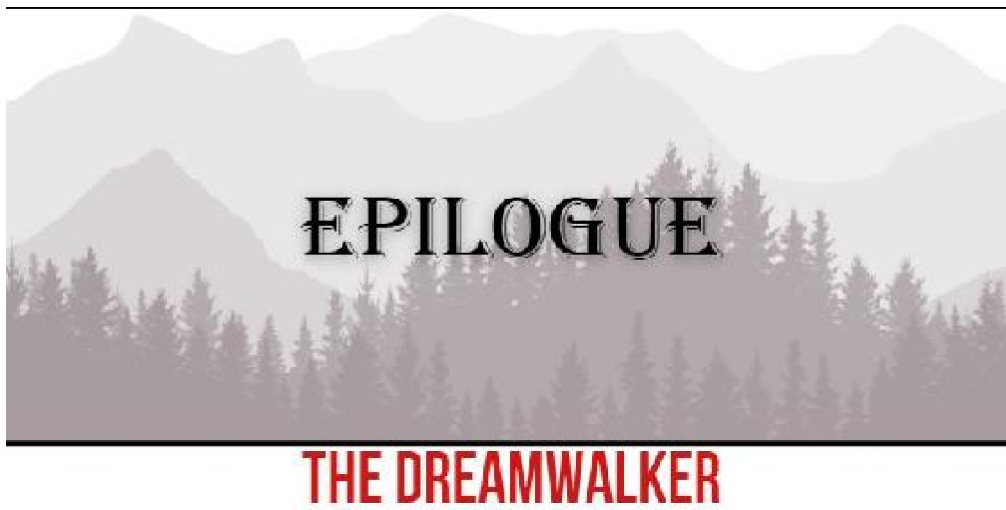
Doing my best to keep my voice even and my poker face on I say, “I don’t speak for the council or even speak directly for my coven. But Sophie, I will relay your message, and if I have any say on the outcome at all, my preference is to help you.”

Ms. Leblanc rises and straightens her pants. I do the same, adjusting the strap of my bag, careful of my precious cargo. “That’s all I ask. Here’s my card,” she fishes out a piece of cardboard that labels her as a higher-up in a research lab. “Call me with your decision, please.” I tuck the card into my wallet and nod. “Take care, Wren,” she says casually, before striding past Becky and out the door, her hair gleaming in the sunlight.

Stepping out of the restaurant, I head home, unsure what will happen for my coven, for vampire kind, for me... But I am thoroughly excited to find out.



THE END



Cold air wraps around the manor tonight. Another meeting, another death sentence for a young woman who deserves so much better than this. This is wrong. All wrong.

I can't do a damn thing to stop it.

Large oak doors open for me as I approach, nameless, faceless nobodies doing the grunt work of the council to keep intruders and undesirables out. But not me. No, they let me in without a second thought.

I am a General amongst vampires. I have status, and I have power. But not enough to save them. Not enough to keep *her*.

The marble floors beneath me allow the steps of my boots to echo in the foyer. My stride is long and my pace is fast as I cross to the hidden door at the end. An elevator disguised as the regular wall opens at my approach, and I nod to the camera in the upper left corner of the room.

Stepping in, nerves clench in my gut. The doors close, and the unmistakable sounds of machinery whir to life as the cab moves downwards.

I have never doubted before.

Not before this last week.

I have always been loyal.

So certain.

So sure.

With my jaw wired tight, the doors open as the elevator completes its descent. Around me is a well-built underground cavern. Strong columns offering support to the ceiling and torches mounted every few yards, looking like something out of a movie, and it makes me want to roll my eyes at the *obviousness* of it all.

I am late.

I almost didn't come at all.

I almost took her and ran.

But I can't do that.

Not yet.

Setting down a path lit well enough for anyone to see, I approach a chamber where voices drone back and forth without ever saying anything of substance. The council loves to think of themselves as essential when only a few hold actual power. I step into the room, slightly bowing to the nine men

around the table. One seat is still open. At least I'm not the only one late.

Spotting my friend Hiram in the corner, I join him by our leader's side. In this region, Isaac is the authority. Not based upon being his disciple, or even his creation, I know he is the most powerful vampire in the entire room. He is why I want to abandon my posting, lose my status, and disappear.

I need to be careful here tonight.

Isaac sits at the head of the table. The newest council member usually fills the empty seat to his right. I pay no attention to the mutterings of the other members. They aren't that important, not here anyway, not in my world. The only part they play here is that they are Isaac's puppets. They bend to his whims and desires and will destroy us before long.

The faint ding of the elevator lets me know that Rafael has finally decided to join us. His footsteps grow closer, and my back and neck muscles grow tighter with every step he takes. He is the youngest council member and loves revering Isaac's plans—the one who always finds a way to take the darkness our leader crafts and make it worse.

I despise him.

I loathe him.

I want to rip him limb from limb.

My nostrils flare as he takes his seat.

“Rafe,” Isaac begins. “What excellent timing. We were discussing current events.” Turning to me, he adds.

“Nathaniel, report.”

I step forward and face the table. No one spares me a glance. “There has been an uptick in demonic sightings. S.P.E.L.L. units are helpless, and I.M.P. is too caught up in bureaucracy and red tape to do anything. It is believed this is the reason for the continued reports of disappearing witches. A bit closer to home, Leland has been killed by his progeny, Emerson.” A few mutterings pass around the table.

That woke them up.

Leland should have been a council member, not Rafe.

He had just been far too noble to stoop this low.

“Oswald successfully dispatched with Emerson and is now leading the Callery area.” My report is concluded, but I know I am not done.

“What of your posting?”

The way Isaac’s quiet yet imposing tone washes over me feels like beetles crawling over my skin. I want to destroy everyone in this chamber and take myself with them.

“I have successfully entered the Seer’s dreams.” This is what they want to hear. They want to think I’m with them. “She will be mine shortly.”

A wicked smile is exchanged between Isaac and Rafe. I step back beside Hiram. I can never tell what he is thinking these days. Has his posting filled him with such distaste as mine does? I imagine it would. I can’t ask him about it, though. If he is on board with this and doesn’t share my misgivings, I

will be ended and unable to help them. They call my brother forward.

“She is ready,” he said, his voice robotic. “I’m arranging the pick up for the next new moon.” If Hiram holds any of the affection towards his Seer as I do mine, he hides it well. If he knows what we are doing is wrong, if he feels any discomfort, it is beyond my discernment.

Isaac is pleased. Hiram steps back to my side, and I think I can sense new tension. I can’t even risk a glance to see if his eyes betray any emotion. We have known each other for centuries. If anyone can tell if Hiram is hiding something, it is me. I like to believe my brother isn’t deplorable. I hope he isn’t.

Turning to Rafe, our leader passes one more evil grin between them. He rises and addresses the rest of the council. I have to work very hard, very deliberately, to keep my face composed. To give nothing to anyone. I am tense because I am always tense. I am tight because I am always tight. Nathaniel, the sword of Isaac, does not *relax*. It is not in my nature.

“The time has come for us to take our rightful place. Soon, we shall harness the power of a Seer for our kind, and not even I.M.P. will be able to stop us. We will no longer need to hide in the shadows. Any fool who sets their sights against us will be destroyed. A toast, I think, is in order.” A servant walks in with a tray of crystal glasses filled with blood and hands one to each of us.

“Ad immortalitatem et potentiam.” To immortality and power. Isaac lifts his glass high in the air. A chorus rings out around the room as we each repeat the phrase together and drink.

Stomach in knots, I vow right then that I will take his power and I will end his immortality with it.

SPOTIFY PLAYLIST BREAKDOWN

BEHIND THE SONG CHOICE

Listen to the music that helped inspire the story:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6yaNPwQBkiq2vYxmKNwEA3?si=6a225e197be045fd>

1. Hard Feelings/Loveless - Lorde

This song is centered around the end of Wren and Spencer's relationship. She remembers the good times and wants to hold onto them, even as she feels their love slipping from her hands.



2. Mr. Sandman - SYML

Oz has been missing purpose in his life, and seeing Wren, feeling the mate bond, is everything he's ever wanted.

Even if he didn't know it yet.



3. Ghost - Natasha Blume

Wren's death was traumatic for her and Oz. As she disappears into "nothing," she feels like she has given up. Oz feels he failed to protect her and will do whatever he can to keep her. Even kill her.



4. You're Somebody Else - Flora Cash

Wren wakes up completely different, with no memory and an extra voice inside her head. She's not herself anymore, and this is the best way to describe how that would make anyone feel.



5. Kiss the Girl - Chase Holfelder

THE CAVE SCENE!!!

Oz hasn't been acting on this mate bond, and it's been driving everyone up the wall, especially Wren, who can tell that something exists between them and can't figure out why he keeps her at arm's length one moment, and the next seems entirely into her. Just kiss the fucking girl Oz!



6. Daylight - David Kushner

Oz has given in a little. This song reminds me that they are finally on the same page, recognizing that they're together, but the distance is still hard to handle.



7. Bring it Back - Splize, Notize

Wren is frustrated with the distance. Why can't they have more? Memory issues? Seriously Oz? Wren is a grown woman who knows what she wants (even if she can't remember what came before) and is not afraid to ask for it.



8. Dark Paradise (Parov Stelar Remix) - Lana Del Rey, Parov Stelar

Love never dies with Wren and Oz. It doesn't have to make sense to the outside world as long as it makes sense to them. This song embodies their angst for each other as they try to navigate Wren's blood lust.



9. Bad Moon Rising - Minotaur Jr., Alaska Reid, Jonny Gorgeous

Wren has had a bad outcome and fears becoming a murderer forever. Terrified to try again, she allows Charlee to take her

out somewhere, leading to the worst thing imaginable.



10. 4 UR ENTERTAINMENT - Chandler Leighton

Wren is frustrated with everything. Herself, Oz, and the supposed conspiracy to rip her from her human life. With memories flooding in, her emotions are out of control.



11. Far From Home (The Raven) - Sam Tinnesz

Seeking solitude to deal with her emotions, memories, and actions, Wren contemplates taking herself out of this world once and for all.



12. Gasoline - Halsey

With Wren is ready to meet her end, her pain is larger than anything she's ever felt, but Oz isn't willing to let her go quietly into the dawn and does everything he can to convince her that life is worth living.



13. Raise My Flag - Ill Factor, Graham Cochrane

Oz's song for the series. Everything he does is based (in part at least) on honor, including "lying" to the woman he loves about whether the sun can kill her or not.



14. After All - Culture Code, Araya, Runn

Wren has accepted that she isn't a monster because of a few mistakes, and finally seals the mate bond with Oz. Forging this bond makes their relationship stronger, and she shows him every dark corner of herself.



15. Lunatics and Slaves - Sin Shake Sin

I imagine this as the song on the dance floor as Wren stalks her prey for her next meal. Humans at the club are a little off balanced, and definitely there to serve the vampires, nothing more and nothing less.



16. In the Shadows - Amy Stroup

Wren takes Oz in the shadows for some fun. The darkness and primal vampire side still reside within her and while that terrifies Oz, it also entralls him to his mate even further.



17. Blood // Water (Acoustic) - Grandson

When Oz discovers Wren has been taken, and his whole world crashes apart.



18. Blood Like Lemonade - Morcheeba

Leland and Wren are hostages at Emerson's mercy. Problem is, he has none. Wren knows that this will bring Oz to fight this dangerous vampire, and she and her other self are determined to keep him safe, whatever it takes.



19. Holding Out for a Hero - Nothing But Thieves

Wren loses Leland before her eyes and just wishes she could get out of there. Hopes Oz finds out where she is, and soon.



20. Little Girl Gone - Chinchilla

Wren digs deep and finds her strength to save herself and the love of her life.



21. Control - Halsey

Now that the fight with Emerson is over doesn't mean things get easier. Wren still has another consciousness in her head that she needs to deal with, and they have all the power over her body.



22. As the World Caves In - Sarah Cothran

Sweet shower scene where Oz and Wren take care of each other



23. River - Bishop Briggs

The book goes out with a bang. Ok there's another chapter and an epilogue, but for the final spicy scene, this song gives the vibes.



24. My Love Will Never Die - AG, Claire Wyndham

Vampires can live forever, as long as they don't lose their heads. Oz and Wren's love will never die, as is the tag line for the book. This song helped inspire their love and I hope you enjoy it.





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<https://discord.gg/8eBWdHP45j>

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Check him out at [https://www.fiverr.com/nabinkarna/do-book-cover-design?
source=order_page_summary_gig_link_title&funnel=745cd28
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A HUGE shoutout to artist Gemma Macniven, be sure to
check out her work on

IG: <https://www.instagram.com/macniveng/>

or

<https://www.deviantart.com/gemmamacnivenart>

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shop.fourthwall.com/](https://ta-lumley-shop.fourthwall.com/)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

T.A. LUMLEY



T. A. Lumley is a vibrant and witty author hailing from Maryland, now settled in the heart of North Carolina. Living alongside her wife and an array of beloved pets, she finds inspiration in the everyday adventures that unfold within her unconventional family. With a penchant for reinvention, T. A. Lumley fearlessly embraces the ever-changing hues of her hair, reflecting the vibrant spirit that infuses her writing.

Adhering to her life mantra, “Better than it was!”, T. A. Lumley radiates positivity, always seeking the silver lining even when confronted with life’s unexpected challenges. Her unique perspective shines through her work, peppered with a delightful blend of sarcasm and dark humor—a coping mechanism honed through the rollercoaster of life.

When not immersed in her writing, T. A. Lumley indulges her passion for gaming, diving headfirst into worlds like *Dead By Daylight*, *The Sims*, and *Fortnite*. Drawing inspiration from her favorite genres, horror, suspense, and romance, she crafts narratives that send chills down readers' spines and thrill their hearts until the last page.

T. A. Lumley's stories are an invitation to explore the extraordinary within the ordinary, the beauty in life's quirks, and the resilience of the human spirit. With her razor-sharp wit and unyielding optimism, she invites readers to embark on a captivating journey through her imaginative worlds.