



EXILED HEIR

THE EMPTY THRONE TRILOGY

KAI BUTLER

EXILED HEIR

EMPTY THRONE TRILOGY

BOOK ONE

KAI BUTLER

Copyright © 2023 by Kai Butler

All rights reserved.

Cover by Sylvia Frost at Book Brander Boutique

Beta Reading by Amy Pittel

Copy Editing by Sandra and One Love Editing

Proofreading by Lori Beth Parks

Book Bible by Rachel Richardson

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Josh - you read this so many times, and helped me fix it. I can't thank you enough for being honest and telling me what wasn't working.

ALSO BY KAI BUTLER

The Empty Throne Trilogy

[Exiled Heir](#) (audio by [Greg Tremblay](#))

[Contested Crown](#)

[Ascendant King](#)

San Amaro Investigations

[Wormwood Summer](#) (audio by [Greg Tremblay](#))

[The Oak Wood Throne](#) (audio by [Greg Tremblay](#))

[A Gilded Iron Blade](#) (audio by [Greg Tremblay](#))

[A Shattered Silver Crown](#) (audio by [Greg Tremblay](#))

[The Heart's Blood Arrow](#) (audio by [Greg Tremblay](#))

[Saffron Wilds](#) (audio by [Greg Tremblay](#))

[Cypress Ashes](#) (audio by [Greg Tremblay](#))

Imperial Space Regency Novels

[The Earl and the Executive](#)

[The Barony Bet](#)

[The Inconvenient Count](#)

[Join my mailing list](#) for exclusive content, updates, and freebies.

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Also by Kai Butler](#)

CHAPTER
ONE

The second time they came for me, I was ready.

I lay halfway between the door and the heavy bracket attaching my chains to the wall. Luckily, when they'd built their makeshift torture chamber, neither of them had used a stud finder because despite its heft, I'd been able to wrench it nearly free from the wall. As long as I was far enough away from it, they wouldn't look too close and wonder if it was supposed to be bent at that angle before I had my hands around their throats.

When the metal door creaked open, I'd been waiting on the floor for long enough that the cold concrete had leached the warmth from my skin, leaving me feeling numb and slow. I'd have to hope that I was fast enough, even when my muscles were cramping from the chill. Whatever they'd drugged me with left me with an itch burning under my skin, like I was halfway through a shift and someone had poured cayenne pepper on my raw flesh.

With my eyes closed, playing dead, my nose and ears told me where they were.

Tweedledee—not his real name, but I didn't really care what his real name was when he had me chained in the back room of a bar—smelled like he hadn't finished shaking himself off before tucking himself back into his pants. Urine and cheap alcohol were an unpleasant cologne. Apparently, he was all too eager to spend the money the bounty on my head would net him.

Tweedledum smelled like cigarettes but not much else. Of the two, he was the smarter one.

“See?” Tweedledee slurred. “He’s still out cold.”

“I leave for an *hour*, and you go to get yourself a drink?” Tweedledum’s voice rose. He sniffed, but he didn’t have a wolf’s nose. “Are you high?”

“No.” Tweedledee shifted uncomfortably, and I heard footsteps as Tweedledum approached his accomplice. I almost felt for Tweedledee. He had the teeth of an addict. I had noticed that when I had sat down at the bar, but right now, the only thing he was under the influence of was the cheapest beer on tap.

“You *are*. I can’t believe you got drunk and high when we have—”

I cracked my eyes open, took a wild guess that they were close enough, and launched myself at them.

At first, everything went according to plan. My speed and momentum made the chain scream, and the bracket attaching it to the wall began to give. My fingers were almost touching them, their eyes wide, one pair bloodshot, one pair shocked.

But my wolf wouldn’t come.

My wolf wouldn’t come. The itch under my skin *burned*, but still, I couldn’t *shift*.

Somehow, I was stuck in my human form, no wolf fur, no claws, no supernatural strength. My terror kicked my heart into high gear, the moment of hesitation just long enough to be a mistake.

Tweedledum raised a gun and fired.

An electrical current that could take down a grizzly bear shot through me. It wasn’t a gun; it was a Taser with all the safety settings taken off.

I fell to the floor, convulsing. Every muscle tightened, and I was pretty sure I cracked a molar my jaw seized so tight.

“Oh my god, Jed, you’re killing him.” But Tweedledee didn’t sound horrified. He sounded amazed. I felt all my sympathy for him evaporate when I realized he wanted in on the murder-the-werewolf action.

With one last burst of electricity, the wires released, and I lay on the ground, too dazed to do more than stare up, blankly, at the white ceiling above. It was stained from smoke and water damage, and there were droplets of blood that hadn’t been cleaned off it.

Electricity buzzed through me, my heartbeat loud in my ears and the smell of my burned flesh curling into my nostrils. I didn’t need to see it to know that the metal probes had seared my flesh where they’d hit. Add a side of potatoes and I’d do a good impression of a rib eye steak left too long on the grill.

“Get the chains,” Tweedledum said. “He’s going to be here in half an hour.”

“He’s going to *what*? He’s coming all the way from Los Santos?” Tweedledee’s voice went high. “Oh my god. Oh my *god*, Jed.”

“Get. The. Chains.” Tweedledum shook his head. Then I saw him approach me, standing over my face. He drew another weapon out of his jean jacket.

This one was most definitely a gun. He waved it in front of my face, then pointed it straight at my brain. “Silver. We know exactly what you are, and we *are* prepared to handle you.”

I stared at him for a long moment, my eyes tracing the harsh lines of the gun, the promise of it. This was not a weapon that was made for showing off in front of your friends. It was something straight out of a military campaign.

Despite the danger, I almost wanted to laugh. I could not believe I had been captured by two werewolf hunters who were such complete idiots.

“Silver?” I slurred.

The fact that I couldn’t use some of my face muscles meant that the word came out more frightened than I intended it to.

“Yeah. We have a guy in the valley that does them cheap. He says it doesn’t even need to be pure silver. Just plated would be enough. And let me tell you. We have enough to kill you and the rest of your pack dead.” Tweedledum’s eyes went bright.

Before I had to think of an answer to that nonsense—the urban legend that only silver would kill a werewolf, the fact that he threatened to kill a pack that hadn’t existed for eleven years, the fact that someone in the Central Valley was charging werewolf hunters top dollar for the ammunition equivalent of snake oil—Tweedledee was back, and he rolled me over onto my stomach.

He was strong, surprising given his girth. For a moment, I fought, limply struggling, trying to stay on my back. It was useless. He pulled back his hand and clocked me across the face with his sledgehammer of a fist.

My vision went fuzzy, fading in and out, my body trying to heal the head wound and my nervous system trying to recover from electrocution. Tweedledee yanked my hands back and slid a couple of thick cuffs over my wrists, locking them closed and then attaching them to a new chain that he attached to a bracket in the floor.

The chains jangled as he tested their strength. He pulled up on the cuffs, wrenching my shoulders. One more injury to add to the rest of the physical trauma.

So much for the quiet beer I’d wanted. Drugged, kidnapped, and about to be handed over to Declan in exchange for whatever the current bounty was. I should have *known* better than to stop in Pineridge Springs.

“Roll him onto his side. If he vomits, I don’t want him to die.” Tweedledum sounded more confident now that I was chained tightly.

The two of them rolled me to my side. I wasn’t sure why they thought Declan would care if I was alive or dead. The whole point of selling me to Declan was that he was going to cut off my head and mount it to his “Men Who Tried To Screw Me” wall.

I convulsed, my body twitching, but I could finally move my fingers again, curling and uncurling them. My major muscles were still useless, but maybe when they transported me to the van or truck they were going to use, I could get free.

Tweedledum swore, looking at his phone. “He’s here.”

His gaze swung around the room. It was empty. I wondered what he expected to see in a back room of the bar I had stupidly decided looked good for a drink.

There was bad luck, and there was dumb luck. Walking straight into Tweedledee and Tweedledum had been the perfect mix of the two.

“We need a chair, right?” Tweedledum turned to Tweedledee, for the first time seeming to want his opinion. “Go get a chair.”

“Like one of the bar chairs?” Tweedledee asked.

“Like... I don’t know.” Tweedledum ran a frustrated hand through his hair. “Like a folding chair?”

Tweedledee shrugged. “Do they even have those? Did you bring one in the car?”

Huffing out sharply, Tweedledum threw up his hands. “Okay. Yeah, a bar chair.”

Tweedledee lumbered out, looking markedly more sober.

“You two are trying to get on Declan’s good side?” Drool dripped from the corner of my lips. “Here’s a hint—Declan doesn’t have a good side. He has *his* side and the side you’re on when he wants you dead.”

“Hey.” Tweedledum approached again, waving his gun in my face. “Declan is good people. He’s given us work before.”

“Just wait until you make a mistake. Declan is only good people until you try to think for yourself.” I managed to shake the chains attached to my wrists. “Trust me, I’m the one he put a hit on. How did you even recognize me, anyway?”

“There’s a text tree. The picture was pretty good.” Tweedledum brought the gun closer to his face, and for a

moment, I was pretty sure I was about to see someone accidentally shoot themselves in the face by trying to look cool scratching their hairline with a semiautomatic weapon.

Then, he pointed the gun down and brought his thumb to his lips, chewing on his nail. I couldn't believe I had been finally caught because Declan was someone who texted all the desperate wannabes when he had a bounty out on someone.

"You know—" I wasn't even sure what I was going to say. I had no money to buy them out. I had no leverage if they were scared of Declan because if he found out that they had me and let me go, it would be them in his next text message.

The door burst open, Tweedledee hefting a heavy wooden chair, panting, his eyes wide.

"He's here. He's..." Tweedledee tripped forward, stumbling and sending the chair flying to a corner of the room. He got back to his feet and stumbled over to the chair, setting it between me and the door. "He's inside. Should we offer him an hors d'oeuvre?"

"A *what*?" Tweedledum said.

"An appetizer? Like at TGI Fridays?" Tweedledee twisted his hands together. "Their potato skins here are pretty good."

"Declan Monroe doesn't want *potato skins*." Tweedledum threw up his hands.

"He likes onion rings," I advised. "Extra crispy."

"We can get him onion rings." Tweedledee nodded. "If we try to talk to him, like, make it clear that we're businessmen, maybe he'll up the reward."

"Yeah," I said. "That's exactly what Declan loves. When someone *doesn't* give him what he wants."

"No, you're right," Tweedledum said. "Maybe if we talk to him and he knows how much work we put in, he'll realize that we deserve more than ten thousand. And *then* we say, 'Oh, we couldn't possibly take that much.' So he'll think of us for another job."

“Yeah, I mean, underselling yourself is always a sound business strategy.” I tried moving my arms, but whatever Tweedledee had done to my shoulder wasn’t good, and the bone ground against the socket when I tried to move it. I exhaled sharply through my nose, the pain making my vision go wobbly.

“I’ll go get onion rings,” Tweedledee said decisively.

“And I’ll go talk to him. Explain how we caught him.” Tweedledum nodded, giving one last look at me before he left. “Don’t try anything. We caught you fair and square, and now Declan’s here.”

“As long as it was fair and square,” I said to his back. The door clanged shut, and I gritted my eyes closed, trying to force my shift.

I could feel the primal power under my skin, the fur and fangs, but it just wouldn’t come. Panting, I pressed my cheek into the concrete. Turning my head, I looked at the door.

I’d have one chance to convince Declan that he shouldn’t kill me.

“I’m sorry,” I said. No, wrong. Declan didn’t do apologies. *I’m sorry* was just what someone said before they got thrown in Los Santos Bay.

“I know I made a mistake, but I can make it up to you. I’ll do the job right this time.” That one wouldn’t work because it was a lie. “Declan, I’ve worked with you for eleven years. You know me. You don’t want to kill me.”

“Do you think that’s going to work?” someone asked. “I’ve met him, and Declan isn’t a man who changes his mind once he decides to kill you.”

I wrenched my shoulder trying to turn, the pain lancing up from my biceps to my neck, leaving me gasping against the concrete. There was someone to my left. Who was to my left?

There was *one* door in the Tweedles’ murder room, and I was staring at it. Slowly, I pushed up a bit and turned my head to stare at a white wall. Shelving had stained the wall at some

point, making the paint fade unevenly, but there was no one there.

Okay. I was adding hallucinations to the drug's side effects. Either that or the electrocution had fried my brain. Combined with the head injury Tweedledee had provided and I was well into head wound hat trick territory.

I wet my lips and tried to turn back to the door. "Declan, give me another chance."

That one might work.

"That definitely won't work." This time, the voice was closer, and I closed my eyes, turning my head again.

The stained white began to shift, moving into intricate patterns. It consumed the wall, growing darker and darker until the lines looked like a complicated tattoo, each black streak precise.

It took me a moment to realize what the shadow was and what it meant. Then I started to chuckle. I was looking at the person who was going to kill me.

CHAPTER
TWO

“Do you have a better suggestion?” I asked. “Because if you have a way to keep my head off Declan’s wall, I’m all ears.”

A form stepped through the waving black lines, but the moving tattoos weren’t real; they were just an extension of his magic. It obscured his face, his hair, anything about him that would have made it easy for me to pick him out of a lineup.

As soon as I saw it was a mage, I knew I was a dead man, but based on the amount of power on display, at least my death was going to be quick. Or long, depending on who was paying the mage.

I chuckled again. Then, risking it, I asked, “Fast or slow?”

The magic shimmered, melting off the mage like water sluicing off a car windshield.

Before, I couldn’t have described his hair color, whether he had brown or blue eyes, even his height. Now, down on the floor, wrenching my neck to look at him, I saw sharp cheekbones and hair so blond it was nearly white. His blue eyes were as cold as the glaciers and just as liable to give me frostbite if I stared at them too long.

He wore a suit jacket and the high-necked shirt preferred by mages. Underneath the sleek black jacket, he wore dark, slender jeans and riding boots.

Tilting his head, he examined me. I wasn’t sure what he was looking for. If he was here, I was dead. Because I recognized him. This wasn’t just *some mage*.

This was Cade Bartlett, mage prince of House Bartlett, heir to the most powerful throne in North America. The only person in the country who wanted me dead more than Declan Monroe was this man.

He didn't speak, approaching slowly. His heels made a clicking sound against the concrete as he walked forward.

When he got to me, his boots were close enough to my face that I wasn't sure if he expected me to kiss them. I reared back, the movement proving I had more control of my muscles. Twisting, I tried to turn over, but he was faster.

Before I could regain my feet and maybe give myself a chance, his foot was on my face, grinding down.

I panted, trying to kick out, trying to struggle, but he pressed down harder. If he wanted to, he could probably press hard enough to shatter my skull, to leave nothing but pulp behind.

"We have a very limited time to have this conversation, even with my magic giving us some leeway. Let's skip the escape attempt. There's no way out of this room. Do you understand?"

He emphasized the question by leaning on his foot, his hard heel digging into my jaw.

I managed to make a sound that approximated a yes. With one last press, he backed off, removing his foot but not moving any further away.

I tried tilting my head, but it was impossible for me to see more than his long boots and pants. My head wouldn't turn far enough for me to see his face.

"If you're going to kill me, just get it over with. Whatever they gave me is wearing off, and I prefer to be drugged while I'm dying," I said.

"I'm not planning on killing you."

I waited, unwilling to give him the satisfaction of asking about his plans again. When the silence grew too heavy, I risked flopping over on my back so that I could at least see his

expression. It pulled at my shoulders, and my weight crushed my hands underneath me.

Cade was haloed by the light, his brows drawn together, a twist of black tattoo disappearing under his shirt collar.

“Do you know who I am?” he asked. I nodded, and his nostrils flared. “Good. That will make things simpler. I heard one of Declan’s lieutenants went rogue. Since you’re tied up in the back room of a *truly* tawdry bar, I’m going to assume that’s you. What’s your name?”

Cade’s question caught me off guard. I searched his face for signs of deception. He *had* to know my name. Wasn’t that why he was here?

Snorting, he shook his head at my hesitance. “Your name.”

“Miles,” I said, drawing the word out.

“Family name? Pack name?” he pressed.

I shook my head. I had neither anymore.

“Good. That will make things easier. I want to hire you, Miles. I suggest you take my offer since we’ve established that Declan is here, wants you dead, and will be considerably angrier after those buffoons try to charm him with *onion rings* and *bravado*.” There was no animosity on Cade’s face, no hate, no rage. Just a bored annoyance as I failed to respond.

My stomach dropped out. Cade Bartlett had no idea who I was.

Cade Bartlett continued to stare at me, and I felt my heart beating fast in my chest, faster than when I had been hit with enough electricity to kill a bull. My next words had to be chosen very, very carefully.

“Can I sit up?” I waited for Cade to nod, then struggled into a sitting position. With my arms behind my back, it was awkward, and I adjusted, trying to get more comfortable.

Cade exhaled sharply through his nose, then closed his eyes. When he reopened them, entire universes were contained in them. My jaw dropped open, and he reached out.

Even though I knew it would make him suspicious, I almost fell backward again, trying to get away from his reach. Tattoos moved along his neck and then disappeared under his shirt. They trailed across his wrist, down his fingers, then lanced out, hitting me on the shoulder.

I felt it like a millipede crawling across my flesh, moving so fast that I couldn't do more than turn my head, and it was on the other side of my body, crawling down my back and leaping to my bound wrists.

The shackles melted.

It should have burned. It should have hurt me. Instead, it felt as though Cade had poured warm water over my abused flesh. When I couldn't feel any hint of warmth, I pulled my hands out from behind my back, examining them.

I didn't know how much magic it took to melt solid steel, but Cade didn't even look breathless. His eyes glanced over me, lip pulled back, revealing a hint of perfect white teeth.

"Are you ready to talk?" Cade asked.

"You aren't scared of me?" I asked.

Both of Cade's eyebrows went up. He huffed something that resembled a laugh. Tilting his head, he asked, "Do you think there's anything *you* could do to *me*?"

Angrily, I stood up, forgetting that in front of this man, I should be as nonthreatening as possible. Nothing to see here, no reason to dig deeper and find out that I *did* have a last name and a pack name.

I was no lone wolf. My family name, my pack name, would get me murdered. The magic that had melted steel could just as easily dissolve my throat.

I took a few steps forward so that we stood less than a foot apart. With my shoulders thrown back, I knew what I looked like. Broad, muscled, dangerous. My dark hair got in my face, and I tossed it back.

Cade looked up at me, his expression bored. He was shorter than me, standing only to my shoulder. The sharp

angles of his face and body, which had seemed so threatening when he entered the room, now made him look delicate, as though he was the china and I was the bull inside the shop.

He lifted a hand, and I thought maybe he was going to reach out to touch my chest. Unexpected, the magic hit me in full force. It dragged me across the room, my heels trying to dig in, trying to keep me on my feet, but I only stopped when magic slammed me into the far wall, my arms spread wide.

I looked over and saw my arms covered in dark, writhing lines of tattoo. Yanking, I tried to pull free, but I didn't even get a millimeter off the concrete. The bindings tightened, wrapping around me like a snake about to crush her prey. Soon, I would have no bones left at all.

Cade stood on the other side of the room, his head tilted, examining me. My harsh panting filled the air between us. I forced my face into a mirror of Cade's blankness.

Sure, he was in the process of painfully deboning my arms, but I didn't let my expression show any of the agony. Maybe it did hurt worse than the time I took three bullets to my stomach and spent a week in Salinas laid up in bed after digging them out myself with a pair of eyebrow tweezers. Maybe it did remind me the only reason he took off my chains was because he didn't need them to control me. But I didn't let my expression show anything other than boredom.

Cade walked across the room, his heels clicking. I tried to get my feet under me, to push myself up, but the magic held firm, my legs splayed out in front of me. The position made it awkward to breathe, my lungs not quite able to fully expand and my vision fading to dark around the edges.

"You're strong. I need strong. Let's try this one last time. Are you ready to talk? The clock is ticking here, and by my estimate, those fools are likely burning through whatever grace Declan is willing to give little men with big ambitions." Cade's words were chilly but precise, the clipped wings of a caged bird.

"Yeah, we can talk." As soon as I said the words, Cade snapped his fingers, and the magic melted off me, leaping onto

his hand and disappearing under his shirt cuff.

I slumped against the wall, my legs giving out. As I slid down to sitting, I focused on breathing, on checking to make sure that none of the bones in my arms were broken.

Cade spoke, each word distinct. “I need a consort. If you agree to this, you will leave here alive. If you don’t agree, Declan is right outside. I’m sure he had other plans for you.”

The thing about someone having a wall of heads was that once you saw it, you couldn’t *unsee* it. Declan could kill me, stuff me, and mount me on his wall, and no one except the dry cleaners that still had my Sunday best suit would even notice I was gone.

“You need a consort?” I felt my chuckle build and then get crushed under my anger. I knew the real word, even if the rest of the world seemed content to forget how barbaric the practice was. “You need a *slave*.”

A consort was the fancy term that mages had come up with when actual *slavery* became illegal during the civil war. All of it was as mysterious as anything else related to magecraft, but werewolves talked in whispers and passed the knowledge between each other. Consorts stayed with their mages for their entire lives, bound to serve them by the dark magic that mages wielded.

They didn’t have jobs or lives outside their mage. They were forbidden from having packs. And worst of all, every shifter who’d ever met a consort knew that they were forced to have sex with their masters.

“A consort is not a slave,” Cade said. “And I need...”

He crossed his arms over his chest, observing me. The cuff of his shirt rode up, exposing a wrist covered in complex tattoos.

“I need someone to *pose* as my consort. If you are able to convince my house you are mine, that we have been joined, then after I ascend, I will pay you five hundred thousand dollars so I never have to see your face again.” Cade’s words were thoughtful, each chosen distinctly. He was being

dangerously honest because who was I going to blab to? The other heads on Declan's wall?

"I just need to pretend to be your consort until you ascend the throne and become head of your house?" I watched his face, trying to see any hint of his plan. "And you'll pay me money."

"Enough money to stay off Declan's radar for the rest of your life." Cade's shoulders stayed steady, neither tightening nor relaxing. He didn't offer any more clues, any explanation. Clearly, I was either supposed to take the deal, or he was supposed to walk out and leave me to some well-placed knife wounds.

"How long until you ascend?"

"I'm not sure. The date hasn't been set yet. But if you perform well, if you convince the rest of the house, then likely it would be before the end of the year," Cade said.

"Eight months from now? You expect us to hold this up for eight months?" I wanted to laugh, but I felt only dread.

"Yes. If not longer." There was a slight tug on the corner of Cade's lips, as though eight months with someone pretending to be his slave, pretending to lick his boots and grovel at his feet, was unappealing.

"You're crazy," I said.

I had to turn him down. Eight months was too long. In eight months, it would be impossible for him not to find out who I was. And then, I wouldn't be chained in some back room. I would be in the heart of his court, in the heart of House Bartlett. They would murder me and then bury me so far in their vast forest that no one would ever find my body.

Not that there was anyone left to look for me. Even Miri...

"You refuse." There should have been a question mark on the end of the sentence, but Cade's disapproval made it into a flat statement.

"I..." The words refused to come because even as I saw him uncross his arms, a strand of black tattoo magic pooling in

his palm, ready for use, I had one clear thought.

If I went with him, could I find out what happened to my parents?

I pushed away that thought violently. No, the more pressing issue was, once he left, Declan was going to walk through that door. Declan didn't want me to pretend to be his consort. Declan wanted to use my eyeballs as a garnish in an expensive cocktail. He wanted to slit my throat and watch me die in front of an audience of every single other person on his payroll that had ever thought the words "double cross" in the same *zip code* as him.

"Yeah. Let's do it." The words were lead, falling from my lips and landing between us. I had spent eleven years doing whatever was asked of me for money. Why should I get squeamish because my client had shifted from Declan Monroe to Cade Bartlett? "You want me to be your little legal slave? You think anyone will fall for it, sure. I mean, it's not like I have any other options."

Cade frowned, his brows drawn together. "If you run, or if you perform poorly, our contract will be void. I will happily hand you over to Declan myself."

I gestured around to the murder room. "I think my life is pretty forfeit as it is."

There were too many bad decisions. Even if I tried to attack him now, tried to escape with my hands free, I wouldn't manage it. Not with Declan and his men right there in the barroom.

At least if I went with Cade, I would be alive. Maybe, if I played my cards right, sometime during those eight months, he would let down his guard, and then I could slip away with enough House Bartlett money to disappear.

I had spent eleven years running from him, from House Bartlett. If I survived, I would spend the rest of my life making sure they never found me again.

Cade narrowed his eyes, sweeping them over me as he considered his next words.

“Well? Are you taking me, or did you just want me to convince the ants in the walls I’m your consort?” I asked. I didn’t push myself up, remembering the tight pressure of his magic on my arms. Maybe if I wasn’t still half-drugged, muscles still jumping from electrocution, I would have a chance. Right now, though, I knew attacking him was a long jump off a short rope.

The handle of the door began to turn, and Cade glanced at it. Then, with a sweep of his hands, we were gone.

CHAPTER
THREE

I felt as though my skin was being peeled off, one millimeter at a time. I thought that I was in pain after the kidnapping and mild torture, but *this* was pain.

When we arrived, I was on my knees, unsure how much time had passed. Pain made time dilate, each second becoming an hour, so for all I knew, we had arrived years later.

But as I grounded myself, feeling the discomfort of the parking lot gravel under my knees and the same honky-tonk cowboy song being blasted through cheap speakers, I realized we were just outside the bar, only half a second after we had left.

“Let’s go,” Cade said.

He was covered in the twisting tattoo lines again, obscuring every feature, making it impossible to get a handle on what his expression was saying. I tried to breathe, but it felt like inhaling glass, and when I looked down, I saw tattoos on my own skin.

The front door to the bar opened, throwing a wide slice of light into the parking lot. Someone came out, backlit by the bright bar behind him, and I didn’t need to see his face to know exactly who it was.

JD Davidson had been gunning for a position as Declan’s second-in-command. With the vacancy I had helpfully provided, it looked like he had gotten a promotion.

Scrambling up to my feet, I followed behind Cade as he walked to a far corner of the parking lot, where an abandoned

car was parked, tires gone flat, grass growing up into the wheel well.

I kept glancing over my shoulder, waiting for JD to see us. Even with Cade's magic obscuring his features, it would be clear that there were two people walking away. JD might be greedy, but no one that high up in Declan's organization was dumb.

He frowned, squinting at us. "Hey."

Then he was halfway across the parking lot, sliding over the hood of a car like he was in an action movie, and I just *moved*.

He'd already half shifted, and if he became fully wolf, I wouldn't have a chance. I brought my fist up, my knuckles hitting the side of his head hard. There was a crack, but he just shook his head sharply. His shift made him larger, broad across the chest and furred all over. The legs were usually the last thing to go, cracking and twisting as he went from a bipedal human to a wolf who ran on four legs.

I brought my foot up and kicked at his knee, but he twisted his head, grabbing hold of my leg with his mouth, his teeth tearing the fabric of my jeans.

This wasn't the first time I'd fought a shifted wolf, but usually, I could shift. Something was keeping me from my wolf form. The drugs, the head wound, I wasn't sure, but I needed to act quickly before he got his bearings. This time, I had control of the panic. The fear that I was fighting without my most reliable weapon: my wolf.

Bringing my foot down, I swung my other leg, kneeing him in the head with a satisfying crack.

JD's wolf wasn't particularly big, but it was fast. He turned and leapt forward. He was going to bear me down, and I would probably get hurt just trying to get out from under him.

I knew from experience the best time to fight a shifting wolf was during their shift. It felt wrong and rotten, like cracking open an egg and pulling out the half-formed chick inside. But I had eleven years to tell me that the only chance I

was going to get against JD was right now, while his body was busy changing and his mind was being ripped apart by two opposing forces.

I brought my leg back and kicked hard, slamming him into the car next to us. It was older, and no alarm went off, which was a relief. The last thing I needed was more of Declan's people spilling out into the parking lot to add more cow manure to this shit sandwich.

JD turned, his human eyes shifting into wolf gold. He leapt at me, not going as far as he would when he'd finished his shift. I knew I had seconds left.

I turned my body just enough that JD slid by me, landing on the hood of another car. Then I was on him, a full-body tackle that sent us tumbling away from each other on the gravel. We both leapt to our feet, and I grabbed at him.

My shoulder screamed, but I locked my arm around JD's neck. He'd completed shifting in midair, meaning that I was now lying on top of a wolf as large as I was.

He arched back, turning his head and snapping, but I locked my elbow, pulling back until I felt him stagger.

Lurching, he tried to throw me off, but I held fast, tightening my legs around his rib cage and holding on like my life depended on it, because it did.

JD collapsed, breathing unsteadily. The carotid artery in wolves wasn't exactly the same as in humans, but if you kept your arm tight enough, it worked the same.

I loosened my body in increments. Every muscle hurt, whether from the fight with the Tweedles earlier, this new fight with JD, or any of the other injuries I had accumulated with four weeks on the run.

"Are you coming?" Cade's question was quiet, a breath of sound. It was only because of my enhanced hearing that I even heard it.

Cade opened the driver's door of the abandoned car. I spared one last look at JD. He was out cold.

As Cade got in, I walked up to the passenger side. The windows were too filthy for me to get a good look at myself. When I opened the door and threw myself into the passenger seat, it was a lot more luxurious than the exterior had implied.

Soft leather seats, glossy chrome accents, an enormous touchscreen in the center of the dashboard that came alive as Cade pressed a button, turning the car on.

“A disguise spell?” I glanced in the back seat, but the whole car was clean, as though it had just been detailed.

“A basic glamour.” Cade drove out of the parking lot slowly, his wheels grinding over the gravel. As he turned onto the main road, he pressed down on the accelerator, and we were flying.

“Well then, you need to start working for Hollywood. Why rent an expensive car when you can just glamour a Camry to look like one?”

“I’m sure the hours would be better than my current position,” Cade said. “Although you have to admit, it would be an extreme step down from *prince* to *prop master*.”

I swallowed. When I caught sight of my arm in the light of a passing streetlamp, I brought it up to my face. “What is this?”

“Magic,” Cade said shortly.

“Yeah, that’s pretty obvious. I’ve just never seen it up close before. Do I get to see behind the curtain, or does the great and powerful Wizard of Oz want to keep his toys secret?” I examined my arm, watching as the tattoos shifted and moved as though they were alive.

Cade glanced over at me, frowning, and then he snapped his fingers, and the magic crawled across my body, a millipede feeling of too many feet. The dark, twisting lines collected on my hand and leapt from my skin to his like an enormous, black static shock.

Of course. Mages were notoriously tight-lipped about their magic. If you had the power to raze a city to the ground, why would you tell people how you did it?

The hundred mage houses kept their people in line, as though breathing a word of how their magic worked would kill them. But even independent mages never explained magic, and those who talked to outsiders about it disappeared.

The internet was filled with conspiracy theories, and it was hard to pull real facts from what we did know: mage houses were powerful, wealthy, and secretive. Their kings ruled via wealth and influence, happy to let the rest of us pretend that Congress and the president had the real power of government.

“So it’s a secret,” I said, annoyed. On the other hand, I tried not to ask, what would happen if Cade did tell me? Would he have to kill me? “What about why you need a consort? Do I need to play twenty questions to figure out why you needed a werewolf so badly you decided pissing off *Declan Monroe* was the best way to do it?”

Cade’s features twitched, but he didn’t say anything else until we were several miles out of Pineridge Springs. When we hit the open highway, the ocean on one side, tall redwoods on the other, he said, “We’ll tell everyone that we met in Los Santos. At a bar named Syndrome. We’ve been seeing each other for three weeks. I suggested you become my consort. You agreed.”

“I agreed to become your slave after three weeks.” I raised my eyes to the roof of the car, taking a long breath. Even inside the expensive vehicle, I smelled the forest. The conifer trees, the damp earth called to me.

“A consort is not a slave.” Cade’s words were clipped, and he turned on his blinker, slamming his foot down on the accelerator to speed past an eighteen-wheeler.

“Really. Are you sure about that?” The clock on the dashboard said it was midnight, and I did the math in my head. I’d gotten to the bar around nine, and I was pretty sure they had drugged me a half hour after that.

Whatever they had given me, I could still feel it. My senses felt muted. The familiarity of them was gone. Usually, I could sense everything. Now, it felt like I was listening and seeing things through a thick layer of glass.

“If you have a problem with being a consort, you’re welcome to get out now.” Cade accelerated, speeding past a minivan before darting back into our lane.

“That’s not much of a choice,” I said.

“You’re going to have to make everyone believe it was your choice,” Cade said shortly.

“Maybe there’s an acting school on your way back to your estate. Pay some community theatre reject a hundred dollars to lick your boots.” I still remembered the feel of his foot on my face, the way he had nudged my jaw to make sure I was paying attention.

“A consort is *not* a slave.” Cade’s voice rose until it was nearly a shout. “They are a trusted companion. They’re the other half of yourself. They have rights to your money, status, and rank. They even have access to—”

He broke off before making a disgusted sound and pulling over on the side of the road. Dust swirled around the car, lit briefly by passing headlights, and Cade’s breath evened out.

I watched him suspiciously. There was something here I wasn’t understanding. There was some reason that he wanted *me* specifically to play this part. And it wasn’t some elaborate revenge on me. I could figure that out myself.

“If it’s so great, why don’t you get someone to do it for real? Why me?” The last part niggled at me, a loose tooth in the back of my mouth that my tongue wouldn’t stop probing.

“If you aren’t interested, I will.” Cade didn’t even look at me, pressing a button on the steering wheel that unlocked all the doors with a decisive click. “I’ll be happy to tell Declan exactly where I left you. Maybe he’s still at the bar. I’m sure he could be here in ten minutes.”

“I’m stepping into a situation I don’t like. I’m taking a job I don’t understand. That’s going to lead to mistakes. That’s going to lead to both of us getting exposed. I need you to tell me what’s really going on.” I dragged my hand through my hair. It was too long, but I wasn’t sure a haircut was in my future. “Why did you choose me?”

“Declan is known for his wolves. I need someone strong. Someone who looks the part of a consort.” Cade’s profile gave away nothing, all sharp edges and harsh lines, the blond of his hair brilliant white in the light from the dashboard instruments.

I knew immediately what he meant. Consorts were getting rarer these days, but there was still a *type*. Muscle-bound, tall, brutal, no matter their gender, they looked like they could take down a linebacker. There were rumors that when mages got into an argument with each other, their consorts would fight to the death over whatever the argument was.

Mages with consorts didn’t even bother with bodyguards; they didn’t need them. Why hire someone when a werewolf who looked like an MMA fighter had pledged their life to you?

“That’s it? You could have gone down to central casting if you needed someone to look the part,” I said.

Cade glanced at me, and both of our skin was dyed by the blue lighting of the car. His eyes traced over my face and down my body.

“Declan is involved in whatever is going on. I’m not sure what you did to him, but since he has a hit out on you, I thought we both had a mutual enemy.” Cade’s words were cold, and his glacier eyes cut to me, as though he could see straight into my heart.

I tensed—there were some thorns in this bouquet. With Declan on my tail, I couldn’t afford to get pricked. “Declan is involved in *what*?”

“Someone is trying to kill me, and I suspect they hired Declan. You’re strong. Declan doesn’t keep weak wolves on his payroll. I don’t need to worry about you taking care of yourself while I figure out who it is.” Cade seemed annoyed. “You’re getting paid money, and you get to keep your head. What more do you want?”

“I *want* more details. How are they trying to kill you? What methods? Did you catch them?” I began ticking off questions on my fingers. “How do you know Declan was

involved? When he wants someone dead, they're dead by the time he finishes his morning cup of coffee."

"Except for you, Miles with no last name," Cade said.

"Yeah, well, I'm a special case. I had a head start, and I know how he works. Even I couldn't make it any further than Pineridge before he caught me." I stared out at the trees, thinking about how a single stupid decision had the power to end the life I'd so carefully put together.

"Someone blew up my car a few weeks ago," Cade said.

"That's not Declan's MO," I said. "Too many people with badges get involved when a car explodes."

"—and two weeks ago, someone released poison in his private club while I was there." Cade continued as though I hadn't spoken. "Convenient that he drew me there and then didn't show up for our meeting."

I whistled. Yeah, that had to be him. No one messed with Declan's establishments without his permission. Clubs were where the money was, and if he was willing to poison one, to metaphorically burn it to the ground, someone had to be paying him a *lot* of money. As in, Declan now had *buy a small tropical island* amount of money in his pocket.

My mind raced with all the things Declan could do with that much change.

"You didn't catch anyone for either assassination attempt?" I asked.

"Not *yet*," Cade said.

"How did you survive?" I asked. "A car blowing up isn't usually something that you walk away from if you aren't in a high-budget action movie."

"With difficulty," Cade said. "I could feel that the magic around us suddenly disappeared. It allowed me to throw a ward around myself just barely in time to save my life."

"And the poisoning?" I pressed.

“I teleported myself out as soon as I sensed it in the air.” Cade swallowed. “Others were not as fast.”

“Someone’s gunning for you. This isn’t exactly going to be me sitting around looking pretty. You need someone who’s watching your back.” I took a guess based on what he’d said. “You need someone watching your back who isn’t in Declan’s pocket and who doesn’t belong to the person who hired Declan to kill you.” Chuckling, I shook my head. “So it’s not so much the enemy of my enemy; it’s that I was your only option because if I was good with Declan or the person paying him, you wouldn’t have had to rescue me from a murder room in the back of a dive bar. I’m the only wolf between here and Los Angeles you can trust.”

Cade swallowed, and I thought I saw a dark flicker around his high collar. On the steering wheel, his fingers tightened and opened. When he spoke, he raised his chin, sniffing, ignoring what I’d just said about his real motives. “Yes. I need someone who can help me. You can either do that, or you can get out here. I’m sure running from Declan with no money and no transportation is so much better than the job I’m offering you.”

I turned and looked out the window. We were in a patch of forest between towns. Pineridge Springs was outside of Los Santos, and until we reached the turnoff for Clear Lake, it was just one small town after the other.

I could probably make it. Even if Cade called Declan Monroe and let him know exactly where he had left me, I could make it into the forest.

Sure, I didn’t have food or water, and I was running on no sleep. My head still throbbed from the fight and being coldcocked, but maybe I could make it work.

Experimentally, I flexed my fingers, trying to get the fur and claws I felt under the surface to spring to life.

Beside me, Cade tensed. Magic swirled, lines of darkness in the air that coalesced into something I knew could kill me.

The shift wouldn't come. The wolf wouldn't come. My stomach clenched.

How far could I make it on foot? How far could I make it without the ability to shift, the thing that had defined my entire life up until now?

My options were to go out into the wilderness as a human or go with him. I got food and someplace to sleep. I had enough time to rest up, to heal from whatever had been in that drug that made it impossible for me to pull the wolf to the surface.

House Bartlett's compound was even further from Los Santos. It was even further in the woods. I could probably reach the Sierra Nevada mountains from there.

"We met three weeks ago. Are we screwing each other?" I asked. For eleven years, I'd been a paid gun for hire. What was so different about doing it for a mage instead of Declan? Both were paying me money. As long as I had that, I was good.

The buzz of magic beside me faded, and when I looked over, I saw the barest hint of a dark line crawl from Cade's neck under the collar of his shirt.

He put the car in drive, the wheels spinning on the dirt of the shoulder for a moment before catching and jerking back onto the road.

"Yes. Part of being a consort is the... intimacy of the act."

I stared at the side of his face, watching his expression, illuminated by passing headlights. "There has to be a hundred werewolves out there who would happily be your 'consort' for real. Strong ones who can survive assassination attempts and watch your back."

"Having a wolf is a status symbol. It has been made clear to me that there will be no coronation until I have a consort." Cade's eyes flicked to me, but then they moved away so quickly that I couldn't read his expression.

"That doesn't answer any of my questions. Go to a club for real. There are matchmaking services that would happily hook

you up with some brain-dead wolf who will give you their freedom in exchange for all that money and status.” Clenching my fists, I tried to pull at the change again, but it was missing, a puzzle piece in the center of my chest that had been removed. Until I found it under the couch, I wouldn’t be whole.

“I need someone strong enough on their own that we won’t actually have to join.” Cade’s words were stiff, unbearably formal.

“You don’t want to have to have sex?” I snorted. “You’re hiring me because you don’t want to have to lie back and think of England?”

“My reasons are my own.” Pointedly, Cade unlocked the door again. Even though my healing abilities didn’t seem to be affected by whatever drug they had given me, I still wasn’t eager to leap out of a car driving fast enough to place in the Indy 500.

“Okay, okay. We’re going to at least need to know some details about each other if we’re going to pretend that we’ve been ‘joining.’” I leaned back in my seat, shrugging. “What do I call you? Cade? Prince Bartlett?”

“I...” Cade went silent, and I watched his Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed. Finally, he said, “Cade.”

“Do you go to clubs a lot? What were we doing when we were seeing each other for three weeks?” When he didn’t answer, I said, “Unless we spent the whole three weeks in bed?”

“No. Of course not. Museums. Restaurants. That sort of thing.”

“That sort of thing. Of course.” My brows drew together. I tried to remember the last museum I had gone to and came up with the seventh-grade field trip to the local agricultural museum. They had let us sit in the driver’s seat of a massive tractor. I still remembered staring out over the parking lot, my hands on the wheel, the other kids whining in line behind me.

“Why? How should we have dated?” Cade asked sharply. “Did we meet up at bars like the one I dragged you out of?”

“No, no, of course not. That would injure your precious sensibilities. You’d be too afraid of getting tetanus in the bathroom.” I tapped my chin, pretending to think on it. “I bet we went to cockfights and cage matches.”

“Not wolf fights?” Cade’s lip lifted in a sneer. “I hear Rage allows opponents to rip off each other’s body parts.”

I went stiff, all traces of teasing gone when I asked, “What else do I need to know?”

“Nothing.” Cade glanced at me, a slight frown between his brows, but he didn’t apologize.

I narrowed my eyes, staring out at the world around us. We were passing through another small town, the bright gas station sign lighting the sky in primary colors.

Only a few more miles until the turnoff, and after that, the chance to get off this ride was gone.

“Five hundred thousand dollars.” I drummed my fingers on my leg. “That’s a lot of money, even if it gets you the crown you want.”

The interchange was coming up, the signs for it indicating the lanes we had to be in to get on the 175. Cade signaled, merging to the right.

We didn’t speak for the next half hour. I was trying to wait him out, and he had no problem driving in silence, without even the radio to break the quiet.

It was only when we turned off the freeway, taking an exit that led to an unmarked road, that Cade spoke again.

“Here. You’ll need to put this on.”

Shifting his body, with only one hand on the wheel, he dug something out of his pocket and threw it at me. Automatically, I caught it before it hit my chest.

It was heavy in my hand, and I squinted down. A passing streetlight illuminated what it was: a collar.

CHAPTER
FOUR

I dropped the collar. It fell to my jeans and then slid down into the footwell.

Cade's eyes narrowed. "Put it on."

"I'm not putting that on," I said.

On the floor, it looked even more innocuous. A plain strap of leather, two inches wide, enough to cover a swath of my neck. There were no hook clips, nothing for a leash to attach to. It was simply a brown length with a silver buckle.

"We don't have time for this, Miles," Cade said. "We're almost at the estate."

"I'm not putting that on." I crossed my arms, tucking my hands into fists. If I could shift, I knew that I would already be covered in fur and growling.

I had done any number of unsavory things for money over the past eleven years. But that didn't mean that I had no limits.

"You have to. It's a symbol of our bond. It's—" He broke off, his eyes narrowing on the road, his lips pressed together tightly.

"It's *what*?" I pressed. "I've never understood why consorts are collared like dogs."

"Not like dogs," Cade corrected.

"*Exactly* like dogs," I said, picking it up and throwing it back at him. It hit the driver's-side window with a loud clatter. "I'm not doing it."

“It’s not a collar like that,” Cade protested. He picked it up, twisting it between his fingers before tucking it into his jacket pocket.

“Is there a different way to wear a collar? You aren’t here to tell me it’s a *fashion statement*.” I pulled my lips back from my teeth. “Are you seriously telling me that it could be anything other than a sign that you own me?”

Cade made another turn, and we started driving up. The path was twisted, and a bright light blinked into existence next to us. At first, I thought it must have been a motion-activated streetlamp, but then a series of them lit up the dark.

As we passed the first lights, tall redwood trees surrounded the car, so massive that even in daytime, the curved road must have been dark.

The glowing lights weren’t attached to anything.

They hovered in midair, suspended by magic. No wires, no light posts, nothing other than a light that pulsed like it was alive.

All I knew about mage lights was urban legend. Whispers here and there, each retelling casting the mages as more and more powerful until they were imagined as practically gods.

In elementary school, someone had said mage lights could see into your soul. They could tell if you meant a mage harm and would burn your heart out if you did.

As we passed another mage light, it glowed brighter, twinkling as brightly as a diamond in the sun.

In fact... I squinted through the windshield, leaning forward as far as I could with my seat belt. Yes, inside each light was a miniature star. If I looked at it too long, it burned my eyes.

The road we were on wound up the mountain, twisting like a snake. The only lights we saw were mage lights, twinkling brightly. Cade Bartlett had his own personal galaxy of stars leading straight to his house.

“We’ll tell everyone that I haven’t taken you fully as my consort. You’ll prove to me that you can fulfill the role before we join,” Cade said finally. “In the old days, a prince would have to display his consort to the council before taking them.”

“Like a prize bull,” I said. “This is sounding less appealing by the minute. Maybe I will get out.”

“It is the best I can offer,” Cade said. His voice was loud in the quiet car. He took another turn too fast, and I slammed into the passenger door.

“You know I betrayed the last guy who signed my paychecks.” I narrowed my eyes, watching his face. “I’m not the most reliable wolf out there.”

His cheek twitched. “Are you planning on betraying me, Miles? I might be your only chance at getting back at Declan.”

“This is more than Declan,” I said. “If it was just Declan, your whole house would be in Los Santos, wiping his organization off the map.”

Cade went tense, his eyes swinging to me and then away, staring out at the road, narrowed.

“It’s bigger than Declan. That person, the one who you think is pulling Declan’s strings? It’s someone in House Bartlett. You’re going to have to kill a member of your own family, and you think because I’m one of Declan’s wolves, I won’t have any problem with that.” The words felt sour in my mouth. The last time someone from my pack, someone from my *family*, walked into House Bartlett, they were doing it for all the right reasons. “You’re even right about that, *Prince Bartlett*.”

It didn’t matter. I was doing this for money. Money had never betrayed me. Sure, Declan had asked me to do all sorts of things for money, but in the end, money was safety.

“I’m paying you five hundred thousand dollars to help me and not get killed. After that, you can walk away.” Cade’s expression was so cold that I could practically see the ice clinging to his eyelashes. “You’re right. Declan was the gun

they used, but I think someone in my house pulled the trigger. Does that change anything?"

For a long moment, I debated. But the same reasons won out. I was hungry; Declan had run me into the ground. I had no money, no supplies, and I hadn't slept in almost two days. If I wanted to, I could escape once I was rested, once my belly was full, once I had stolen enough money from House Bartlett to make my own way.

Once I had figured out what happened to...

I shook my head. "You don't even want to know what I did to Declan?"

Cade looked at me again, and his icy blue eyes seemed to crack just enough that I felt like I was looking at a frozen pond about to melt for spring. My footing wasn't steady, and it was so dangerous that I was a fool for even stepping out on the ice.

"I'm sure it wasn't anything he didn't deserve." Cade tilted his head. "Was it?"

I shook my head. "I betrayed my employer. That makes me a bad investment."

"Lucky for both of us, you aren't my cousin's ill-thought-out T-shirt company." The shadows on Cade's face looked darker in the uneven light from the car's dashboard. "Like you said, I need someone I can trust."

Something pulled at my stomach. What had I ever done to deserve that much faith in me? Would he still believe in me if he knew who I was?

"And that's me?" I asked.

"And that's you." Cade squinted into the darkness. "After all, I don't have any other options."

The ice was shattering under my weight, and I was going to drown. When was the last time anyone had believed in me?

"Okay. For five hundred thousand dollars, you've got yourself a bodyguard." I watched his profile. "Although if you want me to carry you like Whitney Houston, that costs extra."

Mage lights came closer and closer together, even though Cade had slowed from NASCAR speeds to normal highway driving. Then, suddenly, we were faced with a massive gate. It was made of wood, complex carvings lit up by the headlights. It was taller than I could see through the windshield.

With the massive doors in front of me, my heart started beating too fast. There was a very real chance that if I went into House Bartlett, I would never leave. I wouldn't be the first member of my family that had driven through these gates and never been seen again.

Cade dropped his hand to the gearshift and then pressed his foot down on the accelerator. After a couple of hours in the car, I was used to Prince Bartlett trying out for the role of Road Runner in a Looney Tunes cartoon. Still, as the car sped toward the massive gates, I raised my arms, automatically wincing back. I didn't have time to do more than make a strangled sound.

Then we were through the gate, speeding on smooth, black asphalt. My mouth dropped open, my heart beating quickly. I panted, looking around us.

“You don't have a gate opener?!” I growled.

“No need. That's just the visual cue of our wards. They encircle the estate. No one who doesn't have express permission can get in. Or out.”

I turned to look at him, swallowing and taking a half second to soothe my breathing before I asked, “I'm trapped here?”

“You agreed.” Cade slowed the car as we passed through an intersection.

If I squinted, I could see houses in the distance. One and two-story buildings that were more shadow than shape.

“I agreed to do a job, not step foot into a prison.” I clenched my fist and shook my head violently.

“You want out? You want to lose half a million dollars and go back to having Declan on your tail?” Cade's voice was cool, and he screeched the car to a stop in front of a massive

house. “I gave you a choice. You chose to come with me. We made an agreement. Are you going to break it?”

The part of me that didn’t want to wear the collar bristled. I bared my teeth, biting back a growl. Finally, I shook my head, taking two long breaths before speaking.

“No.”

Cade looked me over, his chilly eyes catching on my naked throat. “The next two days will be crucial. If they’re going to make a move on me or you, the best time to do it would be before we’re joined, before we complete the ceremony and you become my consort. You need to be on your toes, be prepared for anything.”

“Anything like what?” I pressed.

“They won’t attack outright. The poisoning and the explosion—neither one of those was direct combat. But they’ll try *something*. While we’re apart, that’s when they’ll think you’re vulnerable. Can you be ready?” Cade shifted in his seat, and I watched the tense line of his neck, the frown between his brows.

“Yeah,” I said. “I can be ready.”

“Are you sure?” Cade asked, his eyes searching my face for something.

“Yeah.” I wanted to reach out and brush back his blond hair from his forehead so I could see his expression more clearly. “I’m sure. If I’m ready, I can take on a mage.”

That wasn’t true, and I wasn’t sure why I’d said it, but the tension around Cade’s eyes relaxed, and he exhaled a long breath, nearly a sigh. “Do you remember our story?”

“We met three weeks ago. You asked me to be your consort, I agreed. We dated by going to restaurants and museums.” I drawled the last word, making sure it was clear how ridiculous it was that I would ever go to a museum. “I’m not collared yet because you are a nice boy who wanted to show me around and make sure I fit with the in-laws before making an honest man of me.”

“Maybe I *should* have stopped at the local community theatre. That was about as convincing as their rendition of *A Streetcar Named Desire*.”

“You want to see my Brando impression?” I said. “Because from my recollection, that wasn’t a play that worked out well for anyone.”

“I need you to make it believable.” Cade opened his door. I saw his shoulders rise and fall once before he stepped out. “You’re the only one I trust with this. Please.”

The word was half breath; Cade and I were two prisoners trapped behind House Bartlett’s wards. He sounded hesitant, and my heart clenched. Cade had said he trusted me.

I followed him.

The air outside was chilly, from the time of night but also from the tall trees that bordered the house. We were in the middle of the forest near Clear Lake, at the heart of House Bartlett territory.

The forest smelled of damp, growing trees, the decomposing leaves on the forest floor. Inhaling, I closed my eyes. I could feel the fur and claws and teeth under my skin. The wolf in me wanted out, wanted to run and howl, no matter how tired, dirty, and injured the human in me was.

When I spoke, I felt almost like whispering, each word absorbed by the forest around us. “Are we sneaking in?”

Cade turned to the house, and the front door opened. A tall man stood in the entryway. He was backlit, so I couldn’t make out more than his height. His body was narrow, and even though it was almost two in the morning, I could see from his outline that he was wearing a business suit.

Cade’s face stilled, and then his lips tightened, creases forming in the corners of his mouth. “Leon. I didn’t expect you to still be up.”

The man bowed his head, and Cade took the stairs, not looking back at me. For a half second, I hesitated.

The building was imposing, three stories tall, made of stone. Wide marble steps led up to the massive front door. At the top, Cade finally turned, looking over his shoulder toward me. Even squinting, I couldn't see his face with the light behind him.

There was no way that this was a complicated game, right? A way of getting revenge eleven years later for something I hadn't even done? But, no. There was no way he knew who I was. If he did, he would have stayed invisible and let Declan cut off my head. Instead, he'd gotten me out, offered me money, and given me a job when the smart money was on hiring some other wolf.

Shoving my hands into my pockets, my shoulders hunched, I began walking up the steps.

CHAPTER
FIVE

At the top of the stairs, I got my first good look at Leon. He was older, probably in his seventies, although his back was straight, and his eyes were clear. His hair was silver rather than white, and the lines around his mouth could just as easily have been smile lines as frown lines.

He bowed his head again, holding the door open for us and gesturing with his free hand. “Prince Bartlett. May I ask who your guest is?”

“This is Miles. He will be my consort as soon as we complete the ritual.” Cade walked through the door, and I followed behind him into the warm house.

The lights were turned down low, soft yellow gleaming on marble floors, cream walls with detailed molding. A massive staircase curved up from the entryway along the wall, a royal purple carpet detailed with gold in the center.

“Ah.” Leon had turned away from us to close the door, so I only saw his expression when he turned back. At that point, it was a bland neutral. “Consort Bartlett, a pleasure to welcome you to House Bartlett.”

Leon bowed to me, and Cade exhaled, as though in relief. I let my eyes turn to him, trying to read what sort of reception he had expected for me.

“You can just call me Miles,” I said slowly, feeling the situation. Cade had dropped me into the middle of a field of land mines without a map.

“This is Leon Lucas, the seneschal of House Bartlett.” Cade gestured to the man with a wave of his hand.

Based on Leon’s behavior, I expected seneschal was a fancy word for butler.

“It’s nice to meet you.” I looked around again, then turned to Cade. I tried to remind myself to speak the way I would to any lover, to someone I was comfortable with. “We going to bed? It’s late.”

“I am. *You* need a bath. Leon, can you have someone help him bathe and make sure he gets a meal? It’s been a long day.”

Cade started up the steps, dismissing me as easily as he had his seneschal. He stopped on the third step, turning back, his jaw clenched beneath a pleasant smile.

“If that’s all right with you? I would never want to leave my consort unattended or ill at ease.” He seemed to be searching for the appropriate way that two people actually having sex with each other would interact.

I nodded. I wasn’t eager to be left on my own, and I felt weariness down to my bones. A soft bed was a lot more appealing than a bath, but, gritting my teeth, I managed my own tense smile.

But this would be one of the perfect times for someone to ambush me, if they were trying to get to Cade. Now, before I learned anything about the house, when I was still getting my bearings.

“I’m fine. I’m sure Leo and I are going to get along just great. I’ll see you when I don’t... smell.” Beside me, Leon stiffened, but when I glanced at him, none of it showed on his face.

Cade nodded, tucking one hand in his pocket before walking up the stairs.

When he disappeared around the bend into a darkened hallway, I turned back to Leon. There was a flash of something in his eyes, a slight tightening between his brows, but then he shook his head, his lips stretching into a neutral smile.

“This way.” He gestured with his hand and then turned, walking further into the house.

“Is there just a bathroom I can go to?” I muttered.

“We have showers for the wolves who come in after hunting,” Leon said smoothly. “Given your current... condition, you might be more comfortable there.”

Almost at the back of the house, he opened a nearly invisible door that matched the wall. I immediately saw the difference. Rather than fancy molding, the only decoration back here was dated wallpaper. The carpet just inside the doorway had a stain the color and shape of a spilled bowl of soup.

The walls must have some sort of noise dampening because I could hear people awake down here, even though it was two in the morning.

We stopped at the kitchens, where a couple of servants wearing kitchen whites were chatting as they kneaded bread. Leon paused in the entryway, and both of the cooks immediately went still. The older one, whose red hair was plaited back from her face, cleared her throat.

“Seneschal. Was there something you needed?” Her eyes glanced back at me, widening slightly.

“Please make up a plate for Prince Bartlett’s consort. The prince indicated he would be hungry. And call Rhys. I believe their services will be needed as well.” Leon’s tone was mild, the same way that I might answer a cashier’s bored “Did you find everything you needed today?”

The cook dusted her hands, nodding her head in a bow. “Of course, seneschal. Immediately.”

Her Irish brogue warmed the words, but when she looked me over, I noticed her eyes caught on my naked throat. She looked away before I could catch her gaze.

“This way.” Leon gestured, and I followed him. The servants’ area seemed to be a long hallway that ran along the side, turning only when we hit the edge of the house. Aside

from the kitchen, I saw an open pantry, a laundry, locker rooms, bathrooms, and finally, a closed door.

Leon stopped just outside and gestured to the door. “The showers are through there. When you’re done, Rhys should be here. If they’re not, feel free to wait in the resting room.”

He indicated the door across from the showers.

“Thanks.” I drew out the word.

“Or would you prefer I stay?” His blue eyes reminded me of Cade’s, but Cade’s had been easy to read. Cade saw me as an employee, a person he could pay to do a job, even if that job was to sit around and make him look good. This man was impossible.

“No, I’m fine. I haven’t needed help bathing since I was in diapers.”

He bowed again, the same deference he had shown to Cade. “I’m glad Prince Bartlett has found someone he’s ready to bond with. I was beginning to worry that...” He shook his head, lips tightening. “I believe you will be good for him.”

“Thanks,” I said again.

He turned away, heading back down the carpeted hallway. I opened the door to the showers. There were rows of them, enough for ten or fifteen people at once. Luxurious white towels were stacked neatly on a bench at the entryway, and next to the bench, there was an open hamper with dirty clothes and used towels in it.

My clothes were a mess of dried alcohol from the bar fight and what looked and smelled like vomit. *That* I didn’t remember, although I had woken in the back of the bar from complete unconsciousness.

I tugged off the shirt, tossing it into the hamper. Before I took off my pants, I went through the pockets. No phone. That had been the first thing I had gotten rid of after I found out Declan had put a bounty on my head.

I wasn’t surprised that the Tweedles had removed my wallet. Luckily, the only thing in it was the cash I had

scrounged up before going to ground. My credit cards, my money in the bank had been untouchable since it would have been a great way to find out where I was. I'd had about two hundred dollars in cash in my apartment, and that hadn't gotten me further than Pineridge.

After making sure there wasn't anything in the pants that would give me away, I threw those in as well, mystery bloodstains, broken glass, dirt, and all.

Then I was naked in front of the mirror, and I could see the real damage. Bruises covered my chest, a long gash crossed my shoulder, and I turned to see it end on my back. Some bruises were fading. Not all of it was from the Tweedles.

Four weeks on the run was a lot of time to run into a lot of trouble. Luckily, the weeks on the road hadn't made me lose any muscle mass. I could still fight. I could still defend myself.

Then again, that was exactly what my parents had thought when they came to House Bartlett eleven years ago.

Turning away from the mirror, I chose the shower in the corner of the room, giving me a good eyeline to the door but a wall at my back. The soap dispensers were built into the wall, and clean washcloths were in a crevice next to the showerhead. Grabbing one, I pumped it full of soap, the thick liquid turning to suds almost as soon as it touched the water.

I started on my face, scrubbing my forehead and cheeks, feeling the sting of the soap where it met partially closed cuts.

The warm water sluicing down my body came away dirty, and I scrubbed harder. Moving to my neck, I lingered, working until I was sure it was clean. When I moved the cloth to my arm, I got a new handful of soap, carefully working to cleanse the cut on my shoulder.

I'd cleaned it when I first got it, but even werewolf healing would take a day or two to close something so deep. It felt warm to the touch, slightly inflamed. Moving down my chest and legs, I tried to work quickly.

Being naked in this room left me exposed. Every part of me was looking for weapons and exits, imagining how I could

get out of any situation. Cade's warning was still loud in my ear. The next couple of days would be critical, and if someone made a move, it would be now. Was Cade as well prepared as I was? Blinking, I shook my head. I needed to be worried about myself. Cade was a paycheck, nothing else.

I ducked my head under the spray. The water came down perfectly warm, the spray made of thick drops with a high water pressure. It was nothing like the dribble of water that had choked its way out of the showerhead at the hotel I had stayed in... what was it? Three days ago? Four?

When I felt clean, down to the spaces between my toes, I turned off the water. Just as I was heading to the fluffy towels, the shower door banged open. A werewolf stood in the doorway.

He was big. As large as an alpha, and the way his eyes narrowed on me immediately meant he could smell exactly what I was. His lips pulled back in a growl.

I kept myself still, waiting for the attack. After a long beat, I let myself relax slightly. Based on his reaction, I wasn't expected. This was no assassin sent to take me out before I could solidify my bond with Cade.

Shirtless, the wolf's pants pulled up his thighs but undone at the top, and I could practically see the dusting of wolf hair on his arms fading as his human side reasserted itself. His bare feet told me exactly what he had been doing: hunting.

The lack of a pack told me it had been by himself. The hunt was a primal thing, and I could tell from the traces of blood at his mouth it had been successful. But his adrenaline was going. I could hear his elevated heartbeat from where I was, his wolf urges still hot and ready for a kill.

"Who are you?" His voice echoed against the glossy white tiles.

I shifted my stance. This had been one of the scenarios I had imagined: a single attacker, from the front, water still slicking the tiles.

The growl built in his chest, practically rumbling the ground under my feet. I answered it, but my wolf was still distant, impossible for me to grab hold of, so mine came out an almost human sound.

“Now, *what* is all *this*?” The voice coming from behind the wolf was high and warm. Annoyance laced through it with an edge of sarcasm. “I know *no one* got me out of bed to clean up *your* perfect behind, Tyson. Because you know Mama likes her *sleep*, and if you piss me off at *two thirty* in the morning, you’re likely to see what happens.”

The wolf half turned, looking over his shoulder. Then, to my utter shock, he let someone shove him aside and push forward into the shower. He wore a robe, and a bonnet on his head protected his hair. Everything from his sleepy eyes to the yawn he covered with the back of his hand said that he had just been woken up.

“Now *you*, they *definitely* should have woken me up for.” Smiling, he offered out his hand, palm down, as though I was supposed to kiss it.

I looked down. “I’m still wet.”

“I *see* that,” he purred. “I’m Rhys. I prefer they/them, Mr. Wet. Or do you have a different name? All they called you was *Prince Bartlett’s* consort.”

The massive wolf frowned, his brows going tight together. His lips pulled back from his teeth, and some of them were still long, still sharp enough to tear human flesh.

“You’re Bartlett’s little consort?” Tyson laughed. He pulled down his pants, tossing them in the laundry. “And your dick didn’t freeze off when you dipped it? Surprised you didn’t get frostbite.”

He made an obscene gesture with his hand, then made a show of looking me over. When his eyes focused on my collarless neck, his laugh turned into a sneer. I crossed my arms. If he thought I was about to be intimidated by some alpha wannabe, he had another thing coming. This wasn’t a middle school locker room. I had nothing to be ashamed of.

Tyson took a few steps into the room, growling. I took another step forward, my eyes narrowed on him. He was going to lunge at me, but I would take a few steps back, let him slide on the puddle of water in front of him. Then I would get my arm around his neck, pulling back, even if he tried to buck me off. He probably had the arm strength to flip us, but even if he did, he would be close enough to the showers that I could slam his head against the wall before...

My plan stopped there because I realized that what I had taken for grime on his throat was actually a thick band of magic.

CHAPTER
SIX

That was how everyone knew I wasn't bonded to Cade. That was what the collars usually covered up. But wolves couldn't use magic. It was impossible.

Still, on Tyson's throat, the magic shifted and moved, curling in on itself and then away.

Cade's power had looked like tattoos, black lines that covered his body, in sharp arrows and blades, every line formed like a weapon. These were dark red, the color of blood. They seethed when he moved, lazily spinning around his neck. A single line trailed down his chest and over his abs.

Tyson followed my gaze, then looked back at me. He smirked, turning to the nearest shower and flipping it on.

"You see something you like? Cade not *satisfying* you?" He grabbed a washcloth, scrubbing it over himself. "I always figured Cade wouldn't be able to get it up with a wolf."

"We haven't fully bonded yet," I said, the words tasting like cardboard in my mouth. I wanted to come up behind him, slam him against the wall. Every instinct in me told me to assert dominance. He had challenged me. He had challenged *Cade*.

That thought brought me up short. Why did I care anything about Cade? No. Cade had paid me to do a job while he looked for whoever was trying to kill him. Although, if Cade had asked me, Tyson would be my number one suspect.

With his back to me, he was making a point. He didn't have anything to be afraid of from me.

“*Okay*,” Rhys said. They picked their way across the bathroom, carefully avoiding letting their enormous, pink, fluffy slippers touch any of the puddles of water. “Come on, honey. I wouldn’t even *try* to talk to Tyson when he’s in a *mood*.”

Rhys took my arm and guided me back to the entrance of the showers. They grabbed one of the towels and held it out for me.

With one last glare at Tyson, who refused to look at me, as good as telling me that I wasn’t even worth the effort of a growl, I followed Rhys out. The hallway was chilly, even with the towel tucked around my waist.

“Not that I don’t appreciate the rescue,” I said, “but why did they wake you up?”

“*Magic*,” Rhys said, their voice going operatic. “Normally people come to *me* in my studio, but I *do* make some exceptions.”

Rhys held open the door across from the showers. Not having anything better to do, I walked into the room.

The cook was inside, setting out three platters of food. She was smiling, chatting with a werewolf who was lounging in a chair. The wolf reached out, about to steal a piece of bacon from the plate, and the cook slapped her hand.

“You!” Rhys pointed at the werewolf. “My *god*, you left me *alone* with *Tyson* when he’d come in from a hunt.”

Rhys drawled every word, making each part of the sentence dramatic. They extended both of their arms out. The werewolf stood, sauntering across the room and embracing Rhys. She was slightly taller than them, and where Rhys had a bonnet on, she had her dark hair cropped close on the sides, slightly longer in the middle. A narrow nose and sharp eyes gave her the look of a wolf, even when she wasn’t shifted.

A thin, silver collar rested at her throat. It was a delicate chain, nothing like the thick leather strap Cade had offered me. I dragged my eyes away from it, back to Rhys.

“Nia, this is Prince Bartlett’s consort. He didn’t tell me his name because Tyson showed up and was all *grrrrr, aargh.*” Rhys rolled their hand at me. “Now would be the time to tell me your name.”

“Miles,” I said. The food was drawing me closer, my stomach rumbling so loud I could feel it in my throat. I meandered over and began picking at what was available on the table. “I don’t know why they got you out of bed. If somebody could point me in the direction of some sweatpants, I’m pretty sure I can find my way back to Cade myself.”

“I’m sure I can find some.” The cook didn’t meet my eyes, rushing out of the room as she said the words.

I looked down awkwardly, holding the towel tighter to make sure nothing was showing.

“Don’t worry about her,” Rhys assured me. They released Nia, who returned to her comfortable chair, lounging with her legs thrown over the arm.

The long table that the cook had put my food on looked like it could have an entire buffet set out.

As I looked around, I remembered what Leon had called the room. The resting room. With that context, the purpose became clear. Massage tables were tucked in the corners, and all of the chairs and couches were plush and soft.

After shifting, it was always difficult to come back to yourself. It was hard to go from being a creature of instinct and brutality to a human again. When I was a kid, we had always ended up in a puppy pile afterward, our human skin feeling too sensitive, too real. It looked like this room was supposed to serve the same purpose. Everything was comfortable, everything was soft. An industrial air purifier hummed in the corner so that, other than the food on the table, there wasn’t any scent that would drive someone’s wolf back to the surface.

My eyes glanced over at Nia again. I could smell that she was a werewolf, but she wasn’t presenting any dominance or challenging behavior. At the same time, she wasn’t showing

submission either. Instead, she was on her phone, although her eyes kept flicking back to Rhys as they began pulling things from a large bag.

“Eat now. Because once I get started, I don’t want any interruptions.” Rhys pointed at the food on the table, making a waving motion with their hands.

My stomach rolled over, desperate with hunger.

The cook had left behind a plate of griddle cakes, heavy and crunchy with grains. I poured an entire pitcher of golden syrup on top of them, barely cutting them in half before stuffing them in my mouth. Bacon shared a plate with yellow, fluffy eggs flavored with salt and pepper.

The last time I had eaten was drive-through fast food the day before. I struggled to even remember what it was. A cheeseburger that tasted like cardboard, maybe?

There was a plate of fruit and hash browns. I didn’t even bother with the ketchup in a small cup to the side, grabbing forkfuls of the hash browns and shoveling them directly into my mouth. They crunched under my teeth, greasy and perfect.

“*Hungry*, isn’t he? Is our little prince not feeding you right?” Rhys’s question was saucy, but I saw them glance at Nia before returning their gaze to me, a warm smile pulling up the corners of their lips.

“It’s been a long day,” I said around a bite of watermelon. The juice was almost as sweet as the syrup on the pancakes. It was a light, refreshing flavor that cleansed my palate, the liquid soothing my throat.

Looking around, I found a pitcher of orange juice and poured myself a glass, chugging the tart liquid in long swallows. When I finished, I wiped my mouth on the back of my wrist and poured myself another glass. That one I drank more slowly, the texture of pulp sliding over my tongue.

After I finished the glass, I set it down next to the empty platters. Four weeks on the run hadn’t left me a lot of time for full meals. Food was what I could get when I could get it.

“Are you done? Or should I call for another plate? The kitchen usually has something good on the stove.” Rhys had taken a seat on one of the couches, while I had been eating like I was trying to win the breakfast-eating competition at the state fair.

“No. I’m good.” I took a seat on the couch across from Rhys, the soft pillows putting just enough pressure on my skin. “I’m still not sure what you’re here for.”

“Well,” Rhys drawled the word. “Usually, no one calls me to work on consorts, unless it’s for a formal event or...”

They glanced at Nia, who grunted, shaking her head once.

“*Anyway*. As soon as I saw *you*, I knew why they called me. You aren’t bonded to Prince Bartlett yet, so you don’t share any of the benefits of being his consort.” Rhys made a clicking sound against their teeth. “I’m pretty sure Leon called me so I can pretty you up. After all, we can’t have you walking around, representing the prince, looking like that.”

I looked down at myself, unsure of what they were seeing.

“Nia!” Rhys clapped their hands. “Mirror!”

Huffing a sigh, Nia stood, opening a tall cabinet door and pulling out a full-size mirror. She set it up perpendicular to the couches.

Rhys got up, gesturing for me to stand as well. “You can just give her your towel. Might as well see what we’re working with.”

Easily, I took off my towel, handing it to Nia. Wolves got used to nakedness. There was nothing quite like taking off your clothes before a shift or coming out of a shift, returning to your naked body.

“Yum, *yum*. One thing we *can* say about Prince Bartlett is that he has *delectable* taste. But I see the *work* that has to be done.” Rhys came forward, their hand extended. Before they touched my chest, they glanced up at my eyes. “I’ll need to touch you for this to work.”

Shrugging, I nodded my consent. I couldn't remember the last time anyone had actually asked me for permission, since usually touch was brutal, fast, and during a fight.

"It's late. I'll try to make this quick. We'll have to schedule a second session." Rhys was examining the cut on my shoulder. In the warm lights of the room, the redness looked worse. "Let's start here."

I smelled the magic before I saw it. Floral and sweet, it crawled from under the feathered cuffs of Rhys's robe.

Cade's magic was sharp, stark black tattooed lines. Rhys's magic floated off their skin like delicate flower petals. They caressed my skin, and I watched in the mirror as they healed the cut on my shoulder, moving from front to back, leaving behind unblemished skin.

"*Wonderful*. Now for the rest of this mess." More magic spun from Rhys's fingers, pink traveling across my body and healing bruises. When the petals swirled together, forming a pale pink rose on my forehead, I saw the goose egg disappear entirely.

With it went a headache that I had only been partially conscious of. I sighed, my shoulders slumping in relief.

"Nia? Did I miss anything?" Rhys asked.

She looked up from her phone, glancing over at me. She shook her head, and Rhys grinned. I could see a sheen of sweat on their face, and they pulled a handkerchief from their pocket, dabbing at it.

"Someone worked you over *good*, sweetheart. Now, on to the *fun* part." Rhys grinned, stepping back and crossing one arm across their chest, the other hand resting at their chin. "Beard first. Stubble is one thing. *This* is giving me *I just spent a month in the backwoods* vibes."

I watched, trying to see how the magic worked, but all I could do was feel it as flower petals brushed across my face, leaving me clean-shaven.

Frowning, I leaned forward, looking at myself in the mirror. "Did you do my eyebrows?"

“Honey, *yes*. Your eyebrows looked like they hadn’t shifted back from wolf form.” Rhys tapped their chin again, using the handkerchief to wipe discreetly at their forehead. “Now, body hair. I love a good manly man, but it’s more common here for wolves to only have hair on their chest when they’re in wolf form. *But* I’m not sure what Prince Bartlett is *into*, if you catch my drift.”

In the mirror, I saw myself clearly. Tall, muscled from years of being the one that Declan would call when he needed someone reliable, someone who wouldn’t ask questions, someone whose body could do anything asked of it.

My body had always been there for me. But I had been undercover often enough that I knew the best way to get what I wanted was to fit in. I needed to look like I belonged in order to help Cade find out who was behind the assassination attempts.

I looked at my hair, running my hands through it. It was still wet from the shower. Shoulder-length, it was longer than I’d ever had it before. But being on the run hadn’t exactly provided me enough time to stop at a barbershop.

“Go ahead. Give me whatever’s standard. The hair too, if you have time.” I shook my head, feeling the water droplets hit my back.

“The *hair*?” Rhys actually sounded injured. “If you *insist*.”

Nia stood, and my eyes immediately went to her, tensing. She stood next to Rhys, a few inches taller than them, draping her arm over their shoulders.

“Thank you, dear. I don’t know what I would do without you.” Rhys leaned over, pressing a kiss to Nia’s cheek. Then they turned back to me, extending both hands in a twisting motion.

Flowers bloomed in the air between us. Then they landed on me, roses and tulips, small pink blossoms that grew across my chest. Petals flowed down my arms, each one as delicate as a kiss.

In the mirror, I could see the changes taking place. My skin glowed, the tone evening out. I was still myself but more beautiful, each aspect of me buffed to perfection.

“*There* he is,” Rhys smiled, and Nia tightened her arm around their shoulders.

The flower petals drifted away, disappearing as though carried by an invisible breeze.

I stared. The person in the mirror looked like me but better. My chest gleamed like I’d been oiled for a bodybuilding competition. My hair was shorter, showing off my cheekbones. When I smiled, my teeth looked whiter.

“What did you do?” I asked.

“Oh, nothing that wasn’t there already. I’m not *that* much of a magician. Just a little bit of cleaning up.” Still, their shoulders slumped in exhaustion, and Nia guided them back to the couch.

There was a soft knock on the door, and the cook poked her head back inside. “This is the best I could get.”

She offered over some folded clothes. Nia crossed the room and got them, bringing them over to me. The cook shut the door so quietly that I didn’t even hear it.

I shook out the pants, examining them critically. They would do. They were long, and the waist was too big, but I didn’t have much of a choice. The fabric was scratchy under my fingers, as though they had been through the laundry a few too many times.

“No, no, *no*.” Rhys shook their head, pushing themselves up. “I didn’t do all that work just to have Prince Bartlett see you *slouching* and wearing sweatpants that make you look like a mom visiting Target on *laundry day*.”

They grabbed hold of the pants, shutting their eyes tightly. I tried to watch what they did, but it was like reality bent. One moment, we were both holding pants that were too long, too big, and had a hole in the knee. The next moment, they were buttery soft under my fingers, as though they were made of silk. When I held them up to my hips, they fit perfectly.

I slid them on, the fabric soft against my legs. I didn't even need to tie the waist. It fit around my hips, leaving a small hint of hair trailing between my navel and the top of the pants.

The white T-shirt thankfully fit when I pulled it over my head.

“My work here is done. We'll have some touch-ups. Have Prince Bartlett bring you by my studio. Nia, *home*. I need at least another *ten hours* of beauty sleep.”

Rhys flounced out of the room, and Nia grabbed the bag left behind, slinging it over her shoulder.

Other than a grunt, I hadn't heard her say a single word. She jerked her chin at me, acknowledgment or farewell. Then she headed out.

They both were clearly assuming I knew my way back to Cade, and it wasn't a bad assumption. I'd seen him go up the stairs. I could follow his scent to his room.

I looked around the room, but there was no more food and nothing else for me to do. My eyelids were drifting closed. Exhaustion made it almost impossible to move my legs to the door.

This would be the perfect time to attack. I was alone, unattended, and it was apparently spreading already that Cade had brought a consort home. The person trying to kill Cade might attack now, if I stayed here long enough, a predator waiting for the careless rabbit to hop close enough to catch.

No, I needed to get back to Cade, if only because if I was a sitting duck here, he was a sitting duck with a big target on his back and a hunter who'd already missed twice. If the third time was the charm, I didn't care that Cade had unilaterally decided that *now* was the perfect time for us to catch whoever was after him. I was done being the duck floating on the pond, waiting for the hunter to take his shot.

I opened the door, expecting to have to find my own way to Cade, but instead, I was faced with a servant. He had bleached hair and a tan that revealed every year of his age.

Despite his pressed suit, something about him reminded me of a weasel.

He bowed low, the way he probably did to Cade. “Consort Bartlett, if you’ll come this way.”

I looked around the empty hallway, but no one else was around. Shrugging, I followed him.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

The servant led me down the hallway through a different door. We exited into the sort of luxury that existed in the reality TV shows Declan liked on in the background when he was working. Plush velvet furniture in gem tones was lit by glowing lights, dimmed in the middle of the night.

I tried to get my bearings, tried to figure out the lay of the house, but it was impossible. The servant was walking so quickly that we passed a formal dining room, two sitting rooms, a small breakfast area, and what might have been a library or study. We walked through the enormous foyer again, the stairs curving from the entryway up to a second level, the banister gleaming with golden accents.

I started to head up the stairs, where the trail of Cade's scent was the strongest, but my guide cleared his throat, indicating a door beyond the foyer. Frowning, I said, "What, us servant types have to use the back way? Our feet are too dirty for the gold-plated stairs?"

When I opened the door, I realized it wasn't servants' stairs. It was an intimate reading room. The marble flooring of the house had chilled my feet, but as I walked forward, I encountered soft, plush rugs. On my left, the wall had a built-in bookcase, and lamps with delicate stained-glass shades were placed strategically next to the furniture.

Two women sat in red chairs, the leather buttery soft. I didn't sense danger, but for all I knew, they were highly trained assassins. My body went tense, observing every detail for some sign of what was going to come next. As I observed

them, my body relaxed in increments. If they were going to try to kill me, these weren't women who'd do it directly.

One woman had pulled her white hair into a neat bun. Her face looked as though a very expensive plastic surgeon had stretched all the lines out of it, her cheeks smooth and lips pulled taut. Only her hair and her eyes indicated her age.

The other woman looked a few years older than me. She had dark black hair and a thin nose with sharp cheekbones. Pale skin and plump lips made her look striking, even beautiful.

Tyson's scent clung to her skin and clothes, strong enough that my eyes swept the room again, making sure I hadn't missed the wannabe alpha hiding in the shadows.

"Thank you, Keith. We'll ring if we need anything," the older woman said, indicating an honest-to-god *bell* on the table beside her. "We do appreciate you alerting us, despite the hour. Your discretion, as always, is valued."

She nodded significantly at an envelope on a table near the door, and Keith swiped it quickly, pocketing it as though that would hide what it was: a bribe.

Keith bowed, saying, "My ladies."

Then he was out the door, so smoothly and quietly he might never have been there.

"When Tyson told me, I didn't believe it." The younger woman rose, approaching me, and the smell of wolf was even stronger up close. She only stood to my chin, but when she examined me, I felt like I was on my knees. This was a woman used to having a whip in her hand.

"You are Prince Bartlett's consort?" the older woman asked. When I didn't respond right away, she repeated the question more slowly, as though she was concerned there was something wrong with my head.

"Yes," I said, unsure if I should clarify that we weren't bonded yet. If Tyson had recognized that we hadn't actually bonded, he'd definitely told these two women.

After all, I was pretty sure I was looking at the mage who owned Tyson's collar.

"Unbonded," the woman who smelled like wolf said dismissively. She retook her seat, crossing her legs at the knee.

"He's the *prince*, Sonja," the other woman said sharply. "What? Do you want him to form a consort bond in some cheap motel?"

"I expect him to act like a *prince*." Sonja gestured to me with her hand, and I curled my toes in the carpet, reminding myself that any information was important, even if it meant taking an insult. "When I took my consort, I didn't randomly kidnap a werewolf off the street. There was a courtship. There was a mutual decision. I asked my father for advice. I've never even heard of this man, have you?"

The older woman tightened her lips but didn't say anything, which was an admission in itself. I might not speak in their fancy subtleties, but I could definitely read when someone had been busted.

"What is your name, dear?" the older woman asked. She leaned forward, both of her hands resting on a cane. The ruby at the top gleamed in the warm lights.

"Miles." Then, because I knew they were going to ask, I added, "No last name. No pack name."

"And where did you meet Prince Bartlett?" the older woman asked.

Sonja snorted. "Petrona, if he didn't meet him *yesterday*, probably at some backroom brawl, I'd give you half my paycheck."

Petrona gave her a narrow-eyed look. "Given what you earn, I will use it to purchase a new hat. Where did you two meet?"

"We met at a bar. Syndrome. A few weeks ago," I drawled. The speed of my words wasn't going to make them think I was any smarter, but I had learned that there was benefit in being thought slow and dumb. "I thought he was hot. I've never had a pack, so I didn't realize he was a mage at first. He took me

out to dinner, he paid for rides. We went to museums. I thought maybe we were just going to hook up. Then he asked if I wanted to be his consort.”

I wasn't sure why I had added that I thought we were going to hook up. Sure, Cade was attractive, but Tyson wasn't wrong when he called Cade an ice prince.

“That sounds like courtship to me,” Petrona said.

Sonja leaned back in her high-backed chair, her nails drumming on the arm. “How long?”

I shrugged. “Three weeks.”

“He *can't* have thought this through,” Sonja said.

“Who?” Petrona asked. She turned to me, her eyes sharp despite their age. “Did you feel you had time to think this through? Did you have time to make a thoughtful consent?”

“I mean, I took enough time that I would've hooked up with him anyway.” That was true. These days, a beer was all it took. Half a beer if the drink was bad and the man attractive enough.

Shaking her head, Sonja said, “Hooking up is not the same thing as becoming a consort.”

“You are so old-fashioned about this,” Petrona said. “If you had your way, Cade would have paraded him through the council chambers, seeking the council's permission.”

“Would that have been the worst thing? His position is critical to House Bartlett. He *is* House Bartlett.” Sonja looked me over again. “I cannot abide by this.”

“You cannot *abide* by this? He is your prince, Sonja. You might be on the council, but you do not stand above Prince Bartlett.” Petrona sounded severe, and she leaned forward further, reaching out with one of her hands and patting Sonja's knee.

“That's the problem. We *do* stand above Prince Bartlett,” Sonja said. “And he has been fully happy with that. Someone tried to kill him twice—they *did* kill members of this house, and he didn't even look into it! There has been no council of

war, no talk about finding the culprit. Do you see *this* as him maturing? Do you truly see him choosing this man as him being willing to accept his father's crown?"

Petrona leaned back, her hand falling away from Sonja, resting back on her cane.

"You," Petrona said sharply, and then she shook her head, changing her tone, "Miles, do you have any ill intentions for House Bartlett? Do you intend to hurt us or the prince?"

I shook my head and answered, "No."

"What *are* your intentions?" Sonja shifted in her chair. She was wearing a high-necked shirt, the soft cotton hiding anything beneath her throat. Her long leather boots reminded me for a moment of Cade's foot on my face.

"My intentions?" I asked. Sonja narrowed her eyes. At least one of them wasn't buying my slow and stupid act. "Cade... I mean, Prince Bartlett and I discussed how I could help him. He talked about how it would benefit me. Isn't that enough? That I want to help him, and by helping him, I can benefit?"

Even Petrona was looking at me with narrowed eyes now, as though she, too, was seeing through my *don't mind me. I'm too big to know better* façade. Words had always been my mother's tool, diplomacy and finding the balance between two opposing forces. My father had always said that we would get our size from him, but our strength would come from our mother.

The room around us darkened, going hazy and shiny. Every light bulb began to sparkle and glow, and Sonja's own skin looked as though it were made of gemstones.

"Can you promise that? Will you make me that promise, Miles with no last name and no pack name?"

"Stop." At the word, ice cut through the room, shattering the warm yellow of the light, the rainbows Sonja had painted on the walls. Petrona was glaring at Sonja. "He is Cade's intended consort, and you would dare to cast spells on him?"

“When *my* consort arrived at House Bartlett, we were bonded. If we hadn’t been, I would have kept to his side to make sure that no one else could cast spells on him. I cannot imagine treating my consort with such carelessness.” Sonja rose and swept her hair off the back of her neck, turning away from Petrona as all the light in the room drew back inside her. When she turned back, it was almost as if we were in a dark cave.

“And you and your consort are the model on which all partnerships should be based.” Petrona’s words cut through the darkness, reigniting the mage lights.

“No, I never said that,” Sonja huffed. She examined me again, her eyes moving from the crown of my head to my bare feet.

“Not everyone can be you. You must give them the grace of that, at least.” Petrona rose as well, her long skirts falling to the floor. She walked over to me and reached up to pat my cheek. “Treat him well. Very few people do. I hope he has made a good match for himself.”

Sonja held the door open for Petrona, displaying the sort of deference she hadn’t had in their conversation. Neither one of them spared me another glance, although once they were out the door, I saw Petrona link her arm through Sonja’s, leaning heavily on her cane as she walked.

I waited for a moment longer and saw Keith out in the hallway, bowing to both women. When I was sure they were gone, I started toward the open door. Maybe I would finally get to see Cade’s rooms. Hopefully, they had a bed because between all the damage my body had taken, all the healing it had done, and everything I’d just learned, I already needed a nap.

Before I could imagine what ice prince Cade’s bed looked like (all black or all white, my mind supplied), someone walked up to Keith, slapping his shoulder and giving him a significant handshake. So, Petrona and Sonja weren’t the only powerful people paying him for access to the prince’s secrets. The man walked through the door, shutting it behind him.

He was almost my height, meaning he was taller than Cade by a few inches. He had hair almost the same color as Cade and similar sharp features.

But where Cade had given me the impression he was frozen through, his gaze just as frosty as his heart, this man *burned*. He spoke first.

“I had to see it for myself. Cade’s little pet before he was collared and owned.”

When he prowled forward, the hair on the back of my neck rose. His eyes scraped over me, making me hyperaware of my newly polished sheen. Rhys had cleaned me up to be put on display for people like him.

At my nonresponse, he bared his teeth. It should have been a smile, but it never quite reached his eyes. “I’m sorry. Let me introduce myself. Brett Kulsa.”

He didn’t extend his hand, but I felt like his introduction was the sort you’d make at a strip club when some rich tech bro was introducing you to his very sketchy money guy. I didn’t respond with my name.

“Where on earth did our little icy prince find you? Impact? Cage?”

I recognized the names of two of the most expensive and exclusive gladiator clubs in Los Santos.

“Doesn’t matter. I know how our little princie works, and given that he wouldn’t even let you shower in his room, you already know your *place* in his life. So here’s the deal. When you’re Cade’s consort, you’re going to have intimate knowledge of everything he does. He has some *plan*. Some plan for House Bartlett’s future.” Kulsa stepped close and placed his hand in the center of my chest. When I didn’t step back, he smirked. “You tell me all the dirty little details of what he has going on in those backroom deals of his, and I’ll get you free. I’ll even give you cash.”

It was everything I could hope for. And it was certainly less than eight months of playing the perfect werewolf slave. Moreover, it would mean not having to deal with Cade.

I could do it. I could betray Cade. That would be fine. Sure he'd said I was the only one he could trust with this. Sure he believed in a version of me that even *I* didn't believe in, but who cared?

The lie curled up my spine, wringing me out. *I* cared, and the smirk that curved on Kulsa's lips told me everything I needed to know about him. This was not a man I could trust.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

I grabbed Kulsa's wrist where his hand still rested on my chest and squeezed. When he whimpered, I pushed him back, leaving him cradling his wrist, the back of his knees hitting the couch, forcing him to sit.

Then I pressed forward, looming over him, putting my hands on the back of the couch on either side of his head. I brought my wolf as close as I could, letting myself feel it in my eyes and teeth.

"You have wrong information. I am Prince Bartlett's consort. My job is to protect him." When Kulsa's eyes went wide, I saw it hit the mark.

He jerked to his feet, and I waited a moment before backing off, giving him enough room to shuffle toward the door, his lips spreading wide. "Good, good. I always have to have the boy's back. You know, because he's so young. Position came to him too young. But now I know you're loyal. Now I know you only want what's best for him. So we don't have to tell him about any of this, do we?"

I leaned over, speaking into his ear. "Now you owe me. Get out."

Kulsa didn't need to be told twice. He scampered away like the rat I could see he was. This wasn't a man who kept his deals with werewolves. This was a man who got rid of evidence. If I had agreed to his little backroom deal, then when everything shook out, it would have been my head on the pike next to Cade's.

After he left, the room felt smaller.

The opulence felt like a collar around my throat. I had learned too much information in the past few hours, and I could see my future through hazy glass. Every time I thought I had a handle on what was going on, I had a handle on my options, I realized I didn't have the faintest clue what I had gotten myself into.

Kulsa had left the door open behind him, and I saw Keith loitering. Straightening my shoulders, I strode through, the wolf still behind my eyes, a snarl sharpening my words.

“Are we waiting on anyone else who paid for the privilege of meeting me?” I snapped. Keith shook his head, and I growled, “Good. Take me to Cade Bartlett's rooms.”

He led me back to the main foyer, up the massive stairs. They were marble, like everything else here, and when we got to the top, I saw that what I had taken for dark tile ceiling was actually a delicate glass, revealing the starlit sky.

The doors upstairs were all closed, so I couldn't tell if everything was bedrooms or if there were some other mixed-use rooms here too. Cade's rooms were at the end of the hall, guarded by a set of double doors sculpted similarly to the massive gates that guarded the property. Up close, I could see the carvings were a mix of different elements. Waves flowed along the bottom. Along the side, forests grew tall redwood trees. A windstorm swept away houses. On the bottom right corner, two mountains pulled apart from each other, dribbles of rock falling down their surfaces.

At the door, I paused, waiting to see if Keith had any more tricks up his pressed sleeves. His body jerked, bowing halfway, hesitating before fully bending at the waist.

I waited for him to stand, watching his face and eyes.

“Should I expect any more visitors who paid you to get to me? What's the going rate for a werewolf visit these days? Hopefully you're remembering taxes and inflation.” I took a long breath, sniffing the air for any hint of his emotions.

He shook his head, his eyes focused on mine. Unlike the other people who had looked at me today, his eyes didn't rake over my body like I was the prime bull for sale at auction.

"You aren't going to beg me not to tell Cade about your side hustle selling access?" I asked.

He didn't smell like fear. He didn't smell like anything.

"Should I?" The side of his lips lifted. "Will Prince Bartlett believe you? The three of them will just deny it. They're going to get away with it. Telling him only gets you and me in trouble. You for making drama and knowing too much about his business. Me for taking an indirect route to his rooms."

Turning toward the door again, I reached for the handle.

"A piece of advice," Keith said. "Be careful. Prince Bartlett has a habit of getting people killed these days."

Before I could ask more, Keith spun, walking silently down the carpeted hallway. I looked back at the door, running my finger along one carving. It was a small bird, perched in one of the massive trees.

When my finger touched it, the bird turned its head, nipping at my finger before opening its wings and flying up to another branch above my head. I gaped, taking a step back to look at the rest of the carvings. None of the other animals moved, but now that I was paying attention, I saw a faint shimmer where the leaves of the tree waved in the wind.

Shaking my head, I opened the door.

Inside, the room was empty. It was massive, easily as big as my apartment in Los Santos. A king-size bed was placed on the wall across from the door. To my left, I saw a bathroom, the door left open. White tile gleamed in the dim lights. To my right, there was an easy chair with a silver lamp sitting on a small table next to it. The closet was walk-in, the door slightly ajar.

There was a low couch along the wall next to the door, clearly intended for someone to sit while changing.

I took a few steps inside, closing the door quietly behind me. The room smelled like Cade, but the man himself was nowhere to be found. I stretched my ears, listening, but the walls must have been soundproofed because I couldn't hear anything on either side of us.

With all sound muffled, my eyes were already drifting closed. I took a long breath, looking between the changing bench and the king-sized bed. It had four posts and long curtains that had been drawn open. They were dark gray, nearly black.

The curtains would be enough to filter out any ambient light. Without the Los Santos' city noise, in the dark, it promised to be the best night of sleep I had had in twenty-eight days.

Shaking my head, I counted again. Twenty-nine days.

I had only taken two steps toward the bed when the door behind me opened. Turning, I found Cade standing in the doorway. His lips were tight, practically bloodless, when he looked me over.

He was wearing the same clothes and didn't smell like he'd taken his own shower. His eyes raked over me, and I drew my shoulders back.

Earlier, Kulsu had been trying to make me feel small, trying to remind me of my place. Cade was merely observing his investment. Would I be worth the time and money he was spending on me?

Stepping into the room, Cade closed the door behind him silently. I wondered if any of the doors in this house made sounds. It must have been hard to be a teenager here, wanting to slam a door when they all shut silently.

"Rhys came to see you," Cade said.

It wasn't a question, but I ran a hand over my newly short hair self-consciously. "Yeah. I ran into Tyson and a few other suspects. Are you sure there's only one source of rot in your household? Because I smell a whole bushel of apples that are fermenting."

Cade exhaled through his nose, his nostrils flaring. He came closer, squinting at my face, examining the work that Rhys had done.

“Who?” he asked in a tight, clenched voice.

“Well, Tyson wanted to start a fight, but Rhys got him to back off. Keith, the servant, delivered me to Sonja and Petrona for a thick envelope full of cash. Brett Kulsa tried to bribe me.” My eyes strayed to the bed again.

Waving his hand, Cade dismissed my suspicions. “No. I know about all of them.”

Biting back my irritation, I crossed my arms in front of my chest. “You know about all of them.”

“Yes...” Cade shook his head. “I expected *someone* would make a move on you or me. My consort arrives at the house, unattended, and no one tries to get at him?”

“Well”—my blood started to heat, all the tension and exhaustion melting away from the hot feeling that flowed through me, washing away anything but anger—“you could have told me the plan was to drop me in shark-infested waters wearing a wet suit made of raw beef.”

“I told you that you had to keep yourself safe,” Cade said. “You assured me it wasn’t a problem.”

“Yeah, but that was before I realized that your entire plan was for me to wander around like a rodeo clown without any information!” I took a step forward, and Cade met me halfway, staring up at me with sharp eyes.

“You said you could handle a mage if you were prepared. How were you not prepared?” He bared his teeth, but it wasn’t a smile.

“I’m tired. *You’re* tired. I’m trying to help here, but we need a better plan than hoping we fall into a trap. Unless we’re the Roadrunner in a *Looney Tunes* cartoon, that seems like a great way to get killed.” I glared down at Cade. “And if you aren’t going to listen to what I have to offer, then I’m leaving. I have a better chance running from Declan without money or a ride than working with a partner who doesn’t trust me.”

Cade's expression remained hard, and I realized that he'd never had a partner before. Despite our conversation, he saw me as an employee. A man he'd hired to do a job, who was now asking for longer lunch breaks and medical benefits.

I'd foolishly been thinking of us as in this together, even though I knew better. Declan had never seen me as a partner, no matter how many fires I put out for him. Why would Cade want different?

Slowly, Cade drawled, "Partners?"

"Partners, someone in this with you for more than just the money." I gestured between us. "If the only reason I was loyal was the money, then I'd have sold you out to Kulsa right now."

"Well, that would be a shame," Cade said. "Brett's a snake. If you trusted him, you'd end up penniless and probably dead. Or worse."

"Which is why I didn't," I said. "That's not partners."

"Right." Cade lingered on the word, his eyes tracing over my face, searching for something. "Because we're partners?"

"Yeah," I said. "You have it out for my ex-boss, he has it out for me, so, you know, the enemy of my enemy helps me stay not dead. It's a win for me."

"How can I argue with a reason like that?" Cade said, but his eyes were staring at me, as though no one had ever offered him anything nearly as good in his life.

Cade extended his hand, and I clasped it in mine, shaking firmly. His skin was warm, and I wasn't sure why I had expected it to be cold, why I had expected the ice in his eyes to flow through his veins.

"I'm not paying extra," Cade said. Our hands were still clasped, and all the heat in my veins had condensed down to that one point of contact. Goose bumps rose on my skin, and electricity seemed to spark between us.

This was just a business deal. I'd shaken hands before. Of course I had. So why couldn't I let go?

“Fine. Now that that’s dealt with, you have to tell me more.” I ran my tongue over the sensitive skin of my bottom lip. “Tell me about the deaths.”

Cade’s eyes went wide, and he pulled his hand out of mine. Turning away, he strode to the bed, grabbing a pillow. He threw it at me and gestured to the changing bench, the message clear: sleep there.

I opened my mouth, but he walked up to me, glaring before moving around me into the walk-in closet.

“You—” I broke off, my fingers digging into the pillow. Frustrated, I tossed it onto the bench and then lay down, my back to the wall.

I should have left when he refused to share even scraps of information with me, but getting clean and fed only solidified my reasons to stay. If I stayed, I would get paid half a million dollars. If I stayed, I would have a chance to recuperate and get back my ability to shift. I could form a plan before Declan found me. I wouldn’t have to plan on the run anymore, hoping that if I just went far enough, he wouldn’t find me.

If I stayed, someone here had to know what happened to my parents.

I shut my eyes, knowing that I wouldn’t be able to sleep until Cade did. I didn’t like to sleep with someone else in the room. It had put off more than my fair share of lovers. Still, there had been more than enough people willing to keep it casual and not spend the night.

In the closet, I heard the slide of hangers, the soft movement of cloth. When he came back out, I cracked my eyes. He was wearing a high-necked sleeveless shirt, his arms exposed. He had traded his dark pants and boots for soft sweats and a pair of socks. In his hand, he was worrying something with his fingers.

I tensed when I realized what it was: the collar he’d wanted me to wear. Walking to the nightstand, he placed it on the bedside table, the buckle making a heavy metallic clink.

The tattoos I had only seen hints of covered his arms. Unlike when he was using his magic, they shifted sluggishly, barely moving. A black tattoo snake spread from under the armhole of his shirt around his biceps and forearm, the head resting just above his wrist.

Cade turned his head, glancing at me. I raised an eyebrow.

“Try to sleep,” Cade said, ignoring my implied question. “We’ll talk in a few hours.”

Then he crawled onto the bed, shutting the curtains behind him. I focused on my breath, and soon, exhaustion overtook me.

I wasn’t sure how long I slept, but I woke, heart racing, when Cade cried out in pain.



I leapt off the bench, striding across the room in four long steps. Cade made a muffled yelp. At the sound of him pushing, the shift of bedsheets, his heart rate skyrocketing, I grabbed hold of the curtains, struggling to pull them open.

But I couldn’t. They wouldn’t move. They were stuck so tightly to each other it was almost as though Cade had stitched them together.

“Cade,” I barked. “How do I open this?”

On the other side of the curtains, there was sudden stillness. Then, something black oozed from Cade’s bed, seeping through the hem of the curtains. I stared at it as it flowed over my bare feet.

“Get back,” Cade said harshly.

Gaping, I retreated, narrowing my eyes at the closed curtains. Swiftly, Cade threw them open.

Cade shifted his body, sitting at the edge of the bed. He glared at me, then looked away.

“Never interrupt my sleep again.” He kept his words low, as though he was afraid of people hearing even through the soundproofed walls. He was pale, his skin gray, and when he breathed, I could hear the catch in it, his heart still racing.

“What was that?” I pressed.

“Nothing.” He swallowed, then pushed off the bed. As he stood, walking to the bathroom, the inky black followed behind him, climbing up his socks until it disappeared entirely under the cuffs of his pants.

I stared after him, my mouth working for a moment before I shook my head, following him. The bathroom door was partially closed behind him, and I slammed it open.

At the sink, Cade jumped, dropping his glass of water. It shattered, glass shards spraying across the white tile.

A flush rose up Cade’s face, pinking his cheekbones. He bared his teeth, taking a long breath before bending down and picking up one shard of glass.

With a glance at me, he closed his eyes, and dark lines flowed from his fingers down onto the ground, sweeping across the floor and gathering all the pieces of glass to him. I saw them form a black cup in his hand, the lines of tattoo drawing it in the air.

Blinking, he opened his eyes, and the lines of tattoo flowed up his fingers and under his shirt. The lines of the snake along his arm rippled, and the mouth opened, a tongue flicking out before the snake went still again.

Cade stood, observing the glass in his hand. He turned to the sink, filling it. Tilting his head back, he gulped down the water, his throat working up and down.

Then, carefully, he set the glass back on the counter with a click.

“What was that?” I jerked my thumb toward the bed.

“Nothing.” Cade looked back at me and rolled his eyes. “A nightmare. Even mages occasionally get them.”

“What was it about?” I asked.

“I’m not paying you to play therapist. My nightmares are my problem.” Cade turned his back to me, and I heard his heart rate kick up, but he didn’t turn back around.

“No,” I said. I was trying for calm, but the words came out as a growl. “No more playing games. Someone is trying to kill you. Someone has killed people in your orbit because of *you*. There are at least four people in your house that are selling your secrets or buying them. You say you trust me to do the right thing. So, trust me with this. Tell me what you know.”

“Yes.”

I stared at him, the affirmative not even beginning to answer my questions. “Yes, what?”

“Yes. There have been two deaths. People who were with me or in the killer’s way.” He looked away from the glass, turning his head to stare at me. “Sonja isn’t a problem. She’s too loyal to House Bartlett. Brett Kulsa might be involved, but he’s too obvious. His machinations are too simple. He wants a seat on the council, and he won’t get that if House Bartlett crumbles at his feet.”

“You have a servant selling you out,” I pointed out.

“Servants can only sell what they know. He took you to two people I already know he’s on the payroll of.” Cade turned away, examining himself in the mirror. He no longer looked gray; the flush had returned color to his skin.

He turned his arm in the mirror, looking at the tattooed lines.

“Is this going to be a problem for us?” I asked. “You keeping all the cards to yourself? I can’t help you if you aren’t straight with me. It’s dangerous for both of us.”

“Are you afraid of danger now? Weren’t you Declan’s enforcer before he decided to kill you?” Cade adjusted the fall of his bangs on his forehead. “Don’t tell me you’re afraid of getting hurt.”

A flare of anger made me fist my hand, banging my closed palm against the door. Cade glanced at me in the mirror before returning his eyes to himself.

“I’m not afraid of a little pain, but you said you trust me. Either you trust me, or you were lying,” I said. “It’s that simple.”

It was not that simple, and the words were acid on my lips. If he had even the faintest idea of who I was, who my parents were, then he wouldn’t throw me to the wolves; he’d kill me himself and hand what was left to Declan. He had no reason to trust me, but still I was hanging on what he was going to say next.

“I trust you. Everyone else here has games they’re playing. You’re the only one whose price tag I’m sure of.” Cade’s voice was even. He turned, pushing past me back into the bedroom.

I caught a whiff of his scent, spicy, uniquely him, and sweat tinged with fear. Turning, I leaned against the doorjamb, my arms crossed.

“Tell me how you got involved with Declan.” I kept my voice reasonable, the tone I used when I was explaining to someone that they could either pay me Declan’s protection money now, or they could find out what happened when they didn’t.

Cade’s head dipped, and he turned back to me, arms crossed in front of his chest. “A business deal that went sour. My mistake for choosing the wrong bedfellows.”

“Literal bedfellows?” I asked, even though the idea of Declan putting his hands on Cade made something in me want to take the glass Cade had just fixed and smash it into a million pieces. It was just because of how foolish it was to mix business with pleasure, I told myself.

“No. Business bedfellows,” Cade said, his head tilting slightly, like he couldn’t quite understand what I was upset about.

I opened my mouth, the questions piling up, but Cade held up a hand.

“Now we’re both going to sleep. It’s noon, and neither one of us got a good night’s sleep. I don’t want to be disturbed until six this evening.”

He turned sharply, getting back in the bed, tugging the curtains closed. For a moment, I stood there, frustration mounting.

The curtains opened, and Cade glared at me. “Go to sleep. I’m not paying you to look tired. I’m paying you to look like my consort. My consort would be nothing short of perfection.”

Then he let the curtains fall closed again. Grinding my teeth, I sat back down on the bench, finally lying down when I heard Cade’s breath even out.

We wouldn’t be having any more conversations until the ice prince got his beauty rest. Slamming my head back on the pillow, I closed my eyes and fell into an uneasy sleep.

CHAPTER
NINE

Sleep came in fits and starts. I was used to getting little sleep on a job. Once, Declan had me go undercover with one of his rivals. I had spent months in a studio apartment, sharing the space with three other guys from the rival crew. With all of them around, I couldn't sleep more than two or three hours at a stretch.

Cade kept waking me, shifting against the expensive sheets. His breathing would even out, then speed up, then go quiet. It was a cycle I recognized.

Sleep, nightmare, wake.

Sometime around three, my exhaustion finally caught up with me, and I was able to get a good three hours of sleep. The sound of the curtains being opened made me sit up, ready for a fight before my eyes focused.

"Well, you might need a trip back to Rhys sooner than we expected." Cade wrinkled his nose, looking me over.

The tattoos on his arms swirled, ducking beneath the sleeves, leaving his arms bare, looking almost naked. Frowning, I pointed toward his right arm, where the tattoo snake was missing.

"Hey, what happened to the—"

Something wrapped around my ankle. When I looked down, a black snake slithered in tight circles around my leg. Its pink tongue startled me, flicking out twice before it continued climbing.

“Basil,” Cade hissed. “Stop that.”

“Who’s this?” I bent low, unwrapping the snake from my leg, feeling its taut muscles, the thick squeeze as it wrapped around my hand.

It was large, hanging heavy between both my hands. I was no reptile expert, so I didn’t recognize the markings: mostly black, with patches of white that formed diamond shapes and patterns.

When it moved, trying to slither up my arm, I adjusted my grip, keeping it in my hands. I didn’t want it anywhere near my throat.

“This is Basil. He doesn’t know how to *mind his own business*.” Cade was closer than I expected, and I felt like I was the snake, sensing the heat in his skin just by proximity.

He held out his hands, and I offered the snake over. It was large enough that we didn’t have to touch each other in order to exchange it.

When it was in his hands, it stretched out, crawling over his shoulders before settling its head next to his ear.

“Basil?” I asked.

Cade’s face went stony, his lips pursed. “Short for basilisk. I got him when I was young.”

“Basilisk.” I couldn’t help the grin that spread across my face. “You were a fan of the David Duncan books?”

“I was into classics. I hardly believe that anyone would put *David Duncan and the Horrible Fate* on par with Homer or Sophocles. It’s common for mages to read Ancient Greek and Latin. For spellwork.” Cade turned away, but then his head twitched, and he whispered something under his breath to the snake. “No. Stop it.”

“Awww. Is the snake hungry?” I grinned.

“Yes. He’s suggesting that I let him eat you, as he has been a very good boy for the past two days.” Cade glanced at me. “Luckily for you, I think his eyes are bigger than his stomach in this case, and I would *hate* to have to explain to the

veterinarian why I let Basil eat something that overstretched his intestines.”

Cade pressed his palm to the wall next to his bed, and a secret compartment opened up, the wall sliding back to reveal an empty terrarium. Carefully, he detangled the snake from his shoulders and arm, placing it on a large rock in the center. Then he shut the lid and flicked on a red heat lamp.

He pressed his hand to the wall above the terrarium, and it slid back down. Narrowing my eyes, I tried to see the seam or any evidence of what was behind the wall, but it was completely invisible.

With the snake gone, there was nothing in the room to distract us from each other. Cade crossed his arms over his chest, the barest hint of another black tattoo darting out from under his shirt before disappearing again.

“What’s the plan?” I asked.

“The plan.” Cade licked his lips, a quick dart of tongue that reminded me of Basil.

“The plan? Your goal is to find whoever is trying to kill you, isn’t it? So, how are you going to do that?” I put my hands in my pockets, the feel of fabric still buttery soft. Sometimes Declan would play games like this, where he pretended that there wasn’t a job, and then dropped me in the middle of a gunfight.

Cade stared at me, his face going pinched.

“You *have* a plan, right? Your plan isn’t just that I’ll take the bullet for you next time someone tries to kill you.” I raised an eyebrow in disbelief.

“We’re mages. There aren’t bullets.” Cade waved a dismissive hand.

“Still, what am I supposed to do? Follow you around like a puppy? Hope for the best?” I felt my anger mounting. “Have you even started looking? Should I just go around asking people if they’re trying to kill Prince Bartlett?”

“Well, if you think that’s the best way to do it, I leave it to your expertise. I’m no authority, but I think people would be suspicious if you randomly started asking them if they’re the killer.” Cade raised an eyebrow.

“It might work. Wasn’t there an Agatha Christie detective who ended up on a secluded mage estate and had to find the killer?” I asked.

“If you’re suggesting Hercule Poirot went suspect to suspect asking if they were the *killer*—” Cade broke off. “You’re teasing. The plan doesn’t need to be complicated. There will be a lot of eyes on my new consort. Your job is just to keep them off me. To be the good consort.” Cade raised his chin, striding past me toward the bathroom.

I gaped after him, then, irritation mounting, followed him into the bathroom. Cade stood in front of the sink, staring at the glass from last night. When I came in, he glanced at me, then reached for a toothbrush in a gleaming silver holder.

Before he could grab for the toothpaste on the counter, I slapped my hand over it, so close to him I could feel the heat of his skin on mine. The hair on my arms rose, and the growl in my throat felt unnaturally human.

“No,” I managed.

Cade arched an eyebrow, a small smirk playing across his mouth. “No? Who are you to tell me *no*?”

“No. You can’t order me around. I’m not really your consort. I’m your partner—we agreed on that.” I leaned in, aware of how much taller I was than Cade, using my height as an advantage. He might look down on me as a partner in this game, but I could make him look up to me right now. “And as your partner, I’m telling you that walking around and hoping that the killer takes a shot at you isn’t a *plan*. That’s murder.”

Cade’s glare seemed to flow from his face over his arms. The dark black lines of his tattoos reappeared, and he fisted my shirt. I felt the fabric pull tight across my shoulders.

It felt like the start of a fistfight or the sort of hookup that left me satisfied for days. Cade’s eyes dropped to my lips, and

he breathed out harshly, enough that I could feel it on my damp lips.

“Cade, as your partner, I’m telling you that I know how to do this. I know what I’m doing.” I tried to keep the patience in my voice, but I felt his hand tighten. “*Use me.*”

The words felt loaded, and Cade exhaled, the breath brushing over my skin like a touch.

“Fine. How would you do this?” His words were so quiet that they reminded me of the moment during a hunt when the prey would look up, hearing danger in something so subtle, a twig cracking, leaves moving out of sync with the breeze.

I could feel the pressure of Cade’s hand on my chest, as though he wanted to pull back and strike me, but he was controlling himself. The black lines of tattoo raced down his arms, dancing along his fingers, ready to attack me.

“You said the next two days are crucial. That they’d try to strike at us before we bonded.” I worked my jaw back and forth for a moment, inhaling a long breath before forcing out the next words. “You also said a wolf is a status symbol, but you also said you want me to protect you. So, what is it? Is a companion a trophy or a shield?”

Cade breathed in and out, his nostrils flaring. Then he pushed away from me, the weight of his hand gone immediately, leaving a chill on my chest where it had been.

“Both. It’s impossible to explain unless you understand the nuances of magecraft, and most of it is secret.” His nostrils flared again, but he closed his eyes for a half second before opening them, calm forced over his face in a mask he was clearly uncomfortably wearing. “A consort is there to protect you because if they’re hurt, you’re hurt. Their skills, their size and strength, it’s all from a mage’s powers.”

“What?” I shook my head. “How would that be possible?”

“When you form a consort bond, you are given some of a mage’s magic.” Cade cleared his throat, and I could smell the sweat on his skin, as though even revealing that was making him physically ill.

It was more than anyone had ever publicly said about consort bonds, and I felt almost like whispering.

“Tyson’s tattoos last night.” I still remembered the twisting lines that had marked his neck like a scar. “He wasn’t wearing a collar when he came in from hunting.”

“Yes. I think Sonja’s foolish to expose herself like that, but she has her reasons, I suppose.”

“What do you mean?” I narrowed my eyes at him. “How does him not wearing a collar expose her?”

Cade opened his mouth, then shut it, turning to look at me, his eyes narrowed.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “I can’t know what’s weird if I don’t understand what’s normal in this situation.”

“When consorts agree to join with their mage, they are given a gift. However, revealing the magic given tells what the mage chose their consort for.” Cade looked down, flexing his hand, forcing the lines of magic to move.

“What does the magic on Tyson’s neck show?” I glanced at the exposed lines on Cade’s arms. None of it looked like a language I knew.

“Sonja gave him strength and speed. His size was a result of those two spells mixing.” Cade looked toward the window, where afternoon light turned the lawn to a brilliant green.

“How does knowing that turn it into a weakness?” I asked.

“Because it shows what she values—she wants him for his ability to *physically* protect her. Moreover, if she is weakened, the spell will degrade, leaving her exposed to physical attack.” His words were precise, each one a game piece on a chessboard.

I saw it now. “And if her strength is what controls the spell, then weaker mages don’t have the magic for a consort?”

“Yes.” Cade nodded. “It’s more complicated than that, but a consort protects their mage, and their size, their skills are a sign of the mage’s power.”

“In other words, I’m the trophy boyfriend and the bodyguard,” I said. “At the same time.”

Cade’s shoulders slumped, seemingly relieved that I accepted his answer without demanding more. “Yes. There are fewer consorts these days because it’s... magically expensive to maintain one.”

I exhaled. “If you bring me in, are they going to see it as you admitting you need protection or as you trying to show off how powerful you are that you just bought the Hermès purse?”

“If they’re on the council, they might see me as giving in to their demands. If they aren’t, then they’ll see it as me wanting a bodyguard.” Cade narrowed his eyes at me. “That does not make you Kevin Costner.”

“Well.” I pursed my lips and gestured to my chest. “I’d take that as an insult, but I know you mean I’m hotter than Costner, even in his *Field of Dreams* days. What’s involved in this bonding, anyway? Won’t it be obvious that we didn’t if I don’t show up one day looking like I’m on steroids?”

But then I thought about Nia, who’d looked lethal but not muscle-bound.

Cade exhaled. “I cannot—”

“You can’t explain it without breaking the mage pinkie promise,” I said. “Right.”

Dipping his chin, Cade nodded. “It would defeat the purpose if I find the killer but get banished from my own house.”

“Yeah, getting kicked out for letting dirty townies into your rich-boy tree house would really be terrible. You know what else would be bad? If you get killed.” I smirked, and Cade rolled his eyes. “I’ll start asking around. I shake some trees, and we see what rotten apples fall out. Meanwhile, you make a big deal about how powerful I am, how strong. What a great guy I am. How lucky you were that we met and you took me to *museums*.”

“Have you really never been to a museum? They’re in every city. *Thousands* of people go to them every day.” Cade

shook his head in exasperation.

I hid my smile by pulling down the corners of my lips. “Either my shaking or your baiting is going to lure them out into the open. Then we just pull their mask off like a Scooby Doo villain. Voilà, it was the rich banker the whole time.”

“You think it will be that simple?” Cade asked. He snorted softly, and I couldn’t read his blue eyes. I couldn’t tell if he thought my plan was too simple and would inevitably fail or if he needed the reassurance that we’d be able to pull this off.

“Listen, there was one job I had to drag myself halfway across Los Santos, leaving a bloody trail that even a human could follow. The assassin didn’t even think to look for a trap, because who could survive two high-caliber bullets to the torso? Trust me, figuring out who in your house is out to get you can’t be any harder than that.” I raised my eyebrows. “Once we figure out who it is, then we’re the ones who set the trap.”

Cade looked me over, his eyes lingering on my chest. “Two high-caliber bullets?”

“I know what I’m doing,” I promised.

“You’d better. Although do try to keep the bloody trails to a minimum. I like the carpets. They’re Persian and expensive to replace.” Cade reached out, hesitating before laying his hand on my chest, as though he could feel the old injury.

“More like here,” I murmured. Hesitantly, I put my hand on top of his and moved it down lower, to the place on my stomach I’d remembered clutching, blood sluggishly pulsing between my fingers.

When someone knocked on the door, he jerked his hand away, and I was left holding my stomach again, still feeling the echo of the injury.

“Prince Bartlett, your presence is requested.” The voice on the other side of the door sounded nervous. “Urgently?”

“No. I’m busy.” Cade exhaled, closing his eyes.

“Cade,” a second voice shouted. “Get your ass out here, or I’m coming in to get you.”

CHAPTER TEN

Cade swore, rolling his eyes up to the ceiling. “We have to go. I don’t think whoever is behind the assassination attempts will attack us right now, but if they do, you can shift into your wolf form. I can protect myself; your concern should be your own safety.”

My stomach dropped out. I couldn’t shift, and he didn’t know.

“Who’s going to pay me five hundred thousand dollars if you’re dead?” I said pointedly.

“Oh, well, in that case, go ahead and save my life first. Put yourself in the middle of a magecraft fight.” When someone pounded on the door again, Cade turned toward it, his head jerking with irritation. Waving his hand, I saw three slices of tattoo reach toward the door before Cade spoke. “Isaac! Give us a minute! We have to get dressed!”

A new voice came through, softer, but I could hear the smile in it. “Take your time. We’ll be in the formal dining room.”

The tattoos fell from the door, slithering up Cade’s fingers and freezing on his forearm. There must be a way to break the silencing spell, like a magical intercom. “We’d better go quickly before Isaac starts destroying furniture.”

Cade turned back to the closet, and I swallowed. He was also relying on me—he was *trusting* me to keep him safe—and I hadn’t been truthful with him about what I could do.

“Wait.” I counted two breaths, buying myself time as Cade turned, a frown between his brows. “There’s something I have to tell you.”

When I didn’t say anything else, Cade rolled his wrist, gesturing with his fingers. “My cousin is not the most patient man. He was being serious when he said that his next step was to break down the door.”

“I can’t shift.” The words felt wrong in my mouth, no matter how true I knew they were. My mother had always said being a werewolf wasn’t about your shift. It wasn’t about the wolf you could bring out, how big it was, how strong. Being a werewolf was who you were. It was your pack name. It was the smell of the wilds burrowing itself into your brain.

But there was no arguing that a werewolf who couldn’t shift wasn’t much protection. Declan wouldn’t have kept me around if I hadn’t been able to shift when I needed to.

“I saw you fight that wolf,” Cade said. But his eyes were moving back and forth over me, as though he was just now realizing that I had fought JD while fully human. “You can’t shift?”

“Temporarily.” I kept my answer short because I had to believe it was only temporary. There was no way this could be a permanent change, someone stripping me of the part of myself that made sense, of the piece of me that was still part of my family, no matter how dead they were.

“How? What happened?” Cade crossed his arms in front of his chest, frowning down at my bare feet before dragging his eyes up over the rest of my body.

“Whatever drugs the two werewolf hunters gave me affected my ability to shift. They were getting their supplies from some con artist in the valley. But, it turns out, even con artists can be right twice a day.” Crossing my arms, I fisted my hands before relaxing.

“When will you be able to shift again?” Cade asked.

I fisted my hands so tightly that my nails bit my palms. “I don’t know. This is the first time I’ve been kidnapped and

given some sketchy black-market drug by werewolf hunters because of the bounty my employer put out on my head.” I raised my eyebrows. “If it’s a problem, it will be *my* problem. Like you said, you can take care of yourself.”

“Yes.” Cade looked me over again, nodding. “I can.”

As he turned back to the closet, he said, “*Ex*-employer.”

“What?” I asked.

“Your ex-employer put a bounty on your head. *I’m* your current employer.” Then he was in the closet, and I wasn’t sure what response he expected.

With nothing to do, I sat back down on the bench I had slept on and stared at my hands, willing them to shift, desperate to see the sharp point of claws, the dusting of fur. I could hear Cade moving in the closet, the scrape of hangers on the bar. I found myself straining to hear the shift of cloth, the rustle of fabric as it dragged over his skin.

When he came out, he was fully dressed in an outfit that looked identical to the one from the night before. High-necked shirt, suit jacket, tight slacks, boots.

My gaze lingered on the boots, remembering the feel of them grinding against my cheek. Had that been less than a day ago?

“If it’s true that you can’t shift, I’ll put some protection spells on your clothes. I can’t put the spell on you—there’s a chance it would make you explode.” Cade threw clothing at me.

I caught them and found a high-necked shirt like the one he wore, as well as a pair of pants. Holding the shirt up against my chest, I tugged it down slightly. “These aren’t going to fit me.”

Cade huffed a sigh and stepped forward. I sniffed the air as he got closer. Something about his scent was familiar now. As though sleeping in the same room as him made my body recognize him in a way I hadn’t with any of my previous roommates.

“You couldn’t have brought your own clothes?” Cade’s eyes were on the cloth, his thumb stroking over the fabric.

“It’s not like I packed an *overnight bag* for my own kidnapping,” I muttered.

“Yes, well, plan better next time.” Cade’s eyes flashed, going stark black, small pinpricks of light appearing in the dark, as though when I stared at his eyes, I was traveling through space.

I felt the fabric shift, lengthening under my hands. The black lines moved along Cade’s arms, shifting quickly into forms I didn’t recognize.

Then he stepped back, gesturing with his hand. “Hurry. Try it on.”

I stood, pulling off the soft cotton shirt I had worn to bed and pushing down the pants. Cade inhaled sharply, and I hadn’t realized how close he was still standing.

His eyes were fixed on my groin, and I looked down, realizing that I hadn’t been wearing any underwear. Slowly, I stepped out of the pants. Every brush of the fabric against my skin felt loaded, suddenly taking on more meaning.

Cade’s eyes flew to mine, the chilly blue cracked. I could see the deep water flowing beneath the ice. A warm flush rose on his cheeks. He turned away first, striding back to his bedside table and fussing with a watch and his phone.

I put on the clothes, pants dragging over my calves and thighs. The fabric looked expensive, but they felt like jeans, slightly thicker but giving me enough range of movement that I would be able to fight if I had to. Then I lifted the shirt, pulling it over my head. The sweats last night had been the softest thing that I’d ever put on, but this was somehow even softer. I rubbed a hand over my chest, luxuriating in the feel.

Adjusting the fall of the shirt, I said, “I’m decent.”

Cade turned around, all color gone from his face. He finished fastening his watch. “If anyone asks, we’ll tell them that we’ve already bonded, but you’re uncomfortable wearing the collar in public, so you’re wearing high-necked shirts until

you get used to the feel of the collar.” Cade’s eyes fell to my bare feet. “Shoes.”

“I had shoes last night. I think I left them in the shower.” I shrugged. The entire experience had been tainted by Tyson’s arrival.

“Oh, normally, they bring laundry in after I leave for the day. But...” Cade pressed his palm to a section of wall next to the door, and it slid open. I wasn’t familiar enough with magic to tell, but it resembled his hidden pet cage. Inside was a large space with a dumbwaiter. My clean clothes and boots were neatly stacked inside.

Stepping back, Cade gestured, and I took all of my clothing out, sitting back down on the bench to put on my socks and boots. They were leather, black boots that worked just as well when I wanted to kick in a door as when I walked silently through an apartment building until I found the right door to kick in.

Someone had shined them, giving them a soft gloss that made them look almost new. As I put my foot in, I heard a crinkle of paper and pulled loose a note. Someone had gone to the trouble of hiding it in my clothes, and I glanced at the words as I palmed it.

You need to leave. I know who you are.

My blood froze, and I swallowed, hiding the note in my sock as I made a show of adjusting my shoes.

“So, your cousin.” I tugged on the laces. My heartbeat was so loud. How could Cade not hear it? “Is there anything I should know?”

Cade shook his head sharply, but I gave him a narrow-eyed look. “Is there anything that a lover would know about him?”

Cade didn’t seem to notice my jerky movements, his gaze slightly unfocused as he thought over my question. I had to calm down. Compartmentalize.

I’d been doing that for eleven years. This was nothing. So, someone knew my connection to Cade. If they wanted me dead, they would have told him.

“Isaac is likely angry because he didn’t know I was seeing you.” Cade looked down, his fingers twitching for a moment before he shook his head again.

“Do you trust him?” I asked.

Cade looked at me, his eyes narrowed, and I got the feeling that he was trying to say he didn’t trust anyone. Except me, because he had told me a lot of secrets in twenty-four hours.

No. I could already see what he was going to say if I suggested that. I was his employee. He was paying me—that was different than trusting someone who wasn’t getting money from him.

“You can’t tell him? You’re afraid that he might be the person who tried to assassinate you?”

“No.” Cade’s negative was immediate. “He has even less reason than Sonja does to want House Bartlett to fall. He is my lieutenant.” There was a very slight pause before the word, as though Cade had been searching for one that fit the position. “My right hand. My fortunes are his fortunes. If I rise, he rises. If I fall... well, he likely would sacrifice himself to save me.”

“So why not just tell him? Wouldn’t he be able to help us sell this thing? People will buy our whirlwind romance better if someone had met me before I arrived. Otherwise, I’m just the gold digger showing up on granddad’s arm at the family reunion.” I frowned, but Cade’s head twitched *no*.

“Isaac is very honest by nature. And his consort is not the most discreet.”

“Is his consort more of a gossip than Rhys?” I asked. “Because Rhys got a good view of me yesterday, and they know you and I weren’t bonded when they magically waxed me like a classic Chevy.”

“We cannot tell Isaac or his consort the truth,” Cade said with such finality that I knew the subject was closed.

I stood, brushing my hands over the shirt and pants. Cade presented me with a jacket that fit, and suddenly, I looked like one of Declan’s personal bodyguards. That was never a position I had aspired to, because they spent more of their time

fending off angry paramours, and I preferred to keep my fights clean. Getting clawed in the face by three-inch acrylic nails wasn't an experience I wanted to repeat.

Cade stepped close, looking up at me. He tugged the jacket straight and brushed an invisible piece of lint off my shoulder.

Something in his face told me he wanted to ask if I was ready, if I had memorized all my lines, the understudy ready for the matinee showing.

I shot him a smirk. "This is someone who *likes* you, right? This is a piece of cake."

Cade shot me a withering look. "Unfortunately for both of us, the people who like me and the people who can kill me overlap in Isaac."

When he opened the door, the hallway was empty. Cade waited for me to walk out before shutting the door. Small tendrils of magic slipped off his fingers, moving into the cracks around the door.

"What's that for?" I asked.

Cade's lips pursed, and his voice was short with irritation. "I like to know who goes in and out of my room."

Cade stared at the door for another moment, his hand hovering over a carving of a large bear. Then he turned, tugging on his jacket and striding down the hallway, not looking over his shoulder to check if I was with him. He took the stairs, and I caught up with him.

"Who else lives in the house with you?" I heard people on the ground floor, the soft murmur of voices. Straining my ears, I could hear they were talking about cleaning and household logistics. Servants.

It had to be one of them who'd left the note. Or someone who'd paid them to get access to me. I'd need to find out who they were before they revealed me, but I couldn't do that standing next to Cade.

When Cade glanced at me, I raised my shoulder in a shrug. "We need to know who has access to you. Who else could be a

threat.”

“Technically, all of the senior members of House Bartlett have rooms here, but most of them live in their own houses on the property. Before he met his consort, Isaac lived here, but now he and Jay reside by themselves.” Cade’s face was blank, as though it didn’t bother him at all to be the only one in a house that no one else could stand living in.

We turned right at the bottom of the stairs, heading past the small reading room that Sonja and Petrona had confronted me in. Cade turned to a set of open double doors.

Looking around, I understood why Cade was concerned about Isaac breaking furniture in this room. Crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling, and the walls were cream with gold accents. The wooden floor gleamed.

Anything in here would cost thousands of dollars to repair. The two men in the room looked up when we entered. A brown-haired one sat at the long table, his thumb on his phone. The other paced behind him.

He had blond hair, although not nearly as white as Cade’s. When he saw us, he bared his teeth in a mockery of a smile.

One sniff told me that the seated man was a werewolf, while the pacing man was human.

“Prince Bartlett. *Thank* you for *gracing* us with your presence. We are so grateful for the opportunity to meet you and your *consort*.” At the last, his voice rose into nearly a roar, the word becoming an accusation.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

“The consort I didn’t even know about! The one *Leon* had to tell me about!” The blond’s words decreased in volume, although the venom in them had to sting. Based on the bitterness and his scent, I pegged him as Isaac, the second-in-command.

Cade’s shoulders tensed, but his breathing stayed relaxed. Short breath in, long breath out.

Ignoring the other man, he walked to the head of the table. I glanced at the setup. Isaac’s partner, the werewolf, had left the seat at the right of the head empty. That was where Isaac would sit.

As I followed Cade, I could feel two sets of eyes on me. I stared down the werewolf first, an old habit because in most situations, the wolf was the one I was worried about. Then again, I had spent eleven years avoiding mages, so I might need to change my standard practice.

The wolf immediately averted his gaze, looking down and to the side, tilting his head to show his neck. I frowned at the quick sign of submission. Up close, I could see his delicate features, a fine nose, plush lips, eyelashes that fanned across his cheeks.

Last night, Tyson had been aggressive, every bit the alpha werewolf. Nia hadn’t shown any signs of dominance or submission. She had definitely been a wolf, but it was as though she was trying to tell me she didn’t play the hierarchy

games that most of us learned as soon as we could toddle over and grab our siblings' hair to grind their faces into the dirt.

Cade took his seat without saying anything, and I pulled out the chair on his left, slouching in it, making every move pointed and heavy. Isaac's partner had already shown submission, but I didn't understand it. Was it a trick? Was he trying to pull something?

"Miles, this is Isaac and his consort, Jay." Cade gestured to each of them in turn.

I dragged my eyes away from Jay to find that Isaac was glaring at me, a protective hand curved around Jay's shoulder.

"Nice to meet you." I kept the words short, looking between them, trying to read the relationship.

"What is this, Cade?" Isaac still stood next to Jay, his hand tight on his consort's shoulder.

Cade shook his head, leaning forward and gripping his hands tightly together. "What *is* this? I found a consort. *You* did. Sonja did. Why is everyone acting like I walked stark naked into House Morrison and offered a complete surrender of all of our positions?"

I kept my face neutral, years of listening to Declan make equally strange pronouncements keeping me from any show of surprise. Even I knew that House Morrison was the mage house gunning for House Bartlett. I didn't know any of the details, but from my understanding, they were growing faster than House Bartlett, becoming more powerful every year.

"Because none of us have even heard of this werewolf." Isaac released his consort's shoulder.

"I've heard of you," I said. Cade threw me a narrow-eyed look, but I hadn't learned to gamble at Declan's tables without learning how to bluff. "Isaac Bartlett. Cade's second. You're the only one in this house he trusts. I look forward to working with you to keep him and the house safe."

Isaac's eyes widened, then narrowed, his jaw tightening before he managed to say, "You look forward to working together?"

I fought the urge to sit up straight, to act as though I had done something wrong. It wasn't even a real lie. I did have House Bartlett's best intentions at heart. Or, I had *Cade* Bartlett's best intentions at heart. Cade was my ticket to five hundred thousand dollars and the freedom from Declan's bounty on my head.

"What did you tell him?" Isaac turned to Cade, dismissing me with a glance.

"I told him what he needed to know," Cade said, his tone solemn. "I didn't lie to him."

Through careful control, I didn't roll my eyes, since getting information from Cade had been about as easy as pulling a lion's teeth without anesthesia.

"He told you what you need to know? He told you that *three people* have died? That his car was bombed? That the entire Firefly Lounge was poisoned while he was having a drink there? He told you that?" Isaac stared at me, but my poker face was better than anyone else's on Declan's crew.

I didn't give away anything. Not even the twinge I felt when I heard the name Firefly Lounge. That was one of Declan's favorite establishments because people paid for the prestige of going, when Declan paid the same for vodka when he charged forty dollars a drink at Firefly or ten dollars a drink at one of his less exclusive bars. I hadn't heard about a poisoning there, which meant that Declan had kept it secret. He would have had some people in on it. Who? JD?

It didn't matter that it happened after I was already on the run. My first instinct was to make sure Declan and the organization were protected from any blowback.

"He told me people were killed," I said.

"*Three* of ours dead. Half the nightclub is still in the hospital, even two weeks later. And then he brings in you?"

Isaac paced forward, circling behind Cade until he was in my space.

Oh. I didn't need to look at Jay to understand the dynamic now. In every room I had ever been in, werewolves clawed for

dominance between each other, but humans and mages were usually left out of the fray. Jay wasn't the one I would have to fight for dominance in this situation. Isaac was.

I stared at him, completely silent, waiting.

He blinked first, pushing his hands into his hair. He turned back to Cade. "Where did you even pick him up? You never said you were seeing someone. Why didn't you tell me?"

The last question had a cut of hurt in it, as though Isaac cared less about me personally and more about the fact that he hadn't known about the fictional relationship Cade and I were in. It felt more personal than Sonja's irritation.

"We met before the poisoning. I had a conversation with Leon a couple of days ago." Cade looked away. "He told me what's being said behind council doors."

Isaac blew out a loud breath but walked over to the chair on Cade's right side and sat down.

"And what is the high-and-mighty council saying?" Isaac asked, but his tone made it clear he already had a good idea.

"The council isn't going to approve me until I have a consort. They feel, given what happened with my parents..." Cade's face went pale, but he straightened his back, looking around at us. "I was going to ask Miles anyway. I knew as soon as I met him he would make a good consort. This just moved the timetable up."

Something cold settled in my stomach as I absorbed all the information. The casual reference to Cade's parents made me shiver. It was the first time he'd spoken about them explicitly. Although, apparently he assumed we all knew what happened to them.

I wasn't sure what to make of Leon telling him what was said behind council doors. Was Leon on the council? I thought he was a butler, but the way Cade and Isaac exchanged glances, it was clear I didn't understand his full position in House Bartlett.

"And you?" Jay spoke, his voice light. He offered me a twitch of a smile, still shrinking back when I looked at him.

I might have gone a little bit too hard on the display of dominance.

“I like what Cade is offering me.” I wanted to let that be it, but now I had both Jay’s and Isaac’s attention. Jay looked almost friendly, but suspicion clouded Isaac’s eyes. “I have no pack name. No last name. A home is something I haven’t had in a long time.”

Now even Cade was looking at me with a slight frown between his brows, which cleared immediately when I looked at him.

“See? Everything is fine.” Cade dragged his eyes away from me to focus on Isaac. “What are you worried about?”

“I worry about everything.” Isaac’s shoulders slumped. He scrubbed his hands through his hair again before pulling it straight. With the anger wiped off his face, he looked younger, maybe only a year or two older than Cade. He was definitely too young for the position he held. “I worry about the optics of bringing in a wolf when we still haven’t found the attackers. It makes you look weak. I worry about the fact that we haven’t caught whoever is behind the attacks. I worry about Trish’s family. They’re making noise about compensation for her life. If they leave, that would be a major blow to House Bartlett.”

Cade waved his hand. “The Jennings are always upset about something.”

“They lost their eldest daughter.” Isaac’s brows drew together again, and this time, he looked horrified at Cade’s callousness instead of angry. “This isn’t like the time you dug up their entire prize rose garden. This is something anyone would be angry about.”

Noise in the corridor tore my attention away from the conversation. I was half out of my seat when Jay tilted his head, hearing it.

“Dinner,” he said, his voice so quiet it was clearly intended for Isaac’s ears alone.

Isaac glanced at the door just as two servants brought in trays of food.

We sat in uncomfortable silence as they took the coverings off, revealing a first course of salad. The green lettuce was crisp, as though someone had gone out into a garden and picked it five minutes before dinner. The color was perfect, deep red edging that faded into a bright green. It was topped with perfect cherry tomatoes and carrots. Dressing was on the side, a small container that smelled like balsamic. We waited for the servants to withdraw before turning back to the conversation at hand.

I memorized their faces, although neither servant had looked at me at all. One of them might have left the note or know who did.

“If the Jennings leave, they take the Franks with them, and the Franks *are* powerful.” Isaac stabbed violently at his salad.

Cade scraped the tines of his fork around the edge of the plate for a moment. “A few minor cousins leave. It’s not a big deal.”

“It will *be* a big deal. It’ll be a big deal when everyone else treats it like a chance to jump ship.” Isaac glared down at his plate, and Jay reached over, putting his hand on Isaac’s forearm.

Isaac turned to him with a smile, one so gentle that he didn’t even look like the same person. For a moment, I could see the bubble that surrounded them, as though they were something special, and the rest of us were just living in their world.

“We will find the killer. When we do, I will ascend, and I can put an end to this nonsense.” Cade said each word distinctly, as though it was a mantra he had been telling himself.

“Is that something you’re going to help with?” Jay asked me.

Surprised, I looked at him. It was an incisive question, one I was sure that Isaac shared. Slowly, I nodded. “I want to find who’s behind the attacks.”

“Well, his arrival did stir up a hornet’s nest.” Isaac ate more of his salad, looking considerably less homicidal. “Did he tell you any details? Or did he just make the murders sound vague so you felt like a romance hero coming to save the mage prince?”

“Your details *were* a little sparse,” I said, smiling at Cade.

Ignoring the sharp, annoyed look that Cade sent my way, I took a bite of my own salad. The greens were delicious, fresh and perfect in my mouth, with exactly the right amount of crunch when I chewed.

“If he’s going to protect you, he has every right to all the information available,” Jay said quietly. His shoulders were hunched, and he was glancing at Cade out of the corner of his eyes, his left hand gripping his fork tightly. The discussion had made him tense, and I felt even worse about pushing for dominance with him earlier.

I didn’t need to know his life story to understand that wolves without packs didn’t always start out without them. More often than not, the story behind why they were alone was horrible and violent. Not that I knew anything about that.

“I have a bit of experience with security,” I said, gesturing vaguely. “Another set of eyes might help.”

“Yes, well, forgive me for wanting to keep the illusion longer. Feel free to shatter it with my complete inadequacy.” Cade gestured at Isaac with his free hand, finishing his own salad and using a napkin to dab at his mouth. He leaned his face on his hand. “Go on.”

“A month and a half ago, while Cade was on his way to a meeting with House Morrison, his car exploded. It flipped over, rolling, killing the driver and the secretary with him. I did the investigation myself afterward. The explosion was set on a time delay, meaning that it wasn’t location or distance that set it off.” Isaac pushed away his unfinished salad.

“You think that means it was someone here at House Bartlett,” I said.

“I don’t know what to think. The car had been out for repairs the day before because our on-site mechanic couldn’t handle it. There was a chance that someone else got to it in town, but because it was a time delay, they might not have even been targeting Cade.” Isaac frowned at Cade. “They might have been intending for a larger explosion that would take out a piece of the property.”

“Or they knew that that car specifically had been off property.” I considered where that thought led. “Meaning that someone from House Bartlett could cover their tracks.”

Isaac’s lips tightened. He had thought the same thing.

“A time-delayed explosion is a lot different than a poisoning,” I pointed out. “Are you sure it was the same person?”

“No.” Isaac shook his head. “Firefly Lounge is a club that services a specific kind of clientele.”

I didn’t say anything. I knew better than most what kind of people visited Declan’s high-end mage bar. I had only been called on a few times to deal with issues there, and almost always, it was a mage that had gotten too drunk or too high for their own good. Luckily, when they were that drunk or high, mages were usually more damage to themselves than Declan’s property.

“It was a magical poison?” I looked between Cade and Isaac, figuring out what they weren’t saying. “Meaning the target was mages or a specific mage. How many of the houses were there?”

“A great many,” Cade said.

“Including House Morrison?” I asked.

“A minor cousin and his entourage,” Cade said.

“But you were the highest-ranking member of a house there,” I guessed.

“Meaning the rest of the houses blame us for the attack,” Isaac said. “Because Cade didn’t even get sick.”

“You didn’t get sick?” I frowned.

“No. I reacted faster than most once I sensed the poison,” Cade said shortly.

“What did staff say? What did the owners say? There’s security at every entrance and exit, including magical security. How would someone have even gotten a poison like that inside?” I frowned down at my salad, then took another bite. The first vegetables in four weeks, and I couldn’t even enjoy them. “Did you talk to...”

I trailed off, realizing I was about to reveal my connection to Declan. If Cade wanted us keeping our relationship secret, then I was pretty sure I wasn’t supposed to reveal I had been Declan’s right hand up until two weeks before the poisoning.

Cade stared at me, his face suddenly pale as though he was just now realizing we hadn’t come up with a cover story. I offered him a smirk. I’d been undercover before; I knew what I was doing. He frowned, lips tightening, and I could practically see his rolled eyes.

“By the time any of the houses got there, the place was cleared out. The staff was gone. The office was burned. We’re pretty sure it was owned by Declan Monroe, but no one can figure out a motive for him wanting to kill a member of our house, or any other house for that matter.” Isaac shook his head, hand clenched around his fork.

Jay reached out, putting his hand on Isaac’s shoulder. Isaac’s whole body relaxed, and he turned toward Jay with a smile. Some visceral part of my brain gave me a flashback. My mother hunched over, face in her hands. My father behind her, placing both hands on her shoulders and leaning down to kiss her temple.

I stared down at my food, eating everything on the plate mechanically. When my vision cleared, the past gone just like my parents, I turned to Cade with a frown.

“Why Firefly Lounge? Who suggested meeting there?”

“Prince Bartlett,” a voice interrupted.

Jay jumped noticeably, and I wasn’t much better, jerking around to see whoever had snuck up on me. The last time I’d

failed to hear someone approach, it was because I'd been so sick I was hallucinating. I'd been laid up with a bacterial chest infection that had me feverish and seeing ghosts. Declan had actually shown up himself with his personal doctor in tow because I'd put the wolf he'd told to take me to the hospital through a wall.

Leon stood in the doorway, flanked by two servants. Cade placed his fork on his plate with an audible click.

“Leon,” he greeted. “Join us for dinner.”

CHAPTER
TWELVE

Leon bowed his head. "I would be honored."

He strode into the room, the servants behind him keeping up with quick steps. As they set out dinner, one of them murmured that she would go get another plate. I watched her leave. Had she looked at me a moment too long?

Leon stood next to my chair for a long moment, something pinched in his expression. Isaac glanced between him and me, and I quickly realized what the problem was. Isaac had taken the seat to Cade's right, and it seemed like Leon was used to the seat on his left.

The seat I was now sitting in.

He pulled out the chair next to me, and I picked up my fork to dig in but realized everyone else was waiting. Carefully, I placed it back down.

Jay and I both tensed at running footsteps, but they slowed before they reached the door, and the servant walked through it, slightly uneven breathing the only sign that she had run all the way from the kitchen.

"Prince Bartlett, were you able to bond?" Leon looked between me and Cade. "Sonja and Petrona both saw that he arrived unbonded. They... informed the others."

"Yes," Cade said simply.

I suddenly felt three pairs of eyes focused on my neck, covered by the high collar of the shirt. I looked across the table

at Jay. His collar was a simple strip of black leather. At my gaze, he raised a hand to it self-consciously.

“Yes? You have bonded?” Leon said.

“That’s what he said, isn’t it?” Isaac snapped. “What business is it for the council, anyway?”

“The council needs some reassurance that Cade has not allowed an unbonded werewolf to wander our grounds freely.” Leon’s lip pulled up for a half second, a hint of a sneer that was quickly covered. “You *know* why.”

He looked at Cade for the last, his tone sympathetic. But I saw the expression on Cade’s face. He was pale, his lips practically bloodless.

“Cade would never do anything that would endanger House Bartlett,” Isaac said. “And *you* were the one whispering in his ear that he needed a consort.”

“I was advising. As is my duty as seneschal of House Bartlett.” This time, Leon’s lip did more than twitch. It twisted up. “Remind me, what is your position in the house, Isaac? You aren’t even *on* the council, so you’re a... what? Unemployed member of the house?”

Isaac bared his teeth, ready to snark back. I glanced between them, trying to make the math make sense. Cade had presented Isaac as his second, calling him his lieutenant. But was it an informal role? One that Cade had assigned him rather than an official one in the house structure?

“This is delicious,” Cade said. The sound of his chewing seemed loud in the silence that had fallen between Leon and Isaac’s sniping.

I looked down at the plate. The meat looked like some sort of poultry, the skin crispy and honey colored. There were vegetables and a small serving of mashed potatoes.

Cutting myself my own piece of the meat, I put it in my mouth. I didn’t recognize it. “What is this?”

“Duck,” Jay said quietly. “One of the chef’s specialties.”

Leon and Isaac were still glaring at each other, but when Jay pressed a hand to Isaac's wrist, he began moving it mechanically to cut up his food.

"Well," Leon said to me. "Now that you are bonded, will you take on the consort duties for Prince Bartlett?"

"Consort duties?" I nearly choked on my bite.

My mind flashed to the large four-poster bed in Cade's room. I imagined myself on the sheets, spread open for him. Or maybe he preferred it the other way, his cool, blue eyes staring up at me from a tangle of sweaty sheets.

I swallowed, reaching for one of the glasses in front of me. I took a gulp of wine, the liquid dry and burning my throat as I drank too much, too fast. There was no way that Leon was *implying*—

"As Isaac has been performing them for so long, perhaps he can instruct you," Leon said pointedly.

There was the sound of shattering from where Isaac had knocked his wineglass into his water glass. He ignored it, though, his eyes fixed on Leon.

"You dare—"

Servants swept back into the room, clearing the mess quickly, placing new glasses in front of Isaac, and pouring him fresh glasses of wine and water. Frowning, I looked toward the door where they had disappeared.

Now that I was paying attention, I could hear them in the hallway, their breathing quiet. So, the people at this table liked the *appearance* of privacy but never *had* any.

Was that how one of them had figured out who I was? No, I hadn't done anything to give myself away. Maybe the note had nothing at all to do with my family and everything to do with Declan and who I'd been only a few weeks ago.

I dragged my focus back to the table, where a second Cold War brewed between Leon and Isaac.

"I would love any pointers," I said firmly. I smiled at Isaac, trying to make it friendly, but all of my friendly smiles

were tinged with a hint of *You know what happens to people who don't pay Declan Monroe*.

“Did you come here just to discuss business?” Cade sounded annoyed, pushing a green bean around his plate, his nostrils flaring once before he looked up, his cool eyes fixed on Leon.

“As seneschal, I came to check on you, my prince. You came home very late last night with an unknown werewolf.” He didn't even glance at me, dismissing me with his intense focus on Cade. “I know I advised you to find a consort, but this was rather rash. This was not what I—or the council—intended.”

“What did you intend, then?” I asked. I cut one of the petite carrots in half and put it in my mouth, speaking around the food. “When you put the bug in his ear that he needed to get hitched?”

The sweetness of the carrot contrasted with sea salt that had been roasted into it, softening the skin. It was possibly the most delicious vegetable I had ever eaten. I couldn't enjoy any of it, too focused on Leon next to me.

“What I said to Prince Bartlett was said in confidence,” Leon said severely. He frowned at Cade. “Is that what you told him? That you were desperate?”

Cade bristled. “What I say to my consort is none of your, or the council's, concern,” Cade said. “Isn't that the point? That I have someone of my own to keep my confidence and give me advice?”

“It's not, and you know it. Prince Bartlett, when I advised you on the council's thinking, I expected you to make a cogent, thoughtful decision. I told you out of respect and thought that the information would be useful to you moving forward.” Leon shook his head. When he cut into his meat, he pushed too hard, his knife grinding against the porcelain. “All I want is the best for you.”

“You have made that *very* clear,” Cade said, his voice arctic.

I looked around the table in one sweeping glance, the same way I might look around a barroom brawl to try to figure out who all the players were and what they each wanted. Cade had completely shut down. Any irritation or warmth he had been expressing when it was just us was gone. Leon's presence had turned him into the ice prince I first met. Isaac was still bristling, his breath coming with the evenness of force, as though he was willing himself into a calmness he didn't feel. Beside him, Jay was trying to become as small as he possibly could, a difficult feat for an adult man.

Leon was matching Cade icicle for icicle. His frustration was clear. Apparently, he wanted Cade to become the prince he wasn't: the perfect mage prince that Cade presented in public, which he failed to live up to in his own home.

Where did that leave me? I swallowed the last of my carrots, wishing this was the sort of table where I could request seconds.

"So, Isaac. What sort of duties will I be expected to perform?" I asked, pointedly ignoring Leon.

Isaac blinked at me, frowning for a split second before that forced calm took over again. "Normally, a consort's duties are exclusively guaranteeing the safety of your partner, but as you are consort to the prince, you will also be concerned with the safety of House Bartlett. Your duties include making sure that his needs are met."

Beside him, Jay choked on a bite of his mashed potatoes, and the look that Isaac threw him was exasperated.

"His *needs*. I assume that's a job with a lot of different *positions*," I said wryly, just to see if I could get an even larger reaction. Jay swallowed large gulps of water, and Isaac narrowed his eyes at me, as though he could tell what I was up to.

"His needs for transportation, his needs for new clothes or a specific item for his spellwork." Isaac raised his eyebrows. "Unless you need instruction on how to meet his other needs?"

“A consort is much more than a glorified secretary,” Leon spat out.

I turned my body to the side so I was facing him, leaning one of my elbows on the table and resting my chin on my hand. “You have a different idea of what my duties should be, *Leo*?”

Leon’s eye twitched at the shortening of his name, and he inhaled deeply through his nose. “A consort is the other half of his partner. He needs to provide everything before his partner asks. His partner’s secrets become his own; his partner’s needs take precedence over his own. If there is one cup of water left, it should always go to Prince Bartlett. You should go thirsty and hungry and sleepless until he is sated and rested.”

Even my experience playing poker with Declan’s crew couldn’t help me mask the disgust I felt. That was the mentality that everyone assumed mages had when it came to werewolves. Everyone assumed that mages thought werewolves were nothing more than slaves, indentured servants whose existence—whose only purpose—was to satisfy a mage’s needs.

My lip peeled back from my teeth. “Is that so?”

Leon huffed out a breath, shaking his head. “You’ve become consort to the most important man in House Bartlett, the strongest house on this side of the country, what used to be the strongest house in the entire hemisphere, and you don’t even know what’s expected of you?”

He glared at me, the frustration evident. I didn’t rise to the bait.

Instead, I turned back to Cade. “Is that what you want from me? To meet your every need? To give you the last drop of water if I was dying of thirst?”

Cade didn’t respond for a long minute, and then he put down his silverware, placing his palms flat on the table. “Leon. I appreciate your advice and your dedication to House Bartlett, but I will be managing my consort any way I choose.”

“My prince—” Leon stopped when Cade held up a hand.

“This is not up for discussion. You have served me and my father well. You are the seneschal of House Bartlett, so I understand your concerns. But I am the prince. My decisions are final.”

Silence fell over the table, and I looked up to see Isaac smirking, even as Leon frowned.

He shook his head. “All I care for is this house.”

“No one is saying you don’t,” Cade said.

Before he could say anything else, servants entered quietly, taking away the dinner plates and replacing them with desserts from a tray. It was a chocolate mousse, whipped so perfectly that the ripples in it looked like waves in the ocean. When I used the small spoon provided to take a bite, my taste buds came alive, the sugary sweet cut with a salty caramel layer underneath. I took another spoonful immediately.

“I understand,” Leon said with a sigh. He turned to me, and I couldn’t read the emotion behind his eyes, although his mouth was pulled in a tight, flat line. “Should you need any help, any explanation, anything to make your job easier, don’t hesitate to ask.”

I raised my eyebrows at the quick turn. Swallowing the dessert in my mouth, I nodded. “Thank you.”

“You’ll need some help orienting yourself,” Jay said quietly. “I’m sure Prince Bartlett will be too busy, but I’ll come get you first thing in the morning and give you a tour of the estate.”

I offered a genuine smile. “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

The corner of Jay’s lips lifted, but he hid it by eating another spoonful of dessert.

I expected the rest of the meal to focus on other topics. There had to be something other than Cade’s bad life choices that they wanted to talk about. But, to my surprise, the rest of the meal was nearly silent.

There was one question I had, and I waited until Leon was scraping the last bite of mousse out of his bowl.

“Why is it important that I was unbonded when I arrived? Cade said he wanted me to come so that I could meet everyone. To see if I could fill the role of his consort before we bonded permanently.” I remembered how insistent Cade had been. There was clearly something here I wasn’t understanding, and I didn’t like it.

Leon set down his spoon. But when he raised his chin, he wasn’t looking at me. “The last time unbonded wolves set foot on this property was eleven years ago, when they killed Prince Bartlett’s parents.”

My stomach dropped out. I knew the story. It was impossible not to. But something in me wanted to hear this man’s version of it. How twisted would it be? How wrong?

“The alpha who wanted to become the ‘Emperor Wolf’”—the disdain dripped off Leon’s words—“answered an invitation from King Bartlett and his wife. She arrived with her partner as *honored guests* of House Bartlett. King Bartlett wished to have *peace*; he wished to show *kindness*. The wolves stayed two nights. On the second, just after midnight, they snuck through the house and killed Prince Bartlett’s parents. Prince Bartlett was there. It was only my quick thinking that saved him. That is why we do not allow unbonded wolves anywhere on the property. Any unbonded wolves found will be killed immediately.”

Cade had gone so white his skin almost matched his hair. I couldn’t look away from the expression on his face, as though some long-distant fear had been brought back to the surface.

When I tore my eyes away, looking back at Leon, his face was almost expressionless. Then he turned to me, and I saw that hint of a sneer lingering on his lip. “Any more questions, Consort Bartlett?”

I shook my head. Something clattered, Cade’s metal spoon falling against the porcelain bowl. He stood.

“My consort and I are going to retire.”

He was out the door quickly, but I managed to grab my last bite of dessert and stand in the same movement.

“Thanks for the food,” I said. “My compliments to the chef and all. I’ll see you in the morning, Jay.”

I strode after Cade, catching up with him quickly. He didn’t say anything until we were back in his room. I turned to close the door behind me but felt something shoot over my shoulder. A bolt of magic slammed the door shut.

When I turned around, Cade’s face had gone red. “How *dare* you?”

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

Frowning, I crossed my arms, leaning back against the door. “You’re going to have to be more precise. There’s a lot of things I dare to do that I’m sure aren’t your cup of tea.”

“You made it seem as though I hadn’t told you about my parents,” Cade said.

“You *didn’t* tell me about your parents,” I pointed out.

“Now Leon will be under the impression that I’m not using you as my confidant.” Cade began pacing back and forth. He yanked off his jacket and threw it at the bed. It slid off the edge, pooling on the floor.

“You *aren’t* treating me as your confidant. I learned more about the job at dinner than you’ve told me since we met.” I felt my own face heating, irritation rising. “I learned why everyone went on high alert as soon as I arrived. You didn’t tell me that they’d treat an unbonded wolf like a nuclear weapon.”

“That’s just Leon. It was written into the house’s bylaws after the... after my parents. But no one enforces it. We have werewolves do deliveries all the time.” Cade began rolling up his sleeves, still pacing.

“Deliveries. Let me guess, those deliveries are heavily guarded by all the consorts House Bartlett can round up. I bet Tyson takes lead, with Isaac overseeing.” I could see it now, a werewolf arriving with a pallet of rice or... furniture. I didn’t know, whatever rich people needed strong wolves to carry.

“I’m sure it’s very inviting for the delivery wolves. I’m sure they love to be reminded that at any moment, they’re about to commit regicide. Who doesn’t like to be accused of *murder* on a job?”

“I don’t know,” Cade snapped. “Do you think I watch every delivery truck that arrives?”

He started on the other sleeve, and I saw a swirl of darkness immediately cover his exposed forearm. The tattoos moved quickly, like a school of fish. They began dripping off his fingers, leaving trails as he paced back and forth.

“I needed to hear about your parents,” I said.

This stopped him, and he turned to face me. The trails of dark tattoo, the droplets left on the white carpet, leapt forward, becoming something large and sinuous. I didn’t move or try to defend myself.

His magic hit me hard, leaping upward until it wrapped around my neck.

The mass of black lines pinned me to the door, like a hand around my throat. I took a careful breath. When I exhaled, it tightened but didn’t cut off my air supply.

“Do you want to hear about my parents?” Cade asked harshly.

“Yes.” I tried to keep the word cold and distant, as though I merely wanted the information so that I could have a complete dossier before I started the job. But a hint of desperation crept in, a hint of need.

I needed to know why my parents had killed his. Why, eleven years ago, the alpha of the Castillo Pack, well on her way to becoming the Emperor Wolf, and her husband had murdered the king of House Bartlett and his wife.

“You want the gossip,” Cade judged. “You want the dirty details. You want to know the sad little story of a boy trapped in a closet while his parents were killed by *monsters*. I don’t pay you to listen to gossip.”

I had never met a wolf who didn't know the story. But all the stories were the same. They were almost identical to the one that Leon had told. Even as wolves whispered it to each other, their eyes narrowed, the story half myth, half political spin, I couldn't believe it. Because I remembered my mother. I remembered my father.

"I need to know it because it's clearly affecting things where they stand." I let that be the end of the sentence, even though a larger part of me was still wanting to scream that it wasn't right. It wasn't true.

Poker face. I had once convinced Declan Monroe himself that I had a better hand than his full house.

Cade's breathing went ragged. I focused on his mouth, open as he panted. His lips had a slight sheen to them, as though the grease from the duck lingered. His magic tightened around my neck like a boa constrictor, and I fought the urge to resist, to strike back and defend myself.

When he released me, I slumped, my knees almost collapsing before I locked them.

"It happened like Leon said." Cade closed his mouth, swallowing and shaking his head. Then he turned and walked to the bathroom. He slammed the door behind him, and I heard the shower come on.

So. There was a way to slam the door. Just not for us non-magic users. Apparently, enough magic could get you the audible slam that would satisfy your anger.

I sat down on the bench, rubbing my face with my hands.

My heart was beating fast, and I felt a chill on my skin: shock or a panic response. Closing my eyes, I asked myself the question that I hadn't been willing to before.

Was this the room my parents had died in?

Everyone knew they had snuck into the king's bedroom, killing him and his wife. Everyone had heard the whispers about their child being there and seeing it all.

Was it here?

Looking around, I tried to imagine it. But my mind was only able to conjure all of the images I had come up with over the intervening eleven years.

In my mind, the king's bedroom looked like a dungeon. Nothing at all like this luxurious master suite. I found myself lost in thought, remembering over and over again what had come after.

The shower shut off, and Cade came out, a towel wrapped around his waist.

Except for his face, every inch of him was covered with tattoos. They scrawled from his throat down to his calves. They writhed like a nest of snakes. Ignoring me, he walked into the closet, and when he came out, he was in his long pants and high-necked sleep shirt again.

"He brought up my parents on purpose," Cade said, his back to me. He reached for a small jar of something on his dresser, opening it with swift movements. He rubbed it on his hands, and the lines of tattoo shrank back from the pungent, medicinal smell.

"Leon?" I guessed. "He was needling you. Reminding you of your parents' death."

"He was reminding me of my *duty*. The only reason I'm in this position now is because they died. Because those rabid animals killed them." Each word was colder than the last, as though Cade was dipping himself in an ice bath, willing himself to not feel anything about the worst moment of his life.

I was glad his back was to me because I felt my entire body seize up, my teeth biting crescents on the inside of my lips.

"Do you think it's the werewolves? Finally striking back?" Cade asked. He turned to me.

I stared at him blankly. Then my mind put together the puzzle pieces. He didn't realize that my interest was personal. He thought I was shaking trees, finding the rotten fruit as it dropped to the ground.

“No. At least not the Castillo Pack. Everyone knows the whole family... the whole pack was killed.” I said the words emotionlessly, trying to forget the stain of blood on the living room carpet. The way the cold air had dragged over my throat as I ran into the darkness, sure that I was next.

“That’s what Leon said.” Cade blinked, looking down where his hands were clenched at his sides. He shook them loose. “Would you be able to find out for certain? That’s a lead that Isaac hasn’t pursued because... well, the poisoning was so obviously magical.”

I nodded, although I didn’t need to make sure. I had been there. I knew that every one of the Castillo alpha’s children had been killed, except for two.

“Good.” Cade sat on the edge of his bed, one hand on the curtain. “If you hear screaming tonight, please ignore it.”

Then he shut the curtain, effectively ending the conversation.

Even though it was night, and we’d only woken up a few hours before, the siren call of a chance at sleep wasn’t something I could ignore. I used the bathroom first and found a new toothbrush placed on the counter. Raising my eyebrow, I opened the package and used the fresh tube of toothpaste. As I stared at myself in the mirror, I tried to see the similarity between me and my parents.

My father was right. I had his size, even his pale skin.

But I had my mother’s dark hair, her eyes. And I had inherited whatever it was about her that made her an alpha.

I spit the froth into the sink and rinsed my mouth, placing my toothbrush next to Cade’s in the holder.

When I went back out into the bedroom, the lights had been dimmed, and I lay on the bench, my head on the pillow. A blanket sat at the foot of the bench, and I tugged it over myself.

As I closed my eyes, my mind wouldn’t stop spinning. Every angle of the job was at odds with each other.

Cade strongly suspected it was someone in his own house, and I didn't disagree with him, even though the evidence could point another way.

If it involved Declan Monroe, well, there was a rogues' galley of people who might have hired him. That was if he didn't have a reason to do the poisoning himself. I still needed to find out what business Cade had had with him. The vagueness of his response meant it was something he was still ashamed of.

I still couldn't wrap my head around a bombing and a poisoning. The methods of assassination were too different. If it was House Morrison, I had to believe their chosen assassin would be more efficient. It was hard to believe they'd fail twice.

Isaac bickering with Leon was simply another thread to pull on. Did one of them benefit from the chaos of multiple assassination attempts? Cade trusted Isaac, but apparently, when Cade took on a consort, Isaac's duties shrank. People did plenty of things for power.

The way that Leon had needled Cade, reminding him of his parents, was exactly the sort of thing someone might do to try and throw the prince off his game. It was also the sort of thing that an older advisor might do to try and make the past relevant to the present. If he wanted to keep his position, it paid to remind Cade that he was only alive because of Leon.

I drowsed off, my thoughts still swimming in circles, unable to make sense of all the different elements that had been introduced.



I dreamed. Blood on the living room carpet, Miriam standing behind wolves. She was staring at me blankly, the way she had that night.

The other wolves were fully shifted but human at the same time. In one of those dream impossibilities, they were both.

The alpha turned to me. He opened his mouth, and it was so big, so large, that he swallowed me whole.

Panicked, I fought, struggling until I woke.

For a long moment, I panted, staring up at the ceiling. In the dim light, the white looked gray.

I listened, straining my ears for any hint of sound. Nothing. Nothing outside the door, nothing outside the window. Just Cade's even breathing in bed.

In, out. It was as regular as a metronome.

In, out. Too regular. Too regular for legitimate sleep.

"Are you awake?" I asked.

"Yes." The word was a murmur.

"What's the worst part about losing your parents?" I asked.

Cade's breath caught, a gasp of air. No more regular in and out.

"I lost mine too," I said. Even though that wasn't why I'd asked.

I had spent eleven years hating him. Hating the entire House Bartlett. All of them could rot.

"Everything," Cade said finally. "Everything is the worst part."

That settled between us, and I thought about my life after running away from the only home I'd ever known, my siblings' murders still visible when I closed my eyes. In a different life, I never would have gone to work for Declan. I never would have even met him.

"Yeah," I agreed. "You're right. Everything is the worst part."

"Go to sleep," Cade said. "I'm not paying you to be tired tomorrow."

I snorted. Somehow, the words were becoming like a mantra. As though each time he said them, he had to force himself to remember that I was only his employee.



The next time I cracked my eyes open, the sun was staining the ceiling. It revealed white paint as clean as fresh-fallen snow. Nothing blemished it.

Water was running in the bathroom, and a moment later, Cade stepped out. I blinked, sitting up quickly. It was impossible.

I never slept soundly with someone else in the room. At my old apartment, I would even wake sometimes if someone walked down the hallway to their own apartment. There was no way he had gotten up, crossed the room so close to me, and I hadn't woken.

Standing, I stretched, rolling my shoulders and my neck. Cade watched me for a moment, a face towel in his hand. The hair at the top of his head was damp, as though he had just washed his face.

"You're going to go with Jay today?" He dabbed at his cheek with the towel.

"Yeah. What are you going to be doing?" I asked.

"A council meeting, probably. I haven't been summoned yet, but after last night, I'm sure I'm about to get an earful." He walked into the closet, and I headed to the bathroom myself.

After cleaning up, I felt vaguely human again. I massaged at the base of my neck. The muscles were beginning to resemble rocks, almost audibly crunching under my fingers.

When Cade came out, he wore a fresh suit, one of his hands in his pockets. He looked me up and down, then flicked his fingers, sending droplets of black at me. They floated through the air slowly, landing on the clothes and moving across my chest and down my legs.

Frowning, I shook my head. When had I become used to magic? When was it something that I didn't flinch away from?

Cade extended out his fingers, and the droplets of magic he had splattered on me returned.

“What’s with the Jackson Pollock magic routine?” I asked.

“A freshening up spell for the clothes,” Cade said. “As I’m not willing to sacrifice more of my wardrobe, you’re going to have to wear those clothes for the foreseeable future. We might as well make sure it doesn’t *smell* like you’re wearing the same clothes day in and day out.”

“What? You don’t like my *aroma*?” I made a show of sniffing under my arm. “I’ve heard I smell like one of those candles.”

“I’m sure they don’t make candles that smell like sweaty werewolves,” Cade said sharply.

I chuckled. “That just shows what you know. They modeled the entire ‘Mountain Man’ Yankee Candle line after me.”

“Questionable candle scents aside, will you be okay today?” Cade looked me over, a small frown pinching his brows.

“Are you worried about me? Or your investment?” I asked.

“Well, if you get yourself killed, I won’t have to pay you five hundred thousand dollars. Perhaps that *would* be a win.” But Cade wasn’t smiling, the corners of his lips pulled down.

“You might not believe this, but I survived a full twenty-seven years before we met. I’m pretty sure I can survive a tour of your expensive property.” I matched his frown. “What are you worried about? What do I need to be on alert about?”

“It is *imperative* that no one finds out we aren’t bonded. The more I think about it, Leon’s words were a warning. If we give him evidence, he will have no choice but to execute you.” Cade’s eyes drifted to my throat, covered by the high-necked shirt.

“I heard his warning loud and clear too. I have no desire to be killed by an octogenarian. I’ll be fine.” I opened my mouth,

but before we could say anything else, there was a tentative knock at the door.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

I sniffed the air, but that was the strangest part, not being able to smell through whatever wards Cade had put in place.

“Prince Bartlett? Miles?” I recognized the hesitance in Jay’s voice immediately.

“I’ll let you know if any poisoned apples fall from the tree,” I said. “Wouldn’t want to end up with a Snow White situation on our hands. Just to be clear, you’re Snow White here.”

“Which makes you which one of the dwarves? Grumpy? Ugly?” Cade snarked.

When I opened the door, Jay was standing a few feet back from the doorway. His shoulders relaxed when he saw me, and he smiled.

I looked over my shoulder to where Cade was still standing, frowning at me. Something tightened in my chest, and I said, “Be careful not to get killed today. It would look really bad if you died my first day as your consort.”

“Oh, I’m sure Leon would give you a tremendous reference,” Cade said. His mouth was still tense, but I saw a crinkle in the corner of his eyes, as though there was a smile there.

“Yeah, probably a reference as target practice.” I turned back to Jay and saw him frowning at me. Shutting the door behind me, I ran a hand through my hair. “Sorry. We were in the middle of a discussion.”

“No. It’s that Cade doesn’t joke. He’s cold...” Jay trailed off, shaking his head. “Never mind. Has anyone shown you the house yet?”

“No, Cade and I have been preoccupied.” I walked next to Jay, catching his elbow when he stumbled on the perfectly smooth carpet. He gave me a wide-eyed look, and I made a face. “I just mean we haven’t left the bedroom much, except to go to dinner with you guys.”

His face went red, and I realized I wasn’t making the situation any better.

“The rooms on this floor are all bedrooms.” Jay’s voice sounded choked. “Belonging to senior members of House Bartlett. Most of the rooms are inherited.”

I realized this was my chance to ask the question that had circled my mind last night.

“So that’s the king’s bedroom?” I gestured back with my thumb toward Cade’s room.

“Oh, no. The king’s rooms are upstairs.” Jay gestured up toward the ceiling. “They used magic to disappear the staircase because... until... well, until someone ascends the throne.”

I almost sighed in relief, the knowledge that I wasn’t sleeping where my parents had died, where my parents had killed Cade’s parents, hitting me like a twelve-hour massage at the most expensive spa in the city.

“It’s a lot of rooms,” I observed.

“None of them are in use, except for Cade’s room,” Jay said, confirming what Cade had told me earlier.

“Why not?” I asked.

It was obvious that Cade had one view of the world, and I wanted to know what things looked like from Jay’s perspective.

Jay frowned, glancing up at the ceiling for a split second before swallowing and starting down the stairs. “I think they enjoy their privacy.”

It was the same answer that Cade had given, more or less. But something about the way Jay said it, his glance at the unused third floor, told me that eleven years ago wasn't long enough to make everyone forget this was the house the king had died in.

There must be something more to it than that, but I wasn't sure what it was, and pressing might shut down Jay as an informant before he warmed to me.

"On this side of the house, there's the dining room, the ballroom, and the council chambers." Jay gestured down the hallway we had taken the night before. We began walking in the other direction, and Jay narrated the rooms as we passed. Receiving room, music room, informal dining room, library.

In each room, he gestured to a hidden door, explaining that that was the way in and out of the servants' entrance.

"Yeah, what's up with that?" I asked when he pointed at one of the doors hidden in the corner of the room. "Are there that many servants?"

"No. I know that quite a few were let go after the king died. Now, it's just down to a skeleton staff of eight. Some consorts have picked up some of the slack."

"Wait, *consorts* are being used as servants?" It wasn't quite the nightmare of consorts being slaves, but it wasn't much better either.

"It's mostly voluntary," Jay said. He looked around and pulled me into an atrium at the end of the house. Walking to the wide windows, he lowered his voice. "It's a way for people who have consorts to keep an ear on what's going on inside the house."

"You know how else they could keep an ear on that? They could move back in," I pointed out.

"They can't." Jay's voice fell to a whisper, his lips barely moving. "*No one* can live here. Whatever happened when the king died, he left his magic behind. It poisoned the shadows. It gives people nightmares; it strains their magic."

Frowning, I opened my mouth to ask more, but Jay pulled back.

“This is the atrium. Sunsets are beautiful here, and the glass lets you see the wards.” He pointed.

I followed the direction of his finger with my eyes and squinted. I had taken the distortion in the perfect blue of the sky as a fault of the glass, but now I realized that it was showing me the magic in the distance. When I squinted, I could see detailed green lines flowing over each other. They rose high and long, and when I looked straight up, I couldn’t see any gaps.

“The wards are a dome,” I said quietly.

Jay nodded. “I don’t know the details, but no one should be able to get in or out without explicit permission from House Bartlett.”

“Any member of House Bartlett?” I asked.

“No, just the prince or the seneschal. Most people go through the seneschal.” Jay stared at the wards for a moment longer, and then he smiled and turned. “It’s safe here. You can relax.”

I stared at him, every gear in my head spinning into motion. *Safe* wasn’t exactly how I would frame it.

“I can relax,” I said slowly. “You feel safe here?”

“This way. I heard you saw the kitchens and the shower room, but I’ll show you the rest of the servants’ halls.” Jay walked quickly to a nearly invisible door and opened it by pressing in for a second. It clicked ajar, and he pulled it all the way open, gesturing for me to go in first.

I walked into the hallway, recognizing the industrial carpet and bland walls from my first night at House Bartlett. Jay pulled the door closed behind us with a handle and explained as he led the way down the hallway.

“There are servants’ halls that lead to almost every room on the ground floor. For the upstairs rooms, they have magical

elevators that allow servants to pass up food or other needs without disturbing residents.”

“The magical dumbwaiter,” I said.

“Yes.” Jay nodded. “Down here, we have the kitchen, the laundry, the showers and resting room. There’s also a few other workrooms that are mostly unused.”

He led us past the kitchen, and I recognized the cook from my first night in the house at the stove. My stomach rumbled with hunger as we passed. Something smelled delicious, starchy and buttery.

“You didn’t have breakfast,” Jay said. He glanced at his phone, frowning at the time. “Of course not. Prince Bartlett doesn’t get up until ten most days, so that’s when they send up his breakfast.”

He reversed course, nudging me inside the kitchen toward the massive island in the center. “Siobhan, can we get some of whatever you’re cooking up?”

She smiled sweetly at him, but when her eyes caught me, she looked down. “Of course, consorts. Let me just get plates.”

Siobhan grabbed a couple from the cabinet and served up a richly layered biscuit with eggs and bacon. I had already eaten two pieces of the bacon by the time she returned with forks.

“Did you do the duck last night?” I asked. “It was amazing. I’ve never had anything that good.”

“Oh, no, that was Louis. He does lunch and dinner. I do all the baked goods and the breakfast.” For a moment, her face glowed, the smile crinkling her eyes. Then she saw me looking at her and ducked her chin again.

“Have you worked here long?” I asked.

“Almost twenty years,” she said. “I arrived just after Prince Bartlett was born.”

“Well, they’re certainly lucky to have you.” I smiled again, letting my features soften. Something I had learned working for Declan was that my smile was just as much a weapon as

my glare. This wasn't a movie where the thug only had two gears: angry and violent.

I knew better. If you scared the mouse for long enough, its heart exploded. If you bribed it with cheese, then it trusted you enough to walk right into the trap.

We finished quickly, Siobhan chopping up fruit and making small talk with Jay. I listened to their conversation carefully. There was some talk of visiting diplomats, a brief conversation about one of the servants getting pregnant by another.

I filed most of it away, trying to memorize the names. After we finished, Jay led us outside. Behind the house, there was a massive lawn that disappeared into tall redwood and pine trees.

I breathed in deeply, the scent fresh and green. I had grown up in a small town just off the 101. It had been too far inland to get reasonable ocean breeze and just far enough away from the forest that trees were something we saw in the distance.

Mostly the thing I remembered about Flores was the dusty feel of it, how hot it baked in the summer, the way the loose, dry dirt scratched across my skin in a windstorm.

After that, Los Santos had been something entirely new. It was a huge city compared to where I had grown up. But once I figured out how many things were the same, tall buildings that blocked out the sky began to feel normal.

“Amazing, isn't it?” Jay said. “We get to go hunting sometimes. Not as a pack. Obviously. But just to run during the full moon.”

“Not as a pack?” I felt both of my eyebrows creep up, although I wasn't sure why I was surprised.

The werewolves that worked for Declan weren't a pack either, but we definitely had a hierarchy. I had been at the top, and everybody underneath me scrabbled for dominance. In fact, I had never met a group of werewolves that worked or lived together without forming something like a pack, even if it never reached that level of formality. Hell, the doughnut

chain down the street from my apartment had a pack hierarchy, and I was pretty sure most of them were college students with their own packs back at home.

“No.” Jay shook his head quickly. “No, it’s not like that here. This way.”

He gestured, and I followed him to one of two golf carts. He started it with the press of a button and pulled around the house to the driveway. Cade’s car was gone, parked somewhere else. I would have to find out where because I assumed that was the same place the bombed car had been stored pre-car-bombing.

Jay pulled onto the main road, and I looked around us. “This is a town.”

“This is House Bartlett,” he corrected.

On either side of us was what looked like a normal small-town street. There was a general store, a laundry, and the mechanic’s. There were a couple of other unmarked storefronts. Then what looked like a salon with blacked-out windows, the word *Rhys’s* scrawled across an enormous shingle over the door.

“You can get almost everything you need here,” Jay said. “We have an on-site doctor, and the house lawyer has an office here as well.”

He gestured at the two offices that I had noticed were unmarked. The golf cart drove further down the road as it began twisting, and I saw driveways to houses.

“This is where the rest of House Bartlett lives.” As we passed, he gestured to each property, naming the family and their position in the house. The more important families had larger houses, some with second and third homes behind the first.

“Where do the Jennings live?” I asked.

Jay’s eyes went wide, and he stuttered. “I don’t think we should—”

“I just want to have a chat, given that they’ve lost a daughter.” I raised both my eyebrows. “Promise I’ll be nice.”

Jay swallowed and pulled the car up to a gorgeous house. Two stories tall, with a *Better Homes and Gardens* flower bed out front, it was the sort of house the magazine would put on the cover. I got out of the cart and walked up to the front door.

As soon as I rang the bell, someone answered. He looked down his nose at me, and all I could smell was *human*.

“Deliveries out back,” he said stiffly.

“Do I look like I’m carrying a package?” I asked. “I’m Prince Bartlett’s new consort, and I had some questions about Trish Jennings’ death.”

“Master Jennings won’t talk to anyone except the prince,” the man said. He started to shut the door in my face, and I slapped a hand to it.

“That’s fine, but there has to be someone in the house who *will* talk to me,” I said.

“Is there a problem here?” A werewolf came up behind the man at the door. He glared at me, all growl with the hint of teeth for a bite.

“No problem, I’m just trying to talk to someone about Trish.” I pulled my hand back and held both palms up. “We’re looking into her death—”

“Yeah? Well, tell the prince that until he’s willing to take responsibility for killing the Jennings’ heir, no one in this house will say *anything* to him,” the werewolf snapped. He grabbed hold of the door, slamming it.

“What the—” I started forward, but Jay grabbed my arm.

“Don’t.” He kept his voice calm, even though I could feel the tremble in his hands.

As soon as I turned away from the door, he dropped his hands. “They’re one of the families who believes in the old ways. They won’t talk to you anyway.”

I remembered how Leon had spoken the night before, wolves giving their last drop of water to their mage. If they saw wolves as nothing more than slaves, I'd need to come back with Cade to see if he could smooth the feathers I'd ruffled. Jay led me back to the cart, and we were on our way again.

"How many people hate Cade the way they do?" I asked.

"That's where Isaac and I live," Jay said loudly, ignoring my question. He pointed at a modest two-story house set back under a canopy of trees. Further down the road, he pulled the golf cart to a stop in front of the massive gates that Cade had driven us through.

"You can't get out of here, not without permission. The mages can, but we—and the humans—can't. It's not a big deal—Leon will give you permission if you need it." He turned the cart along a small dirt road and drove further into the forest. "If you follow the main road past the king's house, you reach the lake. There are a couple of houses out there and one larger hall for communal gatherings. Some of the families prefer to live out there rather than closer to everyone else. Here, though, in the forest, this is our territory."

"Werewolf territory," I said immediately.

"Consort territory." Jay pulled the car to a stop when the road disappeared and got out.

I followed him, rolling my shoulders back and sniffing again, enjoying the smell of the forest. Jay started walking, and I followed him. We passed through a break in the trees, and a wide, enormous garden spread out in front of us.

A tall man with a graying beard was crouched over some sort of lettuce. He pushed back his wide-brimmed hat and waved when Jay stopped at the edge of the field. This must be where they got most of their vegetables. I was no farmer, but I had grown up around farmland, and I recognized a good-sized field when I saw one.

As he approached, he took off a pair of gloves and slapped them against dirt-stained jeans. The collar around his neck was

dark brown and old enough that a groove was worn into it where it latched shut.

“This is Jesaiah. He runs the farm and does some of the gardening around the main house.” Jay grinned openly. “Jesaiah, this is Miles.”

“Good to meet you.” Jesaiah’s white teeth gleamed, and the smell hit me immediately. He was an alpha. An old one. The part of me that wanted to assert dominance reached up, clawing at my throat. Jesaiah immediately said, “We don’t play those games here. Ride it out, boy.”

I tamped down the part of me that wanted to stare him down, wanted to have a fight like I had with Tyson. Everything I had seen so far told me that if I tried to play games like that here, tried to make it clear that I was the alpha, I was going to lose any chance I had at winning the mice over with cheese.

Not to mention, it reminded me that I couldn’t shift. My heart hammered in my chest, the desperation to grow claws and fur. Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t.

“Nice to meet you,” I said when I had my voice under control.

“You already met Tyson, but I asked Jay to bring you over so I could give you the lay of the land.” Jesaiah smiled at me, the wrinkles deep around his eyes. “We all come from different places when we become consorts. No matter what’s happened to you in the past, once you’re a consort, you’re bound by *that* hierarchy. I didn’t want you to take Tyson’s aggressiveness as the way the rest of us will be treating you.”

“Yeah, he was quite the welcome wagon,” I said.

“He can be at that.” Jesaiah chuckled. Reaching into his pocket, he drew out a handful of rocks and offered them over to Jay. They were small, barely larger than pebbles. “Found some more for your collection.”

“Thanks.” Jay ducked his head. “You ready to head back, Miles?”

“No. Don’t worry about him. I’ll take him back with the delivery for lunch.” Jesaiah waved Jay off. “I have a feeling he and I have a lot to talk about. Don’t we, Alpha?”

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

Jay shook his head, looking at me. “No. I brought him here, I should bring him back. I agreed he should meet you because he’s like I was when I first arrived, but now you’ve met...”

“You were a scared little rabbit when you first got here, Jay. This boy is no rabbit. This is an alpha. He’s *used* to being an alpha. Why don’t you let us talk?” Jesaiah glanced at me, a small smile wrinkling his eyes again. “I promise I’m not dumb enough to hurt the prince’s own consort. Go on now.”

Jay looked at me again, and I saw his shoulders shift, his feet planting. It surprised me. Jesaiah wasn’t wrong. I could see the nervousness that still lingered in Jay, the fear. This was a man he had wanted to introduce me to, someone he trusted.

Both Jesaiah and Jay might say that they didn’t play pack hierarchy, at least not like those of us in the rest of the world did, but it was very clear who was the alpha here at House Bartlett. And I was very curious about what the alpha had to say with me coming into his territory.

“It’s okay, Jay. I can find my own way back, even if I have to walk. It wasn’t that far.” Playing a hunch, I reached over and patted his shoulder.

He startled, staring at me with wide eyes. I felt his muscles tense, then immediately relax under my hand. Squeezing once, I released him.

Jay cocked his head, looking at me with something close to suspicion. The thing about playing hierarchy was that some

people just liked to know who the biggest alpha in the room was. They didn't want to be the top dog themselves, but they liked to know. In his heart of hearts, Jay wanted to know who was stronger: me or Jesaiah.

Calm confidence, a reassurance that I was going to win, no matter what it came down to, was enough to convince Jay subconsciously *I* was the one at the top of the dog pile.

Nodding, Jay turned and headed back down the path. As he walked, I saw him take one of the rocks out of his pocket. He tossed it seemingly at random into the brush. Then he was gone, the forest embracing him.

“So, the little prince went and got himself a big bad alpha.” Jesaiah was still smiling, but there was something tense to it now. “My master said he wouldn't be able to find anyone.”

I remembered how he'd said *we don't play those games here*. He'd said it kindly, as though he was giving me an out. But now that I looked at him, I wondered if it was because *he* didn't want to have to fight for his position. He might pretend he wasn't alpha, but when you were the oldest, most well-respected member of a group of wolves who would never be able to call themselves a pack...

Well, alpha was about the best word you could call someone in that situation.

“I'm just here for Cade. I'm not here to cause any trouble.” I kept my hands loose at my side, no claws sprouting from my fingertips.

Not that any claws could. I had been effectively neutered. The part of me that had reacted on seeing Jesaiah was still there. It wanted to shift and fight and bear him to the ground by his throat until he submitted, showing his belly like the old, weak alpha he was.

But if I could have shifted, I would have done so in that moment. Something was wrong. Really wrong, and the terror of it made my heart beat faster, made me snap a little harder than I should have when Jesaiah said calmly, “You seem like

the sort of boy who finds trouble wherever he goes, regardless if you're looking for it."

"Yeah? Are you about to offer me some of that trouble I'm not looking for?" I felt the wolf under my skin, rubbing my senses raw.

I could *smell* Jesaiah, feel the pressure of the power that he held. He was an alpha in the old-school sense. He didn't need to scabble and claw and push his way to the top to hold that title.

He was *born* an alpha. The way that I was.

When he looked at me, there was none of the kindly old man, none of the werewolf that Jay trusted. Everything about him was sharp and powerful.

My hackles rose, and I felt a not-quite-audible growl vibrating in my throat. "I thought we were being friendly, Jesaiah."

"We *are* being friendly," Jesaiah said, his teeth lengthening, his snout forming. His eyes went dark.

He was a strong alpha, and part of me wanted to prostrate myself in front of him, show my belly and whine until he let me go. That was the part I had thought died with my family. I turned, bracing my arms and legs, ready to leap backward if he attacked.

"Now," Jesaiah spoke distinctly. "I can smell the Castillo Pack on you. So you're going to tell me what you're doing here before I rip your throat out."

I froze. Of all the things I had expected him to say, that wasn't one of them. It had to have been his note. He was the one who knew who I was.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I have no pack. No last name." Narrowing my eyes, I spit his own words back at him. "You said we all come from different places when we become consorts. Mine isn't a happy one."

"I'm sure it isn't." Jesaiah leaned forward, his nose becoming dark and damp. He sniffed at me, inches away from

my face.

I didn't flinch.

"I was here eleven years ago. I remember what they smelled like. The dirt. The ill breeding. That grasping desperation." His words became a growl, spittle dripping from his jaws.

It was strange seeing him only half shifted. I could see the bones of the werewolf he would become. He was massive, coming halfway up my biceps.

But the gray from age was more obvious in his wolf form. Patches of dry, brittle white fur ran in streaks down his back and around his eyes.

"Well, then you need to get your nose checked, old man. I've never been in the Castillo Pack." I jerked my chin up. "You're getting old, Jesaiah. Jumping at ghosts."

I made some quick calculations, remembering the question I'd asked myself last night. Who lost power if I came into the picture? Jesaiah had said that they weren't a pack in the typical sense. Instead, they relied on the structure of House Bartlett to tell them where they stood compared to other wolves.

So who was powerful enough that only the prince's own consort would displace him? The answer came to me instantly: Leon.

"You're scared that I'm going to come in and take over your little pack. I'm the prince's consort. Soon, I'm going to be the *king's* consort. And you're going to be tied to your seneschal." I scrunched my face together, tilting my head. "That sounds like I'm going to be the new boss in town, Alpha."

Jesaiah shook his head, his teeth snapping at me once before he was able to speak. "I can *smell* them on you."

I spread my hands wide, shrugging. "No pack. No last name."

It was a common enough refrain. People who lost their pack often lost their family. No last name meant that no matter

what it said on my ID, I had no claim to my family.

Not that my ID said Castillo, anyway.

“No,” Jesaiah growled. He leapt forward, but I had been ready for him to attack. I dodged out of his way but stumbled over a pallet of fertilizer behind me, falling backward onto the springy green plants. I scrambled for a second, springing to my feet as fast as I could.

“You’re desperate, old man. Who do you think Cade is going to believe, you or me?” I moved backward, even as Jesaiah leapt, shifting in midair, coming down as a massive wolf.

Jesaiah was the sort of alpha that made anyone sit up and take notice. The collar around his neck shifted, growing with his size until it fit his massive throat.

I backed away, almost bumping into a golf cart. Jesaiah circled, his eyes focused on me.

What did I say? I wasn’t sure there was a way to de-escalate the situation. It would be idiotic to admit anything. To say something like, “Sure, I’m from Flores, but I was never in the Castillo Pack.” No. Say nothing. That was my best bet.

He roared, the sound shaking the plants around me. My whole body tensed, my heart thrumming in my chest. I screamed back, the wolf inside me straining.

But it couldn’t get free. Even as it pressed up against my skin, as though I was trying to drag it out of myself, it *couldn’t get free*. The anger that made my blood run hot, my vision narrowing to the alpha who *dared* challenge *me*, flipped to a cold, prescient terror.

I had barely been able to fight JD. I couldn’t fight Jesaiah. Which left me with one option, even though it made me want to let him rip out my throat: I had to run.

No, I hadn’t let Declan kill me, and I wasn’t about to let Jesaiah just because playing the roadrunner to this coyote made something in me curl up in shame. I would survive. I turned tail and fled.

Quickly, I darted through the trees, trying to find one I could climb.

“I don’t want to fight you. We are on the same side here,” I said, even though we were very clearly *not* on the same side. Right now, Jesaiah’s side seemed to be *kill the rival alpha*. My side was *survive this fight*.

“I promise.” I grunted, finding a tree with some low branches. I began scrambling up them, scratching my palms as I gained a few feet off the ground. “I’m only here to help.”

Jesaiah howled, just far enough away that I knew it was a hunting call.

I climbed higher, losing sight of the ground as the foliage grew thick. When I thought I was in a safe spot, I settled against the trunk, wrapping my legs around a branch.

So, Jesaiah was worried about losing power. The question was whether or not he actually knew about my connection to the Castillo alpha. Or whether he was guessing in the dark, trying to find an accusation so horrible that I would be immediately killed. If he had given me the note, *I know who you are* was vague enough that he was probably just fishing to see what he could dig up and thought he had something by accusing me of being a member of the Castillo Pack.

At least he hadn’t accused me of being one of the Castillo heirs, one of my mother’s children. He’d said *pack*. Meaning he was guessing.

Another howl answered Jesaiah’s.

Then a third. I swore.

There was a crackle beneath me, the sound of something heavy stepping on dried leaves. An alpha as old as Jesaiah wouldn’t make that mistake.

I breathed in slowly, exhaling silently. I let my heart rate fall. He was trying to scare me. He was going to find out I couldn’t be scared.

The only thing I had been scared of in eleven years had already happened. House Bartlett had found me. If he thought

that I was going to be terrified of some geriatric alpha, he had another thing coming.

Even as I thought the words, I knew they were a mistake. They tempted fate. There was a growl, then scrabbling of claws on wood, and Jesaiah's sharp teeth closed on my leg, dragging me out of the tree.

I hit my back and then my head as I fell, reaching for branches that slipped through my fingers, scratching my palms. When I landed in the dried leaves underneath the maple tree, I was panting, woozy. Blood trickled across my forehead, and a heavy paw landed on my back, pressing me down into the damp ground.

I could barely breathe, and black spots slowly overtook my vision.

No. The part of me that was a wolf reared up, roaring through my body. I expected to grow claws and fur and sharp fangs.

Instead, I found a strength I hadn't thought possible in human form. I pushed onto all fours, then lunged forward, startling Jesaiah at the sudden movement so he stumbled backward, off-balance as one of his paws slipped askew. I turned and faced him. When I howled, it was pure wolf coming from a human throat. I felt my vision begin to shift, but my body stayed human except for sharp claws sprouting from my fingertips.

Maybe it would be enough.

The other howls approached, the wolves who weren't a pack closing in on their alpha. I leapt forward, reaching to grab at Jesaiah's throat with my claws. They raked through his fur, leaving split skin and blood behind.

I pressed the advantage, slamming into him with my shoulder and pushing him back. It was a mistake. He might be old, but his age only meant that he had survived this long as an alpha.

As I grappled, using my human hands with wolf claws to tear at his pelt and skin, he used his size and weight to bear me

down. The howls were getting too close. A single wolf might be able to catch a careless rabbit, but wolves who hunted in packs could take down a stag in his prime.

I lunged forward again, and he took a half step back, his nose and twitching eyes focused on me. I was an idiot.

He was waiting for everyone else to get here.

This wasn't a pack, but he was running it like one, or as close to one as he could get. The best way to form a pack, the way that kept every member together like glue, was to hunt together. Whether that was running down a lone deer in the woods or the time my entire family had spent an hour searching for the missing Monopoly shoe piece, a common hunt was the best way to make disparate wolves into a common pack for the rest of their lives.

Well. That left me with a couple of options. Either I killed Jesaiah and then had to explain to Cade why I had killed the consort of his seneschal, or I ran. Waiting for the rest of the pack to arrive wasn't an option.

They wouldn't let me fight Jesaiah one-on-one. As soon as they got here, I would be dead.

Jesaiah growled, taking a few steps forward. The part of me that was an alpha, the part of me that wasn't about to let anyone tell me my place in the hierarchy, wanted to fight.

But even though I had claws and strength, I couldn't shift.

Turning, I ran. I looked over my shoulder, and Jesaiah was pursuing me. I needed to slow him; I needed to stop him if possible. How could I do that?

Bending, I grabbed a fallen branch, stripping it of leaves and twigs as I sprinted. In one movement, I broke it in half.

Without giving myself time to think, I turned, heading directly toward him. Jesaiah pulled up short, jerking back in surprise, and I used that, swinging the branch until it hit his exposed legs. He didn't have time to avoid the impact, and I felt the branch crack against one of his front legs, although he managed to rear back before it hit his back ones.

Then I was running again, tossing the branch to the side and sprinting forward. I tried to orient myself. Where had the farm been? Where had the road been? How could I get back to the house?

But I could hear the other wolves, their howls getting louder as they approached us. I went left and heard Jesaiah gaining on me, so I moved in the opposite direction. Where was the *road*?

I plowed into something that seared my skin, and I screamed, leaping back in desperation. There was nothing in the air. No buzz, no fence I had missed. But when I looked at my forearm, the skin was mottled red as though I had run through a fire.

What did I hit?

Reaching forward, I pressed my hand into the air and felt an invisible barrier.

When Cade pressed his magic on me, it felt like millipedes, like a thousand feet crawling over me. Even the cleaning spell had only felt like ants crawling over my clothing.

This burned. This felt like knives slicing through the air, ready to cut me open if I tried to press through.

The wards.

The House Bartlett ward that encircled the property. How could I have forgotten? Was that Jesaiah's plan? Drive me to the wards, kill me here so that it would look like I was trying to escape?

No one would protest if he did that. No one would ask questions. He would be able to keep his little pack that wasn't a pack.

Jesaiah limped through the brush to my left, dragging one of his paws. I ran along the wards, but my two feet had nothing on his four, and he slammed into me, sending me flying backward. I screamed as the wards tore up the back of my shirt, slicing at my skin.

Scrambling up, one of my hands flew backward, through the wards. I pushed up, ready to run, but hesitated.

Through the wards? I hadn't felt any pain. No pain meant...

There was a hole.

Swearing, I moved back to where my hand had gone through, bracing before I pressed my palm through again. No pain. I yanked my arm up, finding the top when my arm started screaming in pain. The hole was small.

Jesaiah was right behind me. Screwing my eyes shut, I made the quickest calculation I could. The other wolves were too close, Jesaiah right on top of me.

Crouching as small as I could, I shoved my way through.

I could feel the edges of the hole tearing at my skin, searing my cheeks and forehead. The smell of burnt hair teased my nostrils.

On the other side, the forest looked exactly the same.

Turning, I could see Jesaiah pacing back and forth, spittle dripping from his jaws. He snapped, and I ran, not about to wait for him to figure out how I had gotten through.

When I was far enough away from the wards that I couldn't see Jesaiah or the other wolves anymore, I stopped, panting, bracing my spine against a tree. Sweat coated my neck and brow, my blood pounding hot in my veins. I examined my arms. The burn marks stretched over both arms, skin red and blistering.

If I could shift, I might be able to recover. I would bear scars, but the wounds would be healed.

But I couldn't shift.

Part of me tightened in fury. If I had been able to shift, if I had been able to take him on wolf to wolf, I never would have run in the first place. I would have borne him to the ground, closed my jaws around his throat, and proved to him exactly who was the alpha.

Shame rose in my throat. Instead of fighting, I had treed myself like a desperate house cat trying to escape the neighbor's dog.

I swallowed down the bitter taste of failure and let my shoulders fall. It was okay. I would *be* okay. As soon as I got my bearings and came up with a new plan.

I inhaled deeply, the quiet forest a balm on my senses. I was free.

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

For a long deep breath, I considered what to do. I could walk away. I had clothes, shoes, and enough sleep and food in me that I could probably go a full day without needing either.

That would leave me with the question of what to do next. There were pot farms to the north that wouldn't ask any questions, where I could get paid under the table and hide out for long enough to figure out my next move.

I would probably end up in another state, maybe even on the opposite coast.

But I would never find out what happened to my parents, why my entire family had been killed. I would never find out what had happened that night eleven years ago. Cade's face had been blank—he was *hiding* something.

Moreover, I wouldn't have five hundred thousand dollars to start over and protect myself from Declan's wrath.

The fantasy ran through my head again. I would make my way down the mountain, weaving my way through trees, maybe hitchhike my way up to the Emerald Triangle and find a farm that wouldn't ask any questions deep in the mountains. There was six months of my life.

And while I was gone, I would be leaving Cade alone. He would never know the truth about why I left. He would only know that he couldn't trust anyone else. There were holes in his wards, and I was the only one who knew about them.

He would probably be killed or deposed by whoever was behind the assassination attempts. And when anybody talked about him, he would always be that scared little boy from eleven years ago who had seen his parents killed. That expression on his face—he'd been about to tell me something true but had pushed it back.

I got up, stretching, examining my wounds again. The blistered skin hadn't popped yet. I started walking down the mountain. That was the safe bet. There was more rotten in Cade's house than even he suspected, and I wanted no part in it.

I stopped next to a massive redwood tree, bark soft and stringy. With a scream, I spun and slammed my fist against the trunk.

Furious, I shut my eyes. I was going to turn and continue walking. I was going to keep going down the mountain. I was going to live with the mystery of what had happened to my parents for the rest of my life. I was going to—

I took a few steps, picturing my life. But another vision rose up in front of me, something I hated, something that made me feel so sick I almost vomited.

In that vision, I found out what happened to my parents. I cleared their names. I was able to become Miles Castillo again, heir to his mother, a powerful, naturally born alpha.

Maybe Cade and I even became friends. We would both be powerful men, both kings of our little kingdoms. I could see being his friend as clearly as I could see the forest in front of me.

With a sigh, I looked around. The midafternoon sun lazed toward the horizon. Insects buzzed, enjoying the cool air under the tree.

I had to go back. I had to find out the truth. I could never be an alpha if I didn't have a last name. I could never be an alpha if I didn't have a past.

A growl tore itself out of my throat, and I turned, slamming my fist into another tree. Then, I breathed, slow and

steady.

Okay. I was going back. But now I had more puzzle pieces than Cade did, so I needed to be careful. I needed to talk to him before he talked to Leon. Who knew what story Jesaiah had told Leon and what story Leon had told Cade.

That meant I had to get back to the house quietly.

As I began my trek back up the hill, I wondered what game Jesaiah was playing. Was he *that* scared of a new alpha? Was the prince taking on a consort *that much* of a threat? Or was this about Leon? Leon had been angry Cade had taken me, someone no one knew or trusted. Was that what this was about? Was Leon trying to get rid of me and using Jesaiah to do it?

How did Isaac and Jay fit into this? Jay had been the one to bring me to Jesaiah, but he had been hesitant to leave me alone with the older alpha. Either he knew, and he didn't like it, or he didn't know but suspected. Which made me wonder what Isaac knew. Was Isaac in on it too? Were he and Leon, so publicly at odds with each other, secretly working together?

To what end?

I slunk behind a tree, squinting through the woods. I was positive this was where I had come through the barrier. The wards were invisible, but I knew it had to be there. My nose twitched, smelling my dried sweat on the ground. Even an hour old, I could still smell the terror in it.

There was no movement on the other side of the wards. I stayed there long enough that my muscles cooled, beginning to cramp, and the last of the sun slipped over the horizon, leaving me in a rapidly darkening forest. Cautiously, I crept forward until I ran into something hot and buzzing.

I jumped back. The barrier had singed my palm. Shaking my head, I reached forward with my hand until I touched it, then drew back just enough that I could feel the buzzing of the magic without getting burned. Using my palm, I traced through the air until I felt the gap I had squeezed through. It was small. Maybe the size of a dog door. Definitely not large

enough for a full-sized werewolf, which explained why Jesaiah hadn't followed me. Taking a long breath, I crouched low and squeezed through.

The burning hurt more this time because I was expecting it. I grunted, forcing my way through as quickly as I could. On the other side, I panted. Some of the blisters had burst open at the second exposure to the magic. Standing, I checked the muscles of my legs, searching for any hint of movement in the forest around me. Nothing. I pointed myself in the direction of the king's house and began walking.

If I had come through, what else had crept onto or off House Bartlett lands?

The air around me cooled, and the further into the forest I got, the less nervous I was that someone was looking for me. No one popped out of the bushes; I didn't hear any howls or yips, anything else that would imply someone was trying to scare me into making a mistake.

The paths I had noticed earlier through the woods were narrow for a human but perfect for a shifted werewolf. I felt a twinge of jealousy, a spike of sadness that I couldn't run these paths the way they should be run because my wolf was out of reach.

If I hadn't been able to access my wolf when my life had been in danger, when Jesaiah had been breathing down my neck, about to tear my throat out, there was no way the wolf would suddenly become available now that I wanted to take a nice relaxing lope through the forest. I stayed focused, continuing to head in the direction that I was almost positive the king's house was in.

I wasn't sure how long I traveled. The four weeks I had been on the run had turned me into lean muscle and pure perseverance. I was used to driving myself harder than I ever had before, and Declan had taught me how to drive myself pretty hard, even before he wanted my head on his wall.

The trees began thinning out, and I stopped when I could see the back lawn of the massive house.

Lights illuminated everything a buttery yellow. I waited, hiding myself behind a tree. I needed to get to Cade before I saw anyone else so he would know what the situation was. There was no way he could brush off an attempt on my life and a hole in his wards the way he brushed off Keith selling his secrets.

Mentally, I reviewed the map I'd made during Jay's tour. Potentially, I could use the servants' hallways, sneak my way to the staircase, and then sprint for Cade's room. No. I might run into one of the servants, and there was no guarantee who was more loyal to Jesaiah and Leon than Cade. I suspected almost all of them.

The comments about Cade the ice prince, the sarcastic snarks, the side-eyed looks told me the staff didn't like their master.

Vines grew along the back of the house, gripping tight to the stucco, their tendrils digging into the masonry. They were thin, too thin to hold my weight, but it did give me an idea.

I concentrated on my fingers, bringing back the rage and anger I had felt when Jesaiah attacked me.

My wolf couldn't come to the surface, but I could do this. With a growl, I pushed all my rage into my fingertips, the claws growing long and sharp. Based on my mental map, Cade's room was the far one on the left side of the house. With one last glance around, I sprinted across the open lawn where I was exposed and leapt onto the wall, my fingers digging in. I had to be quick. Speed worked in my favor, and within seconds, I was on the second story, peeking into the window I was sure was Cade's. He was inside the room, pacing back and forth. He spoke to someone, but the window didn't let me see who it was.

If it was Leon, then I was screwed. My foot gave out, and I reached up in desperation, grabbing hold of the windowsill and pulling myself up. Cade spun, his eyes going wide when he saw me. Then he was crossing the room, opening the window with one movement, his other hand reaching out and dragging me inside by my shirt.

I fell to the floor, panting for a moment before springing to my feet and checking who else was in the room with us.

Rhys stared at me, their eyes wide, mouth slightly agape. Nia slouched in a chair in the corner of the room, not even looking up at me.

“Oh my god, this is *too much*. Talk about a dramatic entrance.” Rhys fanned themselves with their hand, turning to Nia. “Did you see that? I might be hallucinating the Romeo and Juliet vibe here.”

Nia grunted, lifting her chin in a short nod.

“Okay, good, you saw it too. So I don’t need to go see Dr. Have You Heard Of A Vegetable, Rhys?”

“Where were you?” Cade exploded.

He looked... disheveled. His blond hair was tousled, his lips plush and pink, with a slight flush rising on his cheeks, exposing his anger. He’d pulled his tie askew, the knot crooked and top button undone.

For a beat, I imagined that he was this rumpled for a different reason. No, I didn’t have time for that, and I wasn’t planning on pursuing it.

I pursed my lips, tilting my head at Rhys and Nia.

Cade shook his head, rolling his eyes. Waving a dismissive hand, he said, “Give us a minute, Rhys. We are very obviously going to need your services soon.”

“This one is *definitely* going to cost you extra, Prince Bartlett. I’m used to cleaning up after a few weeks too long between bikini waxes, not whatever hellfire your consort just escaped from.”

They swept out of the room, their long coat flowing behind them as though they were walking through a wind tunnel.

When the door clicked shut, Cade rounded on me. “Well?”

“Jesaiah attacked me,” I said.

Cade’s mouth dropped open. “The *gardener*?”

“The *alpha*,” I said sharply.

“I’m sorry, the man who comes to every council meeting and demands that we purchase more organic fertilizer, or as it’s commonly known, *cow shit*, attacked you and did this?” Cade gestured to me, and I looked down. In the warm lighting of his room, I looked worse. My clothes were filthy, covered in dirt. The burns on my arms were severe, and the shirt was shredded.

“Most of it. Some of it was done by the wards.”

Cade’s face shut down. “What about the wards?”

“You have a hole in your wards.”

Cade was always pale, but he went bone white. In clipped questions, he demanded I explain exactly what I had felt, how I had known, how I had gotten through.

When he circled back, clearly about to ask the same questions all over again, I threw up my hands. “The bigger deal is that your seneschal’s consort attacked me and tried to kill me.”

“There’s something going on. Leon said the council demanded a dinner with consorts in attendance—”

“Is *his* consort going to be there? Because he tried to kill me a few hours ago,” I interrupted, in case Cade had forgotten. “There’s a chance this is part of that whole trying to *kill you* thing. I’m pretty sure killed by his own council is how Caesar went down, so my warning isn’t so much a ‘beware the ides of March’ as it is a *watch your back because someone’s trying to kill us*. How much do you trust Leon?”

“With my life.” Cade’s face went pale as he spoke, his brows pulled together.

“Well, either he’s not worth that trust, or his consort isn’t, but I’m putting all my chips on both,” I said. “And let me tell you, I would *win* that bet.”

Cade tilted his head and stalked to the window. He stared out at the darkness without saying anything. “If what you’re saying is true—”

“I know we don’t know each other that well, but it sure would be nice if you didn’t call me a *liar* after the action-hero stunts I pulled to tell you what’s going on.” I rolled my eyes in exasperation. I could have been on my way to *Modesto*, and instead, I’d come back for him. No, not for him—for the money and the information he had.

“We need a plan,” Cade said, ignoring me.

“Well, I hope you have one because I sure as hell don’t.” I stumbled over to Cade’s bed, sitting down heavily. The cut on my forehead bled into my eyes, burning, and I swiped at it. Climbing up to Cade’s room must have reopened it.

Cade’s brows twitched, and he walked over to me, reaching out. For a second, he hesitated, his hand hovering near my face, and then he brushed his thumb up across my forehead. I stilled, feeling the warmth of his skin on mine, the shiver of his body as he stood so close.

Then Cade stepped back, pulling a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiping the blood off his thumb.

“I do. It might not be up to your Scooby Doo, pull-off-the-mask standards, but it will do.” Cade looked me over, then walked to the door. “Rhys? I need you.”

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

Rhys looked me over, walking in a wide circle around me, one hand across their stomach, the other tapping their chin.

“What *happened*, honey?” Their tone was horrified. “I left you looking like sin itself two days ago, and today, you look... Well, you look like roadkill someone dragged for a few miles.”

“I had a rough afternoon,” I said. My eyes slid to Cade, following his narrowed gaze back to Rhys.

“Rhys, we’re going to need some discretion here. You’re the only one who’s seeing this.” Cade left it hanging there, the implication clear. Rhys was the only one who was seeing this, meaning if it leaked, we would know who had leaked it.

“Yes, yes.” Rhys waved their hand. “I am, of course, the soul of discretion.”

Cade snorted, and both Nia and Rhys shot him annoyed looks. Apparently, Rhys could dish it out, but he couldn’t take it.

“However, my dear prince, one thing I am *not* is a miracle worker.” Rhys waved his hand at me. “I don’t just ask people to get undressed because it’s hot and it makes the olds uncomfortable. I actually do need to *see* my canvas before I begin painting on it.”

Cade looked at me, his eyes dropping to my neck. I could still feel the cloth around it, the high-collared shirt. Even I saw the immediate problem.

We were bluffing on a very high-stakes hand, and Rhys had just forced us to show our cards. The jig was up—Cade would have to take someone into his confidence.

I couldn't help the spike of... something. Fear? Annoyance? A gnarled knot of some emotion at the thought that someone else would know Cade's secrets the way I did.

"Let me speak with Miles first," Cade said.

He strode into his closet, not even looking over his shoulder to make sure I was behind him. I followed, closing the door.

There was a flicker of amusement once I was inside. The room was as large as my bedroom at my old apartment. Racks upon racks of clothes lined the walls. There was even a center island with a glass top, the ties in it rolled and displayed by color and pattern.

Cade paced back and forth. "This is bad. We might be able to convince Rhys that I had you doing some recon or something that required you to come back looking like... this. But if you don't have any markings where your collar is, they would be required to tell people."

"Aren't you their prince? Can't you just tell them to keep their mouth shut?"

"Rhys might act a part, but they're a loyal member of House Bartlett." Cade shot me an annoyed look. "Asking them not to mention it shows that even I know it's wrong. And asking Rhys to keep a secret like this would be like asking them to polish my boots with their toothbrush."

My eyes dropped to Cade's bare feet, the skin delicate and his long toes exposed. I thought about his boots again, the way they had clung to his calves.

"You're going to have to wear a collar," Cade said. He drew the leather strap out of his pocket and placed it in the middle of the glass display case.

I shook my head before I was even aware of doing anything. "No."

Cade's hand fisted on the leather, the buckle jangling as it dragged across the glass. "We don't have any choice."

"Well, you better come up with one because I am not putting on that collar. You might claim it's a fashion statement, but I know what it is. I can *see* what it is." I took a few steps forward, jabbing my finger on the glass next to the collar. "That means you own me."

For a moment, Cade's brow furrowed, his lips pinched. Then, a smirk spread across his face. "You're forgetting. I *do* own you. I'm paying you. You're doing a job for me. And on this job, you do what I say."

I took a step forward until we were so close I could feel the heat of his skin. He tilted his head up to look at me, his face angled for confrontation or a kiss.

"You're paying me. You don't *own* me. This is a job, meaning I can leave whenever I want," I growled.

"Is that what you would have said to Declan Monroe? Or would you have rolled over and said, *thank you, sir, may I have some more*, because you knew who your master was?" Cade's words hit me so hard that I almost stumbled back.

There was no way he could have known what my relationship was like with Declan, what I would have taken for the man who had saved me from the street, given me purpose, given me a job, given me enough money to live when the other option was die alone, abandoned, the last of my family.

I opened my mouth, not sure what I was going to do next. Tear out Cade's throat? Make him eat his own words?

Then I saw the tremble of his lips, quickly covered with a gritted jaw. The flash of his eyes he blinked away. Underneath all the bravado, all the instigating, he was scared.

Anger still flushed my body, and I fisted my hand. I pounded it once on the table, but Cade didn't jump, still staring up at me like he was waiting.

"I'm your *employee*, not your slave. You don't own me. Neither did Declan." I leaned forward, my face inches from

his. "Let's get this real clear. I wouldn't wear a collar for him, and I'm *never* going to wear one for you. This is *just a job*."

Cade inhaled sharply. Something cool and heavy slid across my wrist. Automatically, I pulled my hand back, shaking it. The snake fell off, continuing its journey to Cade. It had slithered out of one of the tie compartments, where it had been enjoying a nice nap until we had woken it with our argument.

The snake wound up Cade's arm, and when its head lifted to come parallel with Cade's ear, he leaned into it, and it nuzzled his cheek. After a long beat, he frowned.

"I suppose." He looked at me, and his expression lightened. "Yes. That could work."

I looked between him and the snake, not sure I liked anything about this conversation. One, that Cade was apparently talking to an animal, and two, that he liked whatever that animal had to say.

"What?" I asked.

"Basil says that we need to distract them." Cade lifted his arm and came close. He held the snake out to me, and with some hesitation, I took it into my hands. It wound its way up my arm, then up to my throat, curling twice around the fabric before settling its head in the crook of my neck.

Cade nodded, his eyes narrowed. "Yes. That will work."

He reached out, taking the snake back from me. His hands brushed over the fabric of my shirt as he unwound Basil, and I could feel all of my attention where he touched me. When he had the snake back in his arms, he said, "Take off your shirt."

Blinking, I pulled it off, letting it fall to the floor. Cade came closer, the fabric of his shirt sliding against my shoulder as he placed Basil back around my neck. I could feel the ghost touch of his fingers, although I knew they weren't making contact; I could feel where they would if he only moved a millimeter.

The snake wound its way around my throat twice. I swallowed thickly, feeling the heavy muscles of Basil's body.

This wasn't any better than a collar, I reminded myself. I needed to resist. I needed to get angry.

Yet somehow, it felt different, like a promise between the two of us. I wanted it to be the same, but Basil was the only thing in the whole house other than his clothes that Cade seemed to care about, and he was giving him to *me*.

"We're going to pretend that I have a snake for a collar?" The word stuck in my mouth, and I couldn't help the shiver and the urge to throw the snake as far as I could. "I don't like that any more than a leather one."

"No. Not a collar." Cade shook his head, and then he reached forward. I fought the urge to lean back, but he placed a gentle hand on the snake's muscled flesh. Then, suddenly, Cade's fingers were on my throat, the warm stroke of his fingertips across my larynx. He pulled back right away, and I reached up, trying to feel where the snake had gone.

Silently, Cade pointed at a full-length mirror on the far side of the closet. I strode over, but I could already see what had happened. Snake scales were tattooed around my neck, a thick band of them. Basil's head hung just over my clavicle, as though inked there.

For a half second, I wondered what it would be like if this was real, if this was Cade's promise to me.

"What happened? How did you do that?" I could still feel the weight of him, the heft of the muscled snake. When I reached up, though, my fingers only encountered flesh. The tattoo shifted, as though Basil was trying to get more comfortable.

"Basil is... complicated." Cade stopped.

"Listen, either you break this down for me, or I start genuinely freaking out. Is the snake real, or was he an illusion like the car? Explain." My skin felt hot and flushed. I could *feel* the snake, even though I looked at my throat and saw nothing but ink.

Cade frowned. "Think of Basil like magic that has gained sentience. All they're going to think is that whatever spell I

gave you when we bonded was so secret I wanted to make sure no one could see it even if you weren't wearing a collar by having Basil cover that initial spellwork." He stopped again, as though there were paragraphs more of what he wanted to say written, but he was unable to voice them.

"Okay." I drew out the word. "So... Basil is sentient magic. Is it going to hurt me? Because this is the part in the horror movie where you promise it's perfectly harmless, and then we start finding dead coeds all over the house, and it turns out that the sentient magical snake possessed me."

Cade immediately shook his head. "It's just like wearing a real snake. Basil is a part of me. I couldn't give him to you except as this."

"As a collar." I frowned, reaching up, but I couldn't find the edges of the snake. There was nothing for me to pry off.

"As an *illusion*. If he's there, Rhys won't think to ask why you aren't wearing a collar. This is the only option I can think of to keep you..." Cade trailed off, but there were a few ways to finish that sentence, and I was curious which one he intended. Keep you safe? Keep you alive? Keep you with me?

I swallowed, watching my neck work underneath the lines of tattooed snake. Basil moved again, and I could feel the drag of his cool scales against my skin.

It wasn't a collar. It was, strangely, the most intimate gift anyone had ever given me. Basil was something dear to Cade—even I could tell that. And he had given it to me to save my life.

I immediately shook off that thought. No. Cade had given it to me to save both of us. If I went down, he went down with me.

There was a muffled knock on the door.

Cade checked his watch. "We don't have much time. Let's hope that Rhys can work fast."



“Well, this isn’t the *tightest* deadline I’ve ever worked under,” Rhys said.

They circled around me, observing my naked form. Somehow, it felt different from the last time, although I couldn’t say why.

In a tall-backed chair by the window, Cade sat, his arms resting along the arms of the chair. He was wearing a high-necked cream shirt and black pants. His boots clung to his calves. He crossed his legs, and I turned back to Rhys.

The snake at my throat shifted.

“—I don’t know, what do you think?” Rhys narrowed their eyes, scraping them over me again.

I could feel them staring at my neck, but each time I tried to catch them at it, they looked away quickly. Nia hadn’t looked up from her phone since I came back into the room naked.

“You’re the expert,” I said.

“Yes,” Rhys said, satisfaction seeping into their voice. “I *am*. See, Prince Bartlett? *Someone* respects my talents.”

“I respect your talents, Rhys. But we’re under a time crunch. Perhaps you could hurry things along?” Cade’s voice was bored, and I felt a shiver move from my stomach down to my groin.

“All *right*, all right.” Rhys rolled their eyes. They wore a delicate layer of eyeliner, some faint makeup that made their features almost fae.

This time, I was expecting the magic, the flower petals that flew over me, the blossoms that bloomed along my flesh. Because I knew what to expect, it should have gone faster.

Instead, it seemed to take longer, each moment stretching and dilating. Cade watched me with narrowed eyes, expression suspicious when Rhys moved forward, touching a hand to some of the scalded skin on my arms.

Rhys brought a palm to my cheek, stroking their middle finger across the flesh like they were spreading rouge. I could

feel it healing under their touch. The slight itch of sweat and dirt disappeared, melting away into nothing.

Stepping back, Rhys put both hands on their hips, a smile spreading their lips. “Lovely. You’re *gorgeous*.”

They stepped forward, reaching a hand out as though to press a palm to my chest, but Cade was there, grabbing their wrist tightly. “You’ve touched him enough.”

Rhys’s eyes went wide, and Nia was suddenly on their other side, defending Rhys, her lips pulled back from her teeth in a growl that never quite became audible.

“Just the finishing touches, Prince Bartlett,” Rhys said, their voice gentle, as though soothing a wounded animal.

“Quickly,” Cade said sharply. He dropped Rhys’s hand and retreated into the closet, shuffling through his clothes.

Nia didn’t leave Rhys’s side, shrugging her shoulders and slouching again, although not taking out her phone. Rhys raised both eyebrows, lowering their voice to a whisper. “So possessive, our prince. I take it things are going *well*?”

I frowned toward the closet, confused by Cade’s reaction.

“Yes,” I answered distantly, realizing that a response was required.

Rhys extended out their hand again, although they never quite made contact with my chest. Flower petals bloomed, clearing away the last of the sweat and grime. I brought a hand to my cheek and felt that the beard had been shaved down again, leaving the barest hint of hair, an artistic choice rather than a failure to shave.

“Here.” Cade returned from the closet, handing me clothes. He wore a sharp black jacket pulled over the cream shirt. With his arms and legs covered, the high collar of his shirt hiding his neck, none of his tattoos were visible. I couldn’t even see a hint of a dark line.

I accepted the clothes from Cade, looking down at them. Black pants, a black shirt almost identical to the one I had been wearing earlier. Quickly, I pulled on the pants.

They were snug, although not too tight. I adjusted myself before reaching for the shirt. It slid over my head, covering the tattooed snake. I felt Basil hiss and shift as though disturbed by the sudden darkness. He pulsed at my throat, and I swore I felt the muscles tighten around my neck.

Holding out my arms, I presented myself for inspection.

“Black on black?” Rhys sounded almost defeated. “He looks more like the bouncer at a high-end mage club in the *city*. Some color! Gem tones would look *magical* on his skin. Right now, he just looks like he could rip out your throat for failing to pay the *bar tab*.”

A smile curved Cade’s lips. “Perfect. Now, let’s go convince the rest of the council that’s exactly what he’s about to do.”

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

After Cade explained his plan, I frowned. “I didn’t see a servants’ door in the dining room last night.”

“It was removed several years ago for privacy reasons.” Cade waved his hand. “I’ll reopen it for your dramatic entrance.”

“Privacy. Don’t you guys let your servants loiter out in the hallway, listening to everything you say?” I remembered the heartbeats, the quiet breathing of the servants who had leapt in exactly when needed and left when not.

“With the doors open, things can be heard, like last night. But when the doors of the dining room are closed, privacy wards are engaged, similar to my bedroom. No one can hear what’s going on inside.” Cade tugged at the cuff of his shirt. “This will be a formal dinner. Every powerful mage from the most high-ranking families will be there.”

“Great. So no pressure at all. This isn’t giving me flashbacks to my third-grade school play at all.”

“What happened at your third-grade school play?” Cade asked, his lip curling slightly, waiting for the punchline before I could even give it.

“Becky Brighton pushed me onto the stage early, and my costume ripped, so I had to stand there, five minutes before my first line, trying to hold up my pants so I didn’t moon all of the parents in the audience.” I shook my head. “If the servants’ door is sealed, are you sure you’re going to be able to get it

open when you need to? Wouldn't it be easier for me to wait out in the hallway?"

Cade shook his head. "We need to know what Leon is going to say. If you're waiting just outside, someone could announce your presence before I want them to see you."

I nodded. "Okay, so I'm your ace in the hole, waiting behind a door no one would go to because it's sealed shut."

"Exactly." Cade sounded relieved. "One of them is counting on you being absent."

I could read between the lines. Either Jesaiah had attacked me on his own like I suspected—king of the little hill desperate to keep his spot—or Leon had some hand in it, meaning that it hadn't been random; it had been purposeful. If that was true, what was the larger political play, and why was Leon, one of the few people that Cade trusted, making it?

Rhys clapped their hands. "This is more drama than that time I went to summer camp and I came home and Mike and Annie had already gotten married because he got her pregnant."

"Rhys." Cade paused, considering his words. "You understand that you aren't allowed to tell anyone this. Any of it."

Heaving a dramatic sigh, Rhys gestured with one arm, almost knocking over Nia. "But this is all anyone is going to be talking about in my salon for weeks. Prince Cade with the drama! Leon with the false accusations! The servants' door opening!"

"Rhys," Cade said severely. "You will be able to listen to gossip, but the very safety of our house is in danger."

Rhys sobered, their expression closing down, brows pulled together in a frown. "Of course, my prince."

They bowed, and next to them, Nia did the same.

With that dealt with, Cade turned to me, and I pulled back my shoulders as he approached. He brushed a hand across the seam of the shirt, pulling it straight. His fingers reached up,

touching the high neck. I could feel the heat of his fingertips through the fabric.

When he looked up at me, there was a question in his gaze, and I raised an eyebrow, shrugging. How was I supposed to know how his magic, sentient snake was doing?

I jerked my chin toward where Rhys and Nia stood, Rhys whispering about clothing choices and how if they'd known it was going to be such a dramatic moment, they would have dressed with more flair. If anyone was going to give the game up, they were my bet.

Cade pulled his lips to the side, his expression making it clear that desperate times called for trusting the person in House Bartlett who was the most likely to spill his secrets over a cocktail.

Cade pulled his hand back and turned toward the door. I fell into step behind him. This, at least, was familiar. I could play the part of the growling security, the silent muscle. Declan had me do it often, especially after he learned that I saw everything and was able to make my own calculations about risk and politics in any given situation.

At the top of the stairs, Cade looked over the banister. He frowned.

I didn't need to look to see what was beyond. I could hear the murmur of voices as people moved toward the formal dining room we had eaten in the night before.

"Looks like you might not get a chance for the dramatic entrance," I said.

"Trust me," Rhys said, leaning over. "If there's one thing our prince knows how to do, it's a dramatic entrance. He'll find a way."

When Cade spun, shooting Rhys a narrow-eyed look, they held up their hands and stepped backward. "*Sorry*, but you *know* it's true. Don't you remember that time you spilled cranberry juice all over Auntie Diana's white Easter dress just because she said you had used your magic in the Easter hunt? She couldn't show her face for weeks!"

“Wait up here. When everyone enters the dining room, get into the servants’ corridors. The doorway is blocked and warded, so you won’t be able to hear anything. Just wait for me to open it. Nia should know the way there.” Cade turned to her, raising a questioning eyebrow.

She dipped her chin low, not raising it until Cade swept down the stairs, Rhys in his wake.

I gritted my teeth in annoyance. “Sure. Ask me to protect you, and then walk into a room with a bunch of dangerous magic users. It’s not like that would be a good situation to have a bodyguard in.”

Exhaling a short breath, I paced to one wall, turning immediately and walking in the other direction until I hit the wall on the other side of the hallway.

I could feel Nia’s eyes on me, tracking me as I moved. The conversation downstairs quieted immediately when Cade got to the bottom of the stairs. He didn’t say anything, and I heard everyone follow him down the hallway silently. Then, the hall was quiet.

I turned to Nia, raising my eyebrows in a question. She tilted her head, listening. I did the same, and I heard soft footsteps. The clatter of silverware on porcelain. It disappeared in the other direction from the guests. Then nothing.

Nia jerked her chin once in a nod. We prowled down the stairs, my senses on high alert. Every noise made me turn; every shift in light had my full attention.

Crossing the hallway, Nia pressed her palm to a nearly invisible seam in the wall, and a door popped open. We both slipped inside, shutting it behind us.

Once inside, my shoulders relaxed slightly. If Cade was right about the doorway being sealed, there shouldn’t be any servants walking the corridors during a formal dinner. I followed Nia as she led her way through the house. The corridors moved strangely, weaving in and around rooms. For

the first time, I wondered how they worked. How did they not block a doorway or a window?

The house should be larger than it was, and given the stretch of the hall, we should have run into a window at some point. We walked through what felt like a doorway, and I shivered, the magic making goose bumps rise on my arms.

“The hallways are magic.” I shook my head, looking over my shoulder at Nia.

She eyed me, raising one eyebrow incredulously. Her implication was clear, and I rolled my eyes.

“I’m sorry some of us come from the world where this is all very strange and new,” I said. “I’ll try to adapt to life-changing realizations about magic that change the laws of physics and the nature of reality on a time frame more to your liking.”

Nia made a turn, then another. She jerked her head, and I followed. We both tensed at the sound of breathing. Someone was down here with us.

Cade had said that the doorway was warded and closed, meaning that there should be no reason a servant would be down this hallway at all. Even if they were trying to sneak a smoke break, trying to find the one place in the house they wouldn’t be caught out, there were plenty of nooks and crannies on the estate. House Bartlett was made of places to sneak a blunt or text without having your boss breathing down your neck.

I glanced at Nia, raising one eyebrow in a silent question.

She immediately shook her head. No. She had no idea who was down here.

Automatically, I moved slowly, creeping forward, using all of my skills at hunting to make sure my quarry didn’t hear me before I saw them. Nia slid into the perfect position, slightly behind and to the right of me, her body angled. Whatever she had been before she became a consort, she knew how to hunt in a pack and how to hunt in human form.

We rounded a corner, coming to a dead end. This was clearly where the formal dining room door should be. Keith leaned against the wall, pressing his ear against it.

He startled when he saw us, his eyes going wide. He jerked forward, trying to rush past us, but I closed my hand around his arm just as Nia stepped into his path.

If he was listening, that meant the ward was broken. If the ward was broken, there was a good chance they could hear anything we said. I leaned down, whispering close to his ear.

“Now, now. I don’t want you running back to your master to tell them we’re here, so you’re going to stay with us.” I looked at Nia significantly, and she nodded.

She stepped forward, taking Keith’s other arm, and I released him. His eyes were wide, his breath coming quickly.

I could smell the fear rolling off him, which made me frown. When he had sold me off to Petrona and Sonja, even letting Brett get a few minutes with me, he hadn’t smelled afraid at the idea of Cade finding out. So who was this rat scared of?

Nia dragged Keith off down the hall, and I turned my attention back to the wall. As I approached, closing my eyes to focus on my ears, I realized why Keith had pressed his ear all the way against the door. Conversation was audible, but it sounded like listening through water.

If I focused, I could make sense of it, understand what was being said. But if I wasn’t listening carefully, it all became noise.

There was a lot of conversation, and I made out pieces and snatches of it. Then I heard someone’s voice rise above everyone else.

“I’m afraid I come bearing bad news.” Leon sounded genuinely distressed. He cleared his throat, and the table quieted. When he spoke again, all emotion had been wiped from his voice. “Many of you know that Prince Bartlett took the mature step of acquiring a consort. I was so grateful to hear that our prince was taking his duties as the head of the house

seriously. Many of you have asked him when you might meet the consort, only to hear that he is indisposed. However, that is not true.”

A gasp whipped its way through the room, the murmuring beginning again.

Leon raised his voice. “Prince Bartlett’s consort attacked my own, unprovoked. He demanded information about our security, our defenses. Then, using foreign magic, he escaped through our wards.”

Leon continued, but the murmur of conversation in the room made it impossible to pull his voice loose from everyone else’s panic. The cacophony was pure noise, no one distinguishable.

Then Cade spoke, and the room dropped to silence. “My consort did what?”

“I am gravely sorry, my prince, but I thought that everyone must know this as soon as I heard it myself. We will need to immediately repair the wards, send out a search team to see if we can find evidence of who the infiltrator is. Although I think we all suspect exactly who would want intimate information from our highest-ranking member.” Leon did sound genuinely sorry, the frustration leaking into his voice. “No one is blaming you—how were you to know that the man you had pledged your life and magic to would betray you so egregiously? Perhaps we can have the doctor examine any remnants of the bond—”

“You’re suggesting that my consort, who I vetted thoroughly, is an agent of House Morrison?” Cade asked. His tone betrayed nothing.

“He is most definitely not our ally,” Leon said defensively. “Look at what he did to my consort.”

There was a moment of silence. Cade broke it.

“Jesaiah. You are so good at your job I often forget you are a consort.”

“I have served this house for forty years,” Jesaiah said, something aggrieved and defensive in his tone.

“Would you care to tell us what happened, then, consort?” Cade asked.

There was a long pause, and I leaned forward as if I could see through the door, see what was going on. No one spoke. Finally, Jesaiah cleared his throat. “I was explaining to your consort the rules.”

“Rules?” Cade asked.

“Yes...” Jesaiah sounded uncertain but seemed to gather himself together. “That the wolves here are no pack. Instead of pack dynamics, ours is strictly by house dynamics. He began asking me strange questions, about the wards, about the number of people living in the house. About what happened eleven years ago.”

I frowned, wishing I could see Cade’s expression. When Cade responded, his voice was even. “Did he?”

“He did. When I asked why he would need to know that, he attacked me. I defended myself—I chased him to the edge of the property, then I saw him force his way through the wards.”

The gasp was audible.

“Through the wards?” Cade asked. “Are you saying that our outer wards are permeable?”

“I don’t know, I’m not a mage. All I know is that he asked some strange questions, and then he was able to get through.”

“What magic did you see on him? What spells? Was there someone waiting on the other side?” Cade’s questions sounded logical, and I could see him leading Jesaiah further, allowing him to dig his own grave with his answers.

“No, no one was waiting for him. He must have had something on him, something from another house.” Jesaiah sounded confident. “I saw a flash of something before he got through.”

“So one of the houses has found a way to get through our wards?” Cade asked. “And they decided the best way to test it was to set a trap for me, tempt me with a consort and... What?”

It sounds like you were quick enough to know not to give him any answers. Unless you left that out, and you *did* expose all of our secrets.”

“Of course not. I have served this house longer than you have been alive.” Jesaiah’s words were fierce, sharp. There was something in them that spoke to a deep-rooted annoyance.

“Well, I’m glad it was you. One of the younger consorts might not have been so quick. I just can’t help...” There was a long pause that stretched, and I wanted to know what the expression was like on Cade’s face, what everyone else saw that made the silence so tense. “I just can’t help but have more *questions*. Perhaps we should ask Miles about the situation.”

“We will,” Leon said firmly. “As soon as we find him, we will question him, demand answers, demand he give up his masters.”

“Oh, no.” Cade sounded amused. “I meant *now*.”

The door in front of me shimmered, going translucent before disappearing entirely, and I was faced with a room full of the most powerful mages in House Bartlett and every single one of their consorts.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

I stepped through the open door. Everyone's eyes dragged over me, like I was a rare specimen in the zoo. But I kept my focus on Cade, playing the part of the good consort. I couldn't help the relieved breath at seeing that he was fine. We'd seen each other less than an hour before, so I wasn't sure why my heart finally felt like it could beat freely.

As I walked toward the table, I saw the shifting out of the corner of my eyes, heard the murmurs exchanged between mages seated next to each other. When I stood at Cade's right hand, I looked around.

Two dozen mages sat at the table, ranging in age from Leon and Petrona to a child who couldn't have been older than ten. None of the consorts sat. Instead, the wolves stood against the wall, hands behind their backs, staring at me with the same surprise as the mages. A few looked even more shocked.

Quickly, I memorized their faces. They were the ones whom Jesaiah had called with his howl.

Jesaiah himself stood at the far end of the table, next to Leon. His expression was slack, eyes wide, mouth slightly agape.

Leon himself looked confused, glancing from me to his own consort.

"Perhaps you could tell the table how you spent the afternoon?" Cade asked mildly.

"Of course," I said. "Jay was kind enough to give me a tour. He took me to visit Jesaiah, because Jesaiah is the oldest

consort at House Bartlett. He felt that Jesaiah might help me adapt to my new circumstances. After Jay left, Jesaiah attacked me. Brutally and unprovoked. I defended myself and fled into the forest. When I was sure he was gone, I made my way back to Cade.”

“Lies!” Jesaiah spat, his voice rising to a yell. “He lies. How can you believe him, a newcomer, a stranger? I have only ever served this house. It is my home, my life. Clearly he is back because he believes he can twist Prince Bartlett to his will through trickery.”

I raised an eyebrow and saw Jesaiah go red, baring his teeth. His canines elongated. Leon reached out a hand, gripping Jesaiah’s arm tightly.

“You’ll forgive me if I believe my own consort of forty years, Prince Bartlett,” Leon said severely. “Why would he lie about such a thing?”

The question seemed to echo, and I felt all eyes in the room on me again. They were weighing me. My strange arrival, the suddenness of my arrangement with Cade against Jesaiah and his service to House Bartlett.

Cade stood, placing both hands on the table. “Miles is my consort. You are not challenging him; you are challenging *me*. Are you suggesting that *I* am a traitor to House Bartlett?”

Leon stayed in his seat, even as I saw Jesaiah’s shoulders begin to grow, the muscle becoming heavier, his gaze feral.

“Of course I would never question your loyalty to House Bartlett, my prince.” Leon bowed his head. “But even the most loyal can be tricked.”

“By their own consort?” Cade said, his voice sweet. “Are you suggesting that a consort might trick his master?”

Master. The word wasn’t Cade’s. I recognized it as Leon’s, even as I recoiled from the implication.

“There is only one way to settle this,” Jesaiah said, his voice low and half garbled from his shift.

I braced myself. I didn't like the speculation in everyone's gaze when they turned back to me. A challenge had been thrown, but I didn't understand it.

"He's telling the truth."

The quiet voice cut through the tension, and all eyes swung to Jay.

Jay wilted, curling in on himself where he stood against the wall. His voice got even quieter, barely audible. "I saw it. Jesaiah attacked Miles, unprovoked. He drove him into the forest. He must have thought that he killed him."

I felt the twitch of a frown between my brows before I relaxed my face, masking myself in a neutral expression.

"Everyone knows whose *pet* you are," Jesaiah said. "It is no surprise that you would lie for the prince's consort when your own master—"

"You dare challenge my consort?" Isaac stood, his chair screeching across the floor. "You challenge the honesty of the prince's consort and now my own?"

I narrowed my eyes, watching Leon's expression. His face shuttered, brows drawing together, lips pursed. He stood, and Isaac swung his attention from Jesaiah to Leon.

"Leon, you dare let your consort challenge mine? You know how I should answer this." Isaac bared his teeth, leaning forward to place both palms on the table.

"Jesaiah." Leon spoke quietly, his voice controlled. "Kneel."

Jesaiah's eyes went wide, his mouth falling open. "Master —"

"Kneel," Leon repeated, his tone even harder.

Jesaiah dropped to his knees, the thud loud on the wooden floor. I winced internally. That had to hurt, especially with his older joints.

His eyes lifted, focused on Leon.

"Master, I only ever strived—" he started.

Leon cut him off. "Silence. Your lies have shamed me and shamed my name. For your offense, you will be punished."

Jesaiah bowed his head. Frowning, I glanced at Cade. He looked at me coolly, everything in his expression showing bored disinterest. But I could see the glimmer in his eyes, a slight something. Fear? Interest? It was impossible for me to tell.

Leon extended out his hand, and something reflected in the air. It was almost translucent, but when it caught the light, it moved like shimmering liquid.

It wrapped itself around Jesaiah's neck, winding over and over, then moving down his chest. Smoke began to rise from his skin, and through the clear magic, I could see the welts, the red bubbles of blisters.

I closed my fist tightly, letting my nails bite into my palm so that I wouldn't reach out and try and stop what was happening. A true alpha would never allow this to happen to another wolf. Even an enemy. If I was half the wolf my mother had been, I would already be across the table, breaking whatever hold Leon had on Jesaiah.

Instead, I dug my nails deeper, until they almost pierced the skin. That was what an alpha would do, but I wasn't an alpha. I was playing the part of a consort, and that was the only thing keeping me alive.

Jesaiah gritted his jaw tightly, but a trail of blood came out of the corner of his lips where he desperately clamped down on a scream. When it moved to his stomach, shredding the shirt entirely, leaving him half-naked, kneeling on the floor, surrounded by mages who looked on with curiosity, he finally shrieked.

The sound echoed in the room, torn from Jesaiah's throat. I didn't want to look away, but I turned, letting my eyes trail over the two dozen mages still seated. Most of them were staring, their expressions ranging from disturbed to intrigued. There were a couple dozen wolves along the walls. A few had covered their faces or looked away. Jay's eyes were wide, his

face pale and mouth open. He reached out but then pulled his hand back.

My eyes caught on Tyson. He was smiling, a slow smirk pulling at his lips. I wasn't sure what was more disturbing: that he might be enjoying Jesaiah's pain or that he was looking at this as an opportunity to gain the upper hand in their power struggle.

The cry ended with a gasping keen. Jesaiah panted on the ground, curled on his side.

"Leave," Leon said. Jesaiah crawled from the room, taking nearly three minutes to get to the door.

When he was gone, the table was silent. There wasn't even the clink of silverware on plates. People looked at me out of the corner of their eyes, a quick glance that sized me up. How big of a threat was I? I had taken out one of the most powerful people in the house with nothing more than my words. What could I do with my hands?

"My prince, I apologize. I made the mistake of believing my own consort. I will not make the same mistake again," Leon said.

"It is natural to believe the person you trust with your most intimate self," Cade said.

Then, he smiled at me. Warmly, as though I was the most intimate person in his life, the one he shared things with. I tried not to gawk, wondering how good an actor he was.

"Well, Miles," Petrona said. "I cannot imagine this is the welcome you imagined as consort to House Bartlett's prince."

Her eyes on me were assessing, a narrow gaze that saw more than I wanted exposed.

"Cade warned me that the position would be difficult," I said. I offered a quick smile, a hint of charm. "I'm not one who shies away from a challenge."

"Then why did you run away from Jesaiah?" Sonja asked, her voice clear. "Even in your own story, you ran away into the woods. Why not face him? If you had brought him back,

exposed him in the moment, then none of these theatrics would have been necessary.”

Something tightened in my stomach at the way that she called the torture we had all witnessed *theatrics*.

“I wasn’t sure what the etiquette was here. Where I’m from, we aren’t in the habit of beating up old men. Even when they deserve it.” I forced a smile, although it felt more like baring my teeth. “If I was in the habit of thrashing everyone who deserved it, then your own consort would have arrived home with a black eye.”

Sonja inhaled, opening her mouth, but before she could say anything, Cade broke in.

“I think we are all grateful that the situation has been dealt with so quickly,” he said.

When I turned away from Sonja to look at him, I found that his words were for Leon alone. Although Leon’s expression was blank, I could see the tension between his brows where he forcibly kept them from frowning.

“Yes. As I said, I am deeply ashamed of my consort’s actions. I will make sure that there are appropriate consequences.” Leon nodded his head. It looked like subservience, but I could feel the tension in it, the fact that Leon had been put in his place and didn’t like it.

“If only all of our issues could be dealt with so swiftly,” Brett Kulsa broke in. He sat further down the table, nearly at the end.

“Do you have something to say, Brett?” Cade asked sharply.

“No, no, of course not. Merely observing that so many of these issues have been popping up recently. It’s almost as if our house is under siege.” Brett gestured around the table, but his neighbors looked away, as though they had no desire to be included in whatever scheme he was selling.

“I assume you’re talking about the threats on my life?” Cade said.

“Between that and the missing money, House Bartlett is being attacked on all sides. It’s no wonder someone suspected your... consort.” Brett tilted his head, shrugging an apology.

“Missing money?” Cade said mildly. “I have no idea what you’re referring to. If you have concerns, I assume you brought them up with my seneschal before airing them at a formal dinner.”

Brett looked around, but now his neighbors turned completely away, as though putting a wall between his voice and themselves. I kept my confusion to myself, behind a mask I’d learned early on Declan’s payroll. Whatever Brett was up to, he wanted to make Cade look foolish or weak, and I wasn’t about to help him even by looking like I didn’t know what he was talking about.

“Oh, this is no *secret*.” Brett looked around the table, as though for support, and seemed bolstered by the few faces he saw that were intrigued at more drama. “Perhaps your consort knows what happened to the money? After all, he seems to know about a lot of things these days.” Brett turned to me, his blond hair gleaming, his teeth bleached white. “Do you know where *three-quarters of a million dollars* disappeared to, Consort Bartlett?”

I stared at him in silence, remembering the twist of his hand in mine, how easy it would have been to break his wrist or smash his face into a wall. As I stared at him, his own face went pale, eyes widening, as though he could read my mind and saw the violence I was imagining.

Most people didn’t need real violence to be afraid. All Brett needed was to believe that I *could* perform violence.

“I think you’re trying to stir up drama,” I said. “Which makes me wonder why you’re so desperate to put attention on Cade. If I started turning over rocks in your garden, what secrets would I find?”

I stared at him, taking in his expensive suit, his cologne that I could smell from all the way across the room. Although my face was blank, from the expression on Brett’s face, he took it for the threat it was.

Silence took over the room, making even the clink of silverware unbearably loud. Mages exchanged looks. Along the wall, I could see the werewolves shifting uncomfortably. Most of them were my size, although a few, like Tyson, were even larger.

But none of them were naturally born alphas. Meaning a deep part of them wanted to show their throat, to give in, to yield.

“Well, I suppose I’ll have to stop looking into it if you’re going to set your dog on me for asking questions.” Brett waved his hand at Cade, as though dismissing a foul odor in the air. “I assure you, my loyalty is to House Bartlett. The threats aren’t necessary.”

Cade’s face went stony, just as frigid as the ice prince they all accused him of being.

Before he could speak, I moved forward, and Brett’s attention swung back to me. “Kulsa, that wasn’t a threat. When I threaten you, I promise you’ll know.”

Petrona cleared her throat. “Well. This is all very entertaining, however, I fear the dinner theater has delayed our meal.”

Pointedly, she began eating, and those around her did the same. Cade jerked his head, and I followed his eyes to the wall. There was a space behind him, and I took it, not leaning against wallpaper but standing at attention, hands clasped behind my back, feet shoulder length apart.

How many times had I watched Declan eat with his enemies, standing just like this, ready for the first sign of violence?

I was so focused on reading the room, trying to see who was a danger at the table, watching the small bits of relationships I was seeing when someone glanced out of the side of their eyes or ignored a comment from across the table, that I almost missed when I was brought to center stage again.

“Perhaps it will put us all at ease if we might find out more about your consort, Prince Bartlett,” Petrona said.

Her expression was warm, inviting. She actually did believe what she was saying. If they knew more about me, then maybe they could sweep what had just happened under the rug.

Petrona turned to me, her expression open and inviting. “Tell us about yourself.”

“Well...” I stared at the back of Cade’s head, wishing he would turn around and give me a hint of what I should say. “I grew up in Los Santos. I ran the streets when I was a kid, but the church took me in when I was still in grade school.”

“The church.” Petrona nodded, looking to those around her. “Such a venerable institution raised you well, I’m sure.”

“It was all right,” I said vaguely. “I worked odd jobs here and there. Then I met Cade. There isn’t much more to say.”

This seemed to satisfy Petrona, who turned back to her neighbor. “Is it so strange to have such a swift courtship after such a lonely upbringing?”

“Yes.” Her neighbor nodded, his head bobbing up and down in agreement. Sweat beaded along his receding hairline. “Petrona said you went to museums during your courtship. Were you able to see the Van Gogh exhibit?”

It didn’t feel like a trick, but I frowned anyway. I had no memory of any Van Gogh exhibit in the city.

“To be honest... I wasn’t really paying attention to the art when Cade took me out.” I trailed off, letting my lecherous grin do the rest of the talking. “Art was more his thing. My thing was him.”

“Which church took you in?” Sonja asked. She looked up from her plate, pinning me, draining the humor from my words.

I shrugged awkwardly. There were a few in the city that housed werewolves without packs.

“The one on Rincon Street,” I said.

I knew it mostly because after school let out, there were always screaming kids playing in the yard, watched over by

severe-looking nuns in black-and-white habits.

“That one didn’t open until ten years ago,” Sonja said sharply. “You’re... what? In your late twenties? It opened after you would have aged out of the system.”

I frowned, trying to decide if she was right. Los Santos changed more than Flores ever did. Flores was the same, year in, year out. The church was always in the same spot; shops might close down, but new ones would spring up in the same place like weeds sprouting year after year.

Los Santos was different. It was a big city. Old buildings were torn down to build skyscrapers. A manufacturing facility that had gone out of business would be renovated into apartments.

Shrugging, I said, “I spent a couple of years there. But you move around a lot when the church is taking care of you.”

“Of course. I’m sure. But you have to see why your background would matter when you are consort to the man who will be our king.” This time, Sonja didn’t smile to hide the threat in her words.

Something pitted cold in my stomach. No one would believe Jesaiah again, even if he came back and shouted that I was Castillo Pack. But how would Cade react if he found out?

Declan had never made any mention of my past. All he needed was my unwavering loyalty in the present. But I wondered how far someone would have to dig to find out where I actually came from.

It was clear that Sonja had a shovel and was ready to excavate my past in order to find a reason to dislike me.

“That’s enough. He has told you what you want to know. I had him thoroughly vetted. Clearly, there are some house matters to discuss.” Cade looked up from his plate, setting aside his silverware with a definitive clink. “Consorts are excused.”

For a moment, the room was frozen. Then, the consorts began filing out. I hesitated, unsure if I was supposed to go with them or not.

Cade glanced at me, then tilted his head just slightly. Stiffly, I walked out, shutting the doors behind me.

CHAPTER
TWENTY

Out in the hallway, I was surrounded by wolves. It was a strange sensation. Declan employed a lot of us. There was no arguing with the fact that wolves were stronger, faster, and generally more loyal than humans.

In his crew, we operated by pack dynamics. Because I was Declan's right hand and because I was an alpha, I was at the top. Everyone else fell into line.

No matter what Jesaiah had said, I could see the similarities here. Tyson stood a few feet away, his arms crossed. Five wolves stood behind him, mimicking his pose. None of them quite had his size or the feel of his aggression, but he clearly had his own allies.

Jesaiah was nowhere in sight, and the rest of the wolves stood around, glancing between me and Tyson, as though trying to determine who was going to come out on top.

"So you took on the old man?" Tyson smirked.

"He took *me* on." I bared my teeth. "He learned his lesson."

Tyson snorted. "Yeah. His *owner* taught him his lesson. I heard you didn't even shift."

Tension radiated through the room, whispers building into a crescendo of noise.

"You want to see what kind of wolf I am when I shift?" I crossed my arms, leaning back on my heels. "Because we can

take this outside. I was taught never to shift inside a house. Ms. Manners frowns on it.”

“Sure. Let’s take it outside,” Tyson growled.

He leaned in. But before he even touched me, Nia stepped between us. She held up two hands, one toward Tyson, one toward me.

To my surprise, Tyson rolled his eyes, backing off. He waved her away. “He’s not worth it. If he wants to suck on Bartlett’s popsicle and think that makes him an alpha, good for him.”

He mimed giving a blow job before laughing. He and his friends turned, heading down the hallway toward the kitchens.

With the potential fight gone, most of the other wolves trailed away. Nia turned to me, eyes narrowed.

I held up both hands. “Hey, he started it.”

“That’s not going to fly with her,” Jay said quietly.

He had stayed behind, a couple of other wolves behind him.

“Coral and Theo,” he introduced, indicating a broad-shouldered woman, her long blonde hair hanging down her back in two braids. The man—Theo—sat in a wheelchair without handles on the back.

Both of them nodded at me, cautious expressions that spoke more to curiosity than friendship.

“Hi.” I offered over my hand. Coral shook with a quick squeeze, and Theo’s callused hands spoke to how long he had been in the chair. “Listen, I promise I’m not usually this much of an alpha stereotype. Usually, I only get in fights every other day. Twice a day is a lot for me.”

“Don’t worry. Tyson gets to everybody. I’m surprised we have a lawn, given how many pissing contests he causes.” Coral laughed at her own joke, and I joined in.

“So you grew up in the church?” Theo asked.

I immediately saw the question for the trap it was.

“Kind of.” I looked away, closing my eyes and sighing. “Cade knows, but I spent most of my childhood on the streets. After the church kicked me out.”

“Yeah, we figured,” Coral said. “The church doesn’t like alphas.”

She and Theo exchanged a glance, and I immediately knew I had been right. Both of them had grown up in the church. Coral had a cross tattooed just under her collarbone, exposed by her low-hanging tank top.

Church wolves were a different sort than any other I’d met. The church squeezed normal socialization out of them. No dominance games, no shifting, nothing that you’d see in a normal werewolf childhood. I’d seen enough wolves who came out of the church system so stressed and unsocialized that they thought a normal back slap was worth getting into a fight about, or they didn’t recognize when to back off a dominant wolf.

Some of them adjusted to life outside the system, but others never did, ending up challenged for the rest of their lives.

“With all those people listening, I didn’t exactly want to say that I spent most of my teenage years homeless.” I looked at them. “Are you going to rat me out?”

The phrase was automatic, too many years running too many schemes. Luckily, none of them seemed to be paying attention to the fact that it was an odd way of phrasing the question.

“I’ll probably tell my master,” Theo said. “But Jack is a good guy. I don’t think he’ll say anything to the others.”

“Same,” Coral said. “Lily doesn’t gossip.”

I couldn’t help the next question. It had been something trapped in my throat ever since I met Jay.

“You really call them your master? I thought that was something old school. Jesaiah and Leon both said it, but I didn’t know the rest of you did too.” I frowned at Theo.

The wolves looked uncomfortable, even Jay shifting on his feet. Only Nia seemed unaffected. Finally, Theo shrugged.

“It’s just a word.” He pulled a pair of gloves out of the pocket of his pants, tugging them on. He wouldn’t meet my eyes.

“*Hey*. You chose this too.” Coral was in my face, drawing all attention away from Theo. Her nose twitched, smelling me. “Even if the ice prince only screwed you once, you still *chose* to come here.”

Anger simmered under her expression, a flash in her eyes that was nearly a threat. My hackles rose, and I almost took a step forward, ready to show her exactly who was the alpha in this situation.

But that wouldn’t get me anywhere. If I’d fought every single person who had ever looked at Declan wrong, I would have been killed before Declan finished his morning piss, and I would have deserved it.

“Listen, that came out wrong. I’m so used to what they call us, you know? *Dog. Mutt. Where’s your master?* That kind of thing. I guess I’m just not used to how things look here.” The words were mostly true. I had been called Declan’s dog so many times that the insult had lost all meaning.

Coral looked at Theo, and his face softened. So that was how it was. She was a fierce one, the one that had always protected him when they were under the church’s care. He was the soft one because she had given him the space to be.

“I don’t know. I don’t *like* using it, but what else are we supposed to call them?” Theo played with the Velcro of his glove, dragging it open and closed. “Jack doesn’t think of himself like that. But...”

“You always wonder where you would be if he hadn’t picked you up?” I was firing in the dark, trying to see what fit.

Theo turned to me, his eyes wide. He nodded.

I knew exactly where I would be if Cade hadn’t picked me up, and unfortunately for both of us, *he* knew exactly where I

would be too. I wondered if Declan was keeping a place open for me on his wall, if I was going to be the prize trophy.

Nia cleared her throat. She looked at me with a long, unblinking gaze. Strangely, even though she hadn't said a word, I knew exactly what she wanted.

"Hey, thanks for this. We'll have to get together soon. But I should probably get back and wait for Cade." I gestured vaguely toward the stairs.

"Are you sure?" Jay asked. "Usually, the cook puts out a meal for us. We don't get to eat during formal dinners."

I waved him off. "I'm fine."

The three of them turned, heading in the same direction as the rest of the wolves. I turned to Nia.

"Where did you stash him?"



She had stashed him in the same small reading room that I had been ambushed in. I wasn't sure where she had gotten rope, but she'd tied Keith tightly to a chair. His eyes were wide, and sweat ran from his temples to his chin, dripping down onto his pants.

Nia closed the door behind us with a definitive click. Keith went pale, his breath coming in short gasps.

I sat across from him, leaning forward so my forearms rested on my knees. He inhaled sharply. "Keith, what I can't figure out is who else is paying you. Because Petrona, Sonja, and Brett were all in the room. So who were you listening for? Who else wants to know the intimate secrets of House Bartlett?"

With the whites of his eyes visible, he looked so much like prey that the predator inside of me wanted to tear out his throat while he was weak. He opened his mouth a couple of times before swallowing. "I won't tell you anything."

“Interesting word there,” I said, my tone low and dangerous. “Won’t. It’s not can’t, so that means that no one put any magic on you that compels you to keep it a secret. It’s not even a denial that there *is* someone else paying you. Someone outside House Bartlett.”

“I spoke wrong,” Keith said. “There’s no one.”

“See, I just don’t believe you.” I placed my hands on the armrests on either side of Keith’s body and sniffed him. “You know what you smell like, don’t you?” I leaned in close, whispering in his ear. “Fear.”

He shuddered back, pulling himself away, but I leaned forward, grabbing his chin and staring into his eyes. “Keith, I want you to believe me when I tell you this. *This* is me asking nicely. The next step is I report you, and we see how nicely Prince Bartlett asks you.”

Keith laughed, a low sound. I could tell from it he wasn’t afraid of Cade.

“Or,” I said, “I can keep asking you, and when I get tired, I let Nia ask you. Who’s paying you?”

I sat back, watching him, waiting.

He shifted, and I kept still, like I could wait forever. Wolves were predators, predators used to stalking their prey, waiting for them to make a mistake.

Finally, Keith swallowed.

“House Morrison,” he whispered. “They didn’t give me a name. I meet them at a parking garage. They pay me for any information I can bring.”

“House Morrison,” I said thoughtfully.

It made sense; it was a puzzle piece that fit. Of course House Morrison would want to know what was going on with House Bartlett.

But it fit too neatly. It was too pat. It was like when Jesaiah claimed I had been an agent of House Morrison. Something about it fit perfectly, which made it sound wrong.

“Yeah,” Keith warmed to the idea. “House Morrison pays me to tell them what happens here.”

“And what have you told them so far?” I asked.

Keith went pale. “Nothing about the security. Just details about the people. Where they’re going. What they drive. What they want.”

“Details like when Cade went to the city? What car he was driving? Details that almost got him blown up and poisoned?”

“No, no.” Keith twitched his head.

“That sounds very... neat,” I said.

“It’s the truth,” Keith said.

I waited, staring at him. His pulse beat rapidly at his throat. He looked over at Nia, but she was on her phone, completely ignoring both of us, her back resting against the door.

The longer I stared, the whiter Keith went until he was a shaking, sweating mess.

“Or maybe it wasn’t House Morrison,” he blurted. “It could have been one of the other houses. It could have been the dryads. I don’t know. We always met in secret, and they paid me.”

“Where did you meet?” I asked.

“We met in a parking garage.” His head nodded up and down as he spoke, a bobblehead doll on the dashboard.

That was the second time he’d mentioned a parking garage, so either it was the truth, or when he imagined secret rendezvous with other houses, the only place he could think of was the televised version of Watergate.

“Which garage?” I asked.

“It was on Enterprise Street in Los Santos,” he said quickly.

“That’s a long street.” I waited.

“It was the one across from the theater. The old movie theater that they shut down.”

I knew the one. So, it was a lead to check out.

Nia was staring at him, and I rewound the conversation, realizing that she had looked up from her phone when he had mentioned the dryads.

“Why do you think it was the dryads?” I asked.

“They’re always on us, aren’t they? Always in our business. Coming into our territory.” Keith was getting heated, his voice rising.

Strange. For someone who was selling out his employers, Keith was showing a lot of loyalty to House Bartlett. All this *our business* and *our territory* meant that he was more attached to House Bartlett than he wanted me to believe.

If he was selling information, I doubted he was selling out the entire house. Perhaps just one person in the house. I remembered his words, his warning that Cade was getting people killed these days.

Standing, I looked over at Nia. “I need to inform Cade. Is there somewhere you can store him?”

Nia frowned before slowly shaking her head. She glanced significantly at the door, and I made some calculations. Who in House Bartlett would be able to handle this discreetly?

The answer came instantly. Isaac, the man whose job I was taking.

“Go get Jay,” I said.

Nia left. I turned back to Keith.

“You sure you don’t want to start telling me what’s really going on?” I asked. “This is the last chance you have. After this, I throw you to the mages, and who knows what they’ll do to you.”

Keith shook his head, a jerk of motion. “He’ll kill me.”

“*Who?*” I demanded, but Keith’s eyes swung to the door.

Nia opened it, letting in Jay before shutting it behind her. He took one look at Keith, bound, sweating, terrified, and said, “What’s going on?”

I filled him in quickly. “Could Isaac put him somewhere? Until I’m able to inform Cade?”

Jay looked over Keith. “Yes. I know where Isaac would put him. Let me handle it.”

He and Nia had a conversation in shorthand, and I got the gist of it. They were going to move him to an outbuilding that was warded. Who else did they keep there? Before I could ask, the two of them left, Nia prodding Keith in front of her.

For a moment, I stared at the seat that Keith had been sitting on. *He*. Keith was afraid of one person. Now I needed to find out who, and I had a feeling once I did, I’d know who was trying to kill Cade.

A small voice in my head wondered *and then what?* Once I knew who was trying to kill him, what did I do next?

There was noise as the dining room doors opened, the mages leaving their werewolf-free meeting. Slipping out, I searched the crowd for Cade and found him already mounting the stairs to his room. At the top, I caught up to him, and he startled violently when I touched his elbow.

I opened my mouth, but he shook his head sharply. Pointing, he gestured to his room, and I followed, waiting until the door had shut before I tried again.

“Cade,” I said. “Something happened.”

Cade spun, his eyes glinting and sharp as diamonds. No, not diamonds—his eyes were as sharp as ice sheered directly from a glacier.

“Who are you really?” he demanded. “Miles, I need the truth.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

I stared at Cade. For a moment, I thought about telling him the truth, stripping away all of the lies between us.

My name is Miles Castillo. I am the last remaining heir to the Castillo Pack. Eleven years ago, my parents killed your parents, and I've been on the run ever since. I'm here because I don't have anywhere else to go to escape Declan Monroe and also because if I don't find out what happened to my parents, I will never be able to live as a true alpha.

But telling him that was a death sentence, and I hadn't gotten to where I was by taking long jumps off short ropes. If I hadn't rolled over and let myself be killed when I was sixteen and had seen all my siblings but one murdered, I wasn't about to start now.

"What do you mean? You didn't need to know anything about me when you saved me from Declan. In fact, *you* chose *me*." I crossed my arms, feeling the muscles tense and jump.

"You didn't grow up in the church. Even I can tell that. So who are you? Where did you come from?" His eyes searched my face, but there was a blankness on his feature. He had all the excitement of someone asking their smart phone if it was going to rain.

"No. I didn't grow up in the church. I grew up with Declan Monroe." I threw it at him. "Is that what you wanted me to tell your high-society house members? That the consort you chose used to be a thug for the biggest crime boss on this coast?"

Cade's nostrils flared, and he gritted his jaw before biting out, "And before that? Or are you suggesting that Declan raised you from infancy?"

I wanted to look away, give myself some space to think of a response. Instead, all I could see was my life before Declan. Six brothers and sisters, all of us laughing and playing out in the yard. We would trip over each other in the house and play so rough outside that Mom kept a hospital's amount of Band-Aids on hand.

The property had been a farmhouse out on the edge of town, backing onto dry California hills and industrial farms in the distance. Every year or so, Dad would get it into his head to use the land for its intended purpose, and he would drag my older siblings into the venture. We would plant seeds in the ground and watch them sprout, spending hours cleaning them of pests and covering them with shade cloth.

The garden would inevitably be overrun by weeds or disease, and Dad would get distracted by some other project until he remembered we lived on a farm again.

My mother had been the most powerful alpha in the country. She had been on her way to reestablishing the long-dormant Emperor Wolf throne. With that title, she would have had as much power as the strongest mage house. She would have been able to make actual differences in the lives of every werewolf in the hemisphere.

"No, Declan didn't raise me from infancy. I had a family." I forced the words out, swallowing around the emotion that choked me. "They were killed when I was sixteen, almost seventeen. I ran away to Los Santos, and Declan found me. He saw my potential."

Cade's face was white, his blue eyes the brightest thing in the room. They were pools of water from a fae spring, ready to draw me in and drown me.

I saw a flash of empathy in his gaze. Then he shook his head, as though willing away whatever feeling had arisen.

"Who killed your parents?" he asked.

“Who killed *yours*?” I challenged. “My past is my own. You might have bought my service, you might have saved me from death, but you didn’t buy every part of me.”

Cade looked up at me, his chin tilted defiantly. “They know we aren’t joining. Somehow. I don’t understand how.”

“How would they know? I thought that’s what the tattoo covered up.” I gestured to my neck. “Basil should make it look like we’re magically bonded, right?”

Cade huffed out an unhappy breath and began pacing back and forth in the room, his tight movements speaking of irritation and anger. He stripped off his jacket and threw it to the ground near the bed, rolling up the sleeves of his shirt.

As he revealed his forearms, I couldn’t help but admire the muscles, the pale skin that was stained with tattoos.

“No, no one’s mentioned about the bond itself.” He turned to me, accusing. “I mean, they know we aren’t... *joining*. There’s been some implication that we, as you so *eloquently* put it, lay back and thought of England just long enough to form a bond.”

I laughed, a short bark of amused sound. I thought of how Coral had taken one sniff and known we hadn’t had sex recently, how Tyson implied that we weren’t intimate, even when he’d only known me for a few minutes.

Cade’s eyes flew to mine, and I was lost again in that blue, that endless ocean of blue. Shaking myself out of it, I said, “The scent. You don’t smell like me, and I don’t smell like you. So, *all* the consorts know we haven’t ‘joined’ recently.”

“So...” Cade swallowed, his throat working, and I watched the bob of his Adam’s apple. He cleared his throat. “Anyone who’s talked to their wolf would know we haven’t...”

“Probably,” I said.

Cade inhaled deeply, and we were standing so close again. I tried to remind myself his family had killed mine. His house was the reason I was an orphan. But a sneaking sensation crept up my back. The desire to bury my hands in his blond hair and see if it was as soft and silky as it looked.

A voice hissed in my mind. *If he knew who you were, he would kill you on the spot.* It sent a shiver down my spine, but somehow, that didn't lessen the attraction.

“What... What do they smell?” Cade asked. I couldn't drag my eyes away from his plush, pink lips. He licked them again.

“When you're truly mated to someone, when you're *partners*,” I said, “you smell like each other. You breathe the same air, you sleep in the same bed, your skin rubs together.”

I stared at his lips, which had parted just slightly, wondering if I dared tease him. “If you sniff deeply enough, you smell like each other's come.”

Cade's eyes widened, and then he glared at me. “Well, that's easy enough.”

He moved forward, and I thought for a second he was going to touch me—he was going to wrap his arms around me and finally let me feel what those soft, pink lips felt like. I wanted to run my rough hands over his pale skin and find out exactly what it took to make him beg.

Cade nudged me aside, heading into the bathroom. He shut the door behind him, and I stared for a few long moments, gaping at the closed door. Part of me wanted to tell him I'd been joking, that I'd been pushing his buttons to see what he would do. But I *still* wanted to see what he would do. Would he go that far?

With a shrug, I shook off the feeling, the attraction that had sparked between us. I sat down on the bench, realizing that I had been so distracted I had forgotten to tell him about Keith.

Approaching the bathroom door, I knocked sharply, twice. “Cade? I have to tell you about Keith.”

Inside the bathroom was quiet, but I heard the soft sound of flesh on flesh. A muffled grunt, followed by a soft sigh.

My nose twitched. The heady scent of arousal was thick in the air. I could smell what he was doing. I swallowed, my voice rough when I said, “Cade? I was just... There's an easier way to—”

Another grunt, this one sharper. I should walk away, give him a moment, give him space. But I wanted to know the expression on his face. I wanted to see his lips, open and panting, wet with spit.

I was almost pressed against the door, listening for another sound. Cade moaned, muffling a sharp cry of release. Then he was panting, the sound echoing in the bathroom. When I heard him straightening his clothes, closing his zipper, I stepped back, far enough away that it didn't look like I had been listening at the doorway.

He opened the door, and the scent hit me: the warm tinge of arousal, the sharp, acidic hit of come. He offered over a tissue, and I stared at him for a moment.

“Just to be clear, you want me to rub that all over myself? That was the only solution you could come up with.” I sounded incredulous, an impossible laugh bubbling up into my voice.

Even as I tried to stifle it, something about the image hit me hard. I imagined dipping my fingers in and putting them in my mouth, tasting him. I cleared my throat, swallowing down the moisture that was accumulating in my mouth.

Shaking my head, I said, “I told you. There's an easier way.”

I stepped close, watching as Cade went still like a rabbit in the forest who sensed a wolf nearby. He watched me with wide eyes. I reached forward, slowly enough that he would have a chance to move away if he wanted to. His eyes followed my fingers.

With one hand, I tugged his shirt collar down, pulling it so that his neck was exposed. He gasped, his chest rising and falling. Lines of tattoo swirled over the skin, fleeing when I pressed my wrist to his pulse point.

The flesh was warm and soft under my touch. I rubbed my wrist in a slow circle, then slowly raised my other hand until I was cupping his face between my palms, letting my wrists take on the scent of his neck.

He stared at me, eyes unreadable.

Slowly, I lowered my hands, trailing my fingers down his arms. The soft fabric of his shirt caught against my rough fingertips. When I reached his wrists, I gently wrapped my own hands around them.

His palms were smooth, without calluses, moisturized so there wasn't a single bit of rough skin. His breath caught, but his eyes were somewhere on my neck.

I released his hands, reaching to the hem of my shirt to pull it off. I dropped it onto the ground, then trailed my fingers over the back of his hands again, feeling the delicate skin, the fine bones. Taking his palm, I lifted it to my neck.

For a moment, I thought about leaning over and kissing the lines of his palm, but instead, I rubbed his wrist against my neck.

He gasped, and I felt myself getting hard at the touch, the awareness of how sensitive my own wrist had been on his neck. I swallowed, and his eyes stared at my throat.

He must have been looking at Basil, and I wondered how long until he took back the snake.

Never, a traitorous voice in my mind said. *Let him never take the snake back.*

I stepped close, until we were breathing the same air. He lifted his face to mine, and I couldn't help the soft smile on my lips.

"Now we smell like each other," I said.

He jerked back, nearly stumbling over his own feet.

With brusque movements, he rolled his sleeves down, blinking at me. "We'll have to do this every day?"

"As often as you want," I teased him. "Some men even like to do it twice a day, but all the magazines tell me that makes me a loose woman if I let you."

His chin jerked, and he turned from me. The stiff line of his back spoke to a deep discomfort. I tried not to imagine how

long it had been since someone had touched him. Who would he have let undress him, spread him naked across the bed, worship him?

I cleared my throat, blinking. No, that wasn't for me. This was a business arrangement, a profitable one if Keith led us to the person who wanted Cade dead. Neither Cade nor I had time to be distracted by whatever this was.

Shaking off my arousal, I said, "Keith is selling your secrets to someone else."

He waved his hand without turning around, using his other hand to straighten his collar, the sensitive, delicate flesh disappearing under fabric.

"We've been over that. If he wants to sell the secrets I give him to Sonja and Petrona, even Brett, that just means I control the flow of information."

"He was listening outside the servants' door," I said. "Someone had broken the wards so he could hear what was going on inside the formal dining room."

Cade spun, and all traces of disquiet were gone. His eyes were cold, brows pulled together in a frown. "What?"

"Nia and I saw him when we were getting into position. He was listening. When I stood right where he was standing, I could hear through the door." I crossed my arms, feeling the part of me that had been trained by eleven years working for Declan falling into place. "Jay took him to wherever Isaac would put someone when he wanted them to sweat. Keith spun a story, one he thought we would believe. House Morrison was paying him for information. When I didn't believe that, he started throwing other names at the wall. The other houses, dryads, he probably would have named anyone you might think is against you. The only true thing he told me was that he was afraid that *he* would kill him."

"He said House Morrison?" Cade crossed his arms, mirroring my pose. "Why don't you believe that?"

"It's too neat, it's too pat." I tapped one finger on my bicep, realizing that I was still shirtless. "He was trying to tell

me any story he thought I would believe. Moreover, I think he's loyal to House Bartlett. When he talked about the dryads, he kept saying *we*. He still thinks he's part of House Bartlett, even if he's selling your secrets."

Cade nodded, silently agreeing with my assessment. He glanced at the clock on the wall. "We should question him now. Isaac and I know some spells that will loosen his tongue."

Someone knocked on the door, and both Cade and I turned. I sniffed, out of habit, but I couldn't smell or hear anything beyond the wood.

"Yes?" Cade called out.

"Cade. I have news," Isaac said.

Cade nodded at me, and I walked over to the door, opening it. Isaac stood on the other side, Jay and Nia behind him.

I stepped back to let them all in. Both wolves sniffed sharply when they entered the room. Jay blushed hotly, but Nia just raised an eyebrow. I held up both hands, shrugging.

Sure I could have gotten Cade the information faster, but where was the fun in that?

"Sorry to interrupt," Isaac said. He stopped, narrowing his eyes at my shirt on the floor, then frowned up at Cade.

I imagined even to a human nose, the room still reeked of come and arousal. The warm blush that rose high on Cade's cheekbones didn't do much to deny the implicit accusation.

"Have you already started questioning Keith?" Cade asked.

"That's the problem. By the time Jay came and got me, Keith was dead." Isaac's face was dark, brows pulled together, lips tight.

Cade spun, eyes narrowed at Jay. "You left him alone?"

"No, Nia was right outside the cell. She said she didn't hear anything or see anything." Jay glanced at her, and Nia nodded.

“We should go look at the scene,” I said. “How did he die?”

Isaac looked at Cade. “You might want to stay here.”

“Why?” Cade asked suspiciously.

“It might bring back memories,” Isaac said, his tone frank. “It looks like a werewolf attack.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

We walked in silence, Cade and Isaac leading the way, speaking in whispers. Nia, Jay, and I pretended we couldn't hear them.

They were arguing about what it meant, whether or not it was House Morrison intending to shake Cade up. Cade parroted my arguments back to Isaac. It was too neat. It was too obvious.

House Morrison might as well be marching up to House Bartlett's front doors, wearing full military regalia with a marching band blasting John Philip Sousa.

"You didn't kill him?" I asked Nia.

She shot me a filthy look, the annoyance clear in the roll of her eyes.

"I didn't think so, but whoever did is trying to frame you or—" I frowned, the implications still making me nauseous. "—this is a message for Cade."

Or me, but no one knew who I was. No one except Jesaiah had even voiced a suspicion.

Isaac called light into his hand, his magic a brilliant white that illuminated the forest around us. We followed a dirt path, the massive trees on either side looming over us, thick with history and memory.

I could see the marks on the ground where someone had been dragged—likely Keith—deeper into the forest.

Eventually, we reached a clearing with three small, windowless, cinder block cabins set in a semicircle.

Isaac led us to the first one, but before he could get too close, I held up a hand.

“Wait. Tell me again what happened.” I turned to Jay. “You and Nia dragged him through the forest, bringing him here. You threw him inside. Did you tie him up?”

Jay nodded. “There are iron chains inside.”

I raised my eyebrows at the specificity. Chains would hold a lot of creatures, but iron was only used to stop one magical being—mages. They had designed these three little cottages as prisons for mages.

“You chained him. Then you left to get Isaac. You locked the door behind you?”

“No.” Jay looked at Nia. “Nia was here, so I left the door unlocked.”

“You waited outside?” I asked Nia.

She nodded, the expression on her face guarded.

“I would have too. Chained in a cold little prison cell... It’s a lot scarier to be sitting alone in the dark.” I tilted my head, leaning over to nudge her arm with mine. “The CIA would be proud.”

She shook her head, but I saw a hint of a smile in the corner of her mouth, like she was amused. I looked around, sniffing the air, squinting into the darkness.

“Can you put out the light?” I asked Isaac.

He closed his hand, and the light disappeared. It still took a few minutes for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. Under the tall trees, moonlight was scarce, but without the glow of his light casting odd shadows, I could see more clearly.

Scuff marks against the wall of the cabin indicated where Nia had been standing. I could see the disturbed leaves and twigs where two sets of footprints had dragged someone

inside. The area around the cabin was undisturbed, surrounded by overgrown brush and detritus from the trees above us.

“When was the last time someone was put in here?” I asked.

“A few years ago,” Isaac said immediately. “There was a mage who...”

He shook his head, eyes squinted as he searched the darkness for Cade.

“Who what?” I asked sharply.

“It’s not something we speak of in public.” Cade’s words were firm. “What do you notice?”

“Nothing. Either they knew how to get here without disturbing anything, or they were never here at all. Who cleans around the cabins?” The area was covered in fallen leaves and twigs, but not as many as I would have expected if it had remained unused for years. The brush was overgrown, but it hadn’t completely consumed the cabins.

“Jesaiah,” Cade said, realization clear in his voice. “You think he had something to do with it?”

I walked toward the closest brush, examining it, then kneeling and sweeping aside leaves on the ground. I shook my head, the theory collapsing under the evidence. “No. He hasn’t been here for months.”

“Can I turn the light back on?” Isaac asked.

I glanced over at him and Cade. They were blinking owlishly in the darkness, clearly uncomfortable. I smirked over at Jay and Nia. Jay was standing directly beside Isaac, his hand resting on his mage’s shoulder. Nia gave me an exasperated look.

“Yeah, go ahead.” I stood up, dusting off my pants. “I’m sorry to say the only Sherlock Holmes details I have here are ones that clear Jesaiah. Unless he planned this about six months ago, he hasn’t been here in a while.”

I sniffed the air, but no scents stood out. No perfumes or colognes, no trace of someone else’s sweat lingering on a leaf

they'd brushed by.

The light flared, and I winced away from it. Nia held up her hand, glaring at Isaac.

I walked back to the group, my eyes sweeping the ground, making sure I hadn't missed anything, and came up with nothing. No evidence that would suggest anyone had been here before Nia and Jay dragged a scared servant into the woods.

Had he known about these cabins? Did he know what they were for? Or did he have the same thought I had before this all started? That House Bartlett had hundreds of miles of forest where it was easy to bury a body.

"So, you chained him, shut the door, and waited." I frowned at the closed door of the cabin. "Was he a mage?"

"No," Isaac answered. He sounded uncertain, and I glanced at Cade.

"His family has served ours for generations, but they have no magic," Cade said.

"Why did you use iron, then?" I looked at Jay.

"It was the only thing in there," he said. "We only had the rope to bind his hands. And... Nia thought it would be scarier."

"You're not wrong," I said to her, remembering what it had felt like to be bound by chains in the back of the bar, knowing death was coming for me. "How did you know something was wrong? Did he scream?"

Nia tugged on a lock of her hair, tucking it behind her ear. Then she tapped her forefinger against her nose.

"What did you smell?" I asked, frowning. I couldn't smell anything from out here. No blood, no viscera. Nothing to indicate there was a dead body inside the cabin.

She pointed at her stomach, and I looked at the cabin again. I walked closer, examining the ground. Using her footprints, the disturbed leaves and seedpods, I leaned my back against the cabin, closing my eyes.

The smell crept up slowly, so subtle that I almost missed it. My nose twitched, but I'd smelled worse.

"You have a good nose," I said to Nia.

She shrugged, walking over to where I stood, leaning on the wall beside me.

When she got there, she frowned, tapping her nose again.

"It was stronger when it first happened?" I asked.

She nodded emphatically.

"You're just going to let him lead this investigation?" Isaac asked sharply. He was staring at Cade, who only had eyes for me.

My body heated under his gaze, like I was standing under a scalding shower, being pummeled by the drops of water. My skin seemed to come alive, every sense activated.

Nia elbowed me sharply, and I looked at her, embarrassed.

"Believe it or not, his abilities in this area are one of the reasons I chose him," Cade said, his voice low.

I frowned at him, trying to figure out how he would know about my abilities at all. I had never seen him with Declan, and Declan wasn't the sort of man who wanted to brag about anybody but himself. How did Cade know a thing about me?

I turned to the door, examining it in the bright white light. I could see where opening it had scraped an enormous pile of leaves and detritus to the side. The first thing I noticed was the lock.

"Who has a key for this?" I asked.

"I do," Isaac answered. "But usually, Jay keeps my keys. I'm just as likely to lose them as have them when I need them."

"I have keys. So does the seneschal," Cade said.

"Have you lost them recently?" I asked Isaac.

He shook his head, but I couldn't help but wonder if one of those times they had been "lost," they had actually been lifted,

someone making a copy.

“You, Isaac, and Leon,” I said. The three most trusted men in House Bartlett. It didn’t help me decide who was more suspicious: Isaac or Leon.

Nothing around the lock indicated that it had been picked or forced, no scratches, no bent metal. I reached for the handle, but Cade stopped me, his warm fingers on my wrist.

Stepping back, I watched as he waved his hand through the air, his fingers moving in slow circles. Dark lines peeled off his fingers, surrounding the door handle. Three colors appeared on the door, a fluorescent orange, blue, and maroon. When I turned, Isaac, Jay, and Nia held up their hands, each with a palm the same color as the fluorescent magic.

“Only those three opened the door?” I asked.

“Within the last year,” Cade confirmed.

“Could someone disguise themselves from your spell?” I asked.

“No.” But Cade hesitated on the word, dragging it out a moment longer than he would have if fully confident.

I opened the door, and the smell hit me instantly. There must have been some magic that disguised the interior because inside, it smelled like a butcher’s shop.

No, it smelled worse than a butcher’s shop. Someone had torn open the bowels, releasing the stench of feces.

Beside me, Cade swallowed, but when I looked at him, his face was still.

Isaac wasn’t wrong. It looked as though Keith had been torn apart, claws raked across his face and down his chest. Something with enormous jaws had torn open his stomach, rooting around inside for the good bits.

I looked around the exterior of the room, checking for any cracks or holes that something might have got in through, but there was nothing. Keith was in the center of the room, wrists and ankles bound by heavy iron chains. His eyes had been gouged out.

“No wolf did this,” I said firmly.

“That’s not what it looks like,” Isaac said pointedly. “Jesaiah was angry after the meeting. Maybe he took it out on the closest victim.”

“He crawled from the meeting, ended up in the forest, happened to see you two bringing Keith into the cabin, then managed to sneak inside, kill Keith, and escape before Nia heard him?” I raised an eyebrow pointedly. Turning to Nia, I said, “What did you hear?”

She tapped her right ear, then brought the flat plane of her palm across her throat. It was clear what she meant.

“Nia didn’t hear anything. Meaning whoever did this was fast and quiet. They got in and out of this cabin before she even knew anything was wrong.” I pointed to the interior. “How?”

“You clearly have an idea,” Isaac said.

“Not an idea. I have a method. They used magic.” I walked inside, crouching over the body. I took a long sniff.

The wolf under my skin was going wild at the scent of blood. Blood meant weakness. Blood was an opportunity.

“Magic?” Cade had stepped inside the room.

I gestured to the body. “They made this look like a wolf kill, but no werewolf would do this. Sure, we’d kill a human. But eat one? No matter what campfire stories you’ve heard, werewolves aren’t cannibals. I’ve never heard of a wolf eating a person.”

I leaned closer, focusing on the details rather than the gore in front of me. “This fabric is thick—there’s two layers, and they broke through the rib cage. That would have left behind hair, maybe chipped claws or teeth.”

“And you know this from experience?” Isaac asked.

I stood, turning. Isaac’s light had followed me into the room, hovering between me and him so that he was nothing more than a dark outline. But I could hear the challenge in his voice well enough.

“Do you have something you want to say to me?” I asked.

“Just that it is *awfully* convenient you arriving, the answer to all of Cade’s needs for a consort. You just so happen to have all the experience to read this crime scene. He won’t even tell us where you came from.” I could hear the frustration growing in Isaac’s voice, the anxiety that underpinned his aggression.

“That’s because he bought me,” I said. Cade went still behind me, and I heard his sharp inhale. “He was looking for someone with my skill set, a consort who could be a partner and a security expert. We had been early in negotiations, but his needs sped up the process. We don’t all have the convenience of partnering for love. That’s just for fairy tales and romance novels with half-naked werewolves on the cover.”

I pointedly looked toward where I could hear Jay’s heart fluttering loudly. Given how important Isaac was in House Bartlett, it was clear that he had chosen his own consort for love rather than politics. He needed a strong werewolf, someone who could match him, have his back when he needed it.

Instead, he got Jay. Jay was someone he had to protect. I remembered Jesaiah’s words, describing Jay as prey rather than predator.

How had they even met? How had Jay become someone Isaac wanted to keep safe?

“You *bought* him? Cade, is that true?” Isaac’s voice rose.

“Yes,” Cade said, his voice cool. “It’s not that uncommon. I needed someone I could trust, and Miles gives me that.”

“Are you *kidding* me?” Isaac burst out. “You trust someone who’s only in this for the money? What if someone else offers him more money?”

I laughed. “Trust me, Brett already tried that tack. My loyalty can’t be bought. If I was just in this for the money, I would take a security job guarding some high-profile CEO. Cade has my loyalty.”

“I don’t like this,” Isaac said. “Buying a consort? That’s...”

“That’s how it was done for hundreds of years,” Jay said, his voice small and tremulous. “That’s why they call us...”

“Slaves.” I nodded. “It’s not like that. There was no one selling me. Cade and I just came up with an agreement for compensation.” I winked, allowing a smirk to curve my lips. “And trust me, the compensation isn’t all monetary.”

Nia huffed out a laugh. At least there was one person on my side.

“Are you going to tell anyone?” Cade asked.

“Well, it’s not like you did anything illegal, and if it helped you find someone you can actually trust.” Isaac went silent, and I searched for his face, but the light was still blinding me. He was nothing more than a blobby dark outline.

“I trust him,” Cade repeated. “Do you know how refreshing it is to know exactly what someone wants? To believe that...”

Cade turned away. He cleared his throat.

“Stay back. I’m going to cast.”

I moved with him, watching as he brushed a hand over his arm and across his chest.

This time, rather than small circles with his wrist, he swept his arm up into the air like he was tossing paint onto a blank canvas. Despite Isaac’s light, the room was enveloped in darkness.

Then it began to glow.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE

“**M**agic?” I asked.

Cade turned in a slow circle. “It should lead to the caster.”

“Could someone hide their location from you?” I asked.

Nodding, Cade continued to turn, then crouched down in front of the body, examining it. Now that my eyes had adjusted, I could see the entire body wasn’t glowing. Instead, pieces of it rippled, like the scales of a fish in a deep, dark lake.

Everywhere that the flesh was torn open gleamed.

“Isaac? A little help?” Cade’s voice was quick, sharp, a command.

The bright orange of Isaac’s magic slammed forward, hitting the body. Isaac grunted, and Jay was immediately there, slipping his hand into Isaac’s, wrapping his other palm around Isaac’s forearm.

Isaac exhaled in relief. When he opened his eyes, they were bright orange, devoid of any other color.

“No. I don’t see anything either,” he said.

The light in his eyes flickered, shuttering off like an old-fashioned movie projector running out of film.

“How could someone have hidden their location from you?” I said.

“If they were powerful enough, they could hide themselves.” Cade reached forward again, brushing his fingers through the blood. “There are ways to activate magic from a distance. Some users can put a spell on a token and activate it at a certain time or when some criteria was met.”

“Would it tell them what happened?” I looked between Cade and Isaac. “Do they already know Keith is dead?”

Isaac and Cade exchanged a look.

“They might,” Isaac said. “But it would depend on the type of spell. If it was something Keith could activate himself, they might not, otherwise they’d be aware of it.”

Standing, Cade said, “Is there anything else you need from the scene?”

I shook my head. “Not right now, although I’d like—”

Cade raised his hand, and thick bands of black tattoo seethed off his body, swallowing the room. The sharp scent of burning hair and flesh coated the inside of my nostrils, and I turned away, almost gagging.

Heavy iron chains clanked against the floor.

Within seconds, the tattoos retreated, climbing back up Cade’s arms and hiding themselves under his shirt. The room was empty.

“Why did you do that?” I asked. “There might have been something I noticed in the daytime, with more light.”

“I dismissed Keith from service. I discovered he had been spying on me, and I sent him away.” Cade turned, staring at Nia.

She glared at him, her lips pursed.

“*That* is the story Rhys will spread.” Cade raised an eyebrow. “It doesn’t matter to me what they know. It matters to me what they do with the information. I fired Keith. He had been spying on me for a long time, but he crossed a line trying to listen in at the formal dinner.”

Nia's face relaxed, hearing the implicit permission. She could tell her mage what had happened, as long as the official story was the only one that got out.

"I'll go let Leon know," Isaac said. He opened his fingers, his mage light springing to life.

He looked pale, although I couldn't tell if it was just from the color of the light, which had the effect of fluorescent lights in a police interrogation room. Jay still stood beside him, listing against his shoulder.

They walked first, Nia close behind. I waited for Cade to move.

Instead, he waited until they were nearly out of sight, only visible from the bob of the light in the forest. Then his shoulders slumped, his breathing going ragged.

He turned to me, and in the dim light from the moon, barely filtering into the doorway, I could see his eyes were wide.

"You're sure?" he whispered, the demand fierce. "You're sure it wasn't a werewolf?"

I looked at where the body had been, where every trace of blood, flesh, and clothes had disappeared. "I'm sure. Trust me. I know what a werewolf attack looks like, and this wasn't one."

I remembered the glassy-eyed stare of my older brother, his blood seeping into the tan carpet. Mom had hated that carpet. She'd bugged my father for years to replace it.

Cade's breath was still jerky, shredded by a fear he had kept so tightly coiled in his chest not even his best friend had been able to see it. Slowly, I reached out, putting my hand on the spot where his shoulder met his neck.

Even through the fabric, I could feel the warmth of his skin.

"A werewolf didn't do this. Now we just need to find the mage that did." I squeezed, feeling all the tension in his body.

He nodded, the motion awkward, like watching someone pull his puppet strings. Mechanically, he turned and began walking down the path. I took one last look at the room, all the evidence gone, then I followed him.



We parted ways in front of the main house, Isaac and Jay going off to inform Leon, while Nia disappeared before the tree line ended.

She'd walked in Isaac's footprints the entire way back, her eyes scanning the forest around us. Everything about her said she'd once been part of a pack, and I had to wonder what happened, what had been so bad that she decided to become slave to a mage.

Cade and I mounted the wide stairs by ourselves, his shoulders going tense when a servant opened the front door. A few of the staff were gathered in the entryway. They looked at each other nervously, but it was Siobhan who stepped forward and spoke.

"Prince Bartlett, we're concerned because no one has seen Keith for several hours. He wasn't working the formal dinner, but he was supposed to be here." She met Cade's eyes, but when she saw me looking at her, she dropped her gaze to the floor.

"Keith is no longer employed by House Bartlett," Cade said. "I found evidence that he had been selling my secrets. When I confronted him, he didn't deny it. Isaac and Jay drove him to the city."

I watched the other servants. None of them seemed surprised. It wasn't as though Keith had been very discreet about his side hustle.

"He left his stuff," one of the servants murmured.

"His cell phone, his wallet, everything in his locker..." Siobhan swallowed, raising her chin until she met Cade's eyes. "I can take care of it if you just tell me where they left him."

Cade's face went still, and I realized why everyone thought he was an ice prince. Nothing about his expression showed any feeling about what had just happened—the fictional version or the real one where he had burned someone's remains to nothing.

“Have his possessions delivered to my room. I will make sure he gets them. Let this be a lesson to all of you. I will *not* tolerate traitors, even ones who have served for years.” Cade turned, heading up the stairs, effectively ending the conversation.

I moved to follow, but before I got more than a step, Siobhan's quiet voice stopped me.

“Is it true? Keith left on his own two feet? He's somewhere in the city, safe?”

She knew. They *all* knew.

“He sold out House Bartlett. He was questioned, but Cade didn't hurt him.” That at least was true, even if it let them make their own assumptions about what had happened.

“Sure, the little ice prince won't get his hands dirty,” one of the servants muttered. “Why should he, now that he has a dog to do it for him?”

Another servant hushed him but then looked at me. “He didn't care that Keith was selling his secrets for so long. Why did he care now?”

“He doesn't care about anything. Not unless it's how we didn't press his shirts right. When his parents got killed, I heard he didn't even cry. Didn't do anything different. Demanded breakfast the next day like nothing had happened,” the first servant muttered. He stalked off, throwing a dark glare at me.

Siobhan was still staring at the floor, her face pale. I waited to see if she would say anything else, but she just waved at the servants, gesturing for them to get back to work. She raised her chin slowly, as though it took effort, her eyes catching mine.

“Don’t mind them. They don’t mean it,” Siobhan said. “Keith had been here the longest. Most of them see him as an older brother. His loss will be felt.”

I nodded, then turned to follow Cade back up the stairs. The hallway was empty, the doors silent. It was still unnerving, this entire enormous house for one man.

At the door to Cade’s room, I took a moment to breathe. I was doing the right thing. I had to keep telling myself that. Whether I liked it or not, my future was tied up with Cade’s.

I opened the door.

“What took you so long?” Cade asked as soon as I shut the door behind me.

“The servants think you killed him,” I said.

Cade stiffened, standing in the middle of his enormous bedroom, looking like nothing more than a small boy who had been slapped. “They think I would do that?”

“It seems like a lot of people have the wrong impression about you,” I said.

“And what impression is that?” Cade’s words were measured, cold, as calculated as they thought he was. “That I go around murdering servants?”

“That you don’t feel anything,” I corrected. “That you are House Bartlett’s ice prince. The Jennings think you don’t care their daughter died, and the way you reacted when Isaac brought her up, I can’t blame them. Why do you want people to think you don’t care about anything but yourself?”

Cade dragged in a breath, his hands wrapping around his elbows. In his dark shirt with his pale skin, he looked ephemeral, like something out of a fairy tale. When his eyes caught mine, I was reminded of drowning again.

I could get lost in those eyes.

“Who knows why minor families or servants think anything. Keith thought it was a good idea to sell me out to someone who killed him.” Cade turned away, heading to the

wall and slapping his hand against it. It opened, revealing the empty terrarium.

He stared at it for a few heartbeats. Even all the way across the room, I could hear his heart speed up. He turned, staring at my covered throat with a half second of longing. Shaking his head, he raised his hand, pressing it more gently against the wall until it shut.

“The missing money,” I said. “I need you to tell me the details.”

Cade turned, the expression on his face perplexed. “What?”

“There’s too many details I don’t know. The money. It’s clearly a big deal, and it threw you off-balance. I need to know everything.” I tried to keep my voice reasonable, make it a fact rather than the slow simmer of annoyance that was boiling over in my chest. “It had to do with Declan, didn’t it?”

“No,” Cade snapped. “Even if it did, I would *never* discuss house finances with outsiders.”

I stared at him, feeling every muscle of the wolf that wanted to burst through my skin. But I still couldn’t shift, so it simmered there under the surface.

“I am not a *stranger*. For all intents and purposes, I am your consort.” I strode close to him, sniffing. I smelled the woods on his clothes, the sweet pine trees, loamy dirt. There was a hint of sweat from our trek all the way out into the forest, salty and delectable.

Underneath that was the acid scent of fear, so subtle that it would be easy to miss. And even further down, even deeper than that, I smelled his arousal, the come that still lingered on his skin.

“You aren’t my consort. I don’t owe you anything. I am simply your employer, and I don’t pay you to ask questions I don’t want to answer.” He raised his chin, his head tilted at an angle. I couldn’t ignore the smirk that curved in the corner of his lips.

“I’m deeper in this than either of us wanted. Without me, you never would have found out about Keith.” My fingers twitched. I wanted to bury them in his soft hair again.

Cade’s eyes traced over my face, dropping to my neck. He lifted his hand, wrapping it around the fabric covering my throat. “I don’t owe you anything. You’re just here because I’m paying you to be. You’re my employee, not my partner.”

I swallowed, feeling his hand tighten incrementally on my throat.

My stomach rumbled, rolling over on itself with hunger. Cade stepped back, frowning at me. His voice held a note of concern when he said, “You’re hungry.”

I laughed, the sound bright in the tense room. “Starving.”

Cade huffed in exasperation, his breath moving the hair that hung over his forehead.

“Hang on,” he said. He pulled out his phone, typing something onto the screen. “Someone will send up food.”

He turned away, heading into his closet. I fought the urge to follow him, to watch him undress, to drink in each inch of pale skin covered in tattoos. Instead, I sank down on the bench.

I heard something that sounded like scratching inside the wall. A moment later, there was a pale green light that appeared above where I remembered the dumbwaiter being. I pressed my palm to the light, and it opened, revealing a platter of food.

By the time Cade emerged, wearing soft pants and a V-necked shirt, I was halfway through a steak. I had almost shoved the baked potato into my mouth whole, but at the last second, I cut it in half, slathering it with sour cream and butter. I did have some self-respect, although I had no idea what Ms. Manners would say about this situation.

Cade stared at me, a struck expression on his face.

I shrugged. “What can I say? I was raised by wolves.”

Shaking his head, Cade covered his face with one hand, his shoulders shaking with quiet laughter. I finished eating, the creamy texture of the potato and the delicious chew of the meat perfect. When I finished, I realized how much of my anger had been hunger disguised.

Cade crossed his arms, standing in the middle of the room, his entire body tensing. “It *was* Declan. The money. Years ago, before I was born, maybe before my father was, House Bartlett had to sell off a lot of its property in Los Santos.” A line of ink swirled down his arm, circling until it turned into a spiral. “The family was short on cash, something about the markets and investments. Then, we conquered House Doyle, absorbing their assets. All of a sudden, House Bartlett was on top again. But we never got the property back.”

“You took *House Bartlett* money to buy back some of it?” I used the cloth napkin to wipe my mouth. Folding it, I replaced it on the tray, then turned to put the entire thing back in the dumbwaiter. “Money that Brett thinks wasn’t yours to take.”

“Yes. I was making a deal with Declan. The money was the down payment.”

I squinted at Cade. “Declan doesn’t own that much property in Los Santos.”

Land in California costs money. Land with buildings costs more money. Declan didn’t need to *own* a building to have complete control of it.

“He didn’t own it. He was helping me evict some of the current residents.” Cade’s lips twitched, and he tilted his head self-deprecatingly.

I could see what happened like I was looking at one of those 3D optical illusions from grade school and it suddenly came into focus.

“You were paying Declan to force some tenants out so that you could buy the building at a discount. He betrayed you. He got the people out, but then he bought the building.” I opened

my mouth, then shook my head. Lifting my finger, I pointed at Cade. “He bought the building with your money.”

“Yes.” Cade nodded. “It was some property along the waterfront. I saw the possibility of evicting current renters and rehabbing it, turning it into apartments.”

“Are you kidding me? You were trying to use Declan to gentrify the downtown?” My eyebrows were almost up to my hairline. “That’s...”

I blew out a breath.

“Yes, well, now I see how foolish it was.” Cade exhaled again, the breath short. “And it wasn’t about gentrification. When House Bartlett initially owned the property, it was considered part of the house, meaning many mages lived there. Mages who might not have been able to afford it on their own.”

I leaned forward, bracing my arms on my knees. “Okay, let’s try this again. You paid Declan to knock some heads, break some windows, kick out the current tenants. Your plan was to turn the waterfront into affordable housing for mages?”

Cade blew out a frustrated breath, reaching up to dig his hands into his hair. “House Bartlett abides by its own laws. If I could reclaim the swathes of Los Santos that once belonged to us, we would regain control over several key ley lines. If, in the process, we could offer free or affordable housing to mages who need it, then we would be adding fresh blood to the house, new members who might be able to... shake up the status quo.”

I stared at Cade for a long moment, trying to detangle what he wasn’t saying.

“Is this about House Morrison? They’ve been welcoming people in with open arms for decades. Even people that didn’t come from established mage families.” The only framework I had for this was werewolf packs. What would it look like if a pack let itself stagnate the way House Bartlett had? Only accepting people from the same lines, the same families.

“Yes.” Cade sat on the edge of his bed, his bare feet barely brushing the carpet. “The problem with accepting new mages is there’s really nowhere for them to live here at the main property. Which means they’re living on their own in Los Santos, where they’re more easily targeted by other houses.” Cade gestured to the window. “Not to mention, most mages don’t want to move out to the middle of the forest, even if I *could* get the council’s permission to build more housing.”

I blew out a long breath. “So you have a few problems. Declan stole your money, now he probably owns the land you wanted, someone is trying to kill you, your council won’t give you the crown, and Brett knows you stole the money.”

“The entire council knows I stole the money.” Cade fisted one hand, the skin going black as his magic seethed over his fingers like water from a fountain. “Stole. As though it isn’t *my* money. That money belongs to Family Bartlett. The rest of them are leeches, holding jobs and positions that come with stipends.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Leeches who have control of the purse strings.”

“I intend to bring it up at the next council meeting,” Cade said. “If I had bought the property on my own, they wouldn’t have been able to say no. But I can’t risk that now—they all want to know what I spent the money on. Maybe I can get them to see reason...”

He exhaled sharply.

“Do you think that will work?” I asked.

“No, but I *have* to try,” Cade said.

“Okay. Now the question is, who’s mad enough about the missing money, or you ascending, or the land deal to want you dead?” I tapped a finger against my hip, running through all the different options.

“I don’t know. I need you to tell me.” Cade shook his head. When he looked at me, there was something vulnerable in his eyes, something I’d never seen before. “Isaac isn’t wrong. You are the perfect person for this job.”

My throat dried, and I wanted to reach out and touch him, but instead, I looked at the clock on his bedside table. “It’s late. We can talk more in the morning.”

Cade nodded. “I left out pajamas for you.”

He gestured toward the closet, then stood, brushing off invisible lint. He went into the bathroom, and I heard the water turn on. In the closet, I saw a pair of sweatpants and a loose shirt, already sized correctly for me.

I put them on, leaving my own clothes on the center display. By the time I got out, Cade had already tucked himself in bed, the curtains pulled closed.

“Good night, Cade,” I said, turning off the light.

There was a long stretch of silence before Cade spoke. “Thank you, Miles.”

If he had nightmares again, they didn’t wake me.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR

The next day, Cade was already dressed when I woke up. I stretched, my joints cracking.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“House business,” Cade said shortly.

I bit back a frustrated grunt. For every shred of information he gave me, I felt like I was always back at square one with him.

“I should go with you,” I said. “Let me just get dressed.”

Cade shook his head. “No, you’re right. The staff won’t talk to me, but maybe you can get something out of them. We need to find out who else Keith was selling information to.”

“And if someone tries to kill you?” I raised an eyebrow.

“If I’m not safe here at House Bartlett, I’m not safe anywhere. I’ve survived twenty years without you; I think I can go a few hours.” He reached for the door again, then hesitated. “The scent.”

I stepped forward as he turned around, pressing his back against the door. Slowly, I reached forward. He pulled down on his collar, exposing his neck, and I rubbed my wrist against it.

His whole body shivered, and he swallowed. I felt his Adam’s apple bob against my wrist. I rested my hand on his shoulder and lifted my other wrist to his neck. Lingering for a moment too long, I was drawn to the slide of his tongue over his bottom lip.

With a sharp shake of my head, I pulled back, dropping my hands.

He reached out and pressed his own wrists against my neck. When it was done, I remained where I was, wanting to see where else he would shiver if I touched him. He swallowed again, straightening himself and pushing off the door, then turned and left.

With the room empty, it felt colder. I stripped off my pajamas, heading into the closet to find the clothes from the day before. When I brought them to my nose, they smelled freshly laundered and faintly of Cade. With a shrug, I put them on.

Back in the room, I noticed a collection of items on the small table near the armchair in the corner. Curious, I examined them. The jacket was worn denim, pockets empty, but it smelled strongly like Keith. The wallet only had twenty dollars in cash and a credit card. I examined Keith's ID, but it listed his address as the House Bartlett estate and showed a younger man glaring at the DMV camera.

The phone was locked, and after a few attempts, I gave up trying to open it. Instead, I swiped down, checking to see what the newest notifications showed. The phone displayed five unanswered phone calls from a blocked number, a text message that looked like it was written in code, and a reminder that it was his turn on a knockoff Scrabble game.

If I had Declan's resources, I would be able to get into the phone. Hopefully, Cade had some IT guy on staff and we wouldn't need to send it out.

I headed down into the servants' area of the house. I was starving, my stomach rolling over itself in hunger. This was the most I had eaten and slept in weeks, and now that I had somewhere safe to sleep and good food on hand, my body was desperate for both.

In the kitchen, I found the day chef. He took one look at me, and his eyebrows went up.

“Consort Bartlett?” He nodded his head, half a bow. He had black hair streaked with gray and a trim figure. He wore kitchen whites, a red apron around his waist with a towel hanging from it. Laugh lines and crow’s feet wrinkled his copper skin.

“You must be Louis. I was hoping to get some breakfast or... brunch?” I took a guess at the time based on the light coming in from the window.

“Of course!” He set to work preparing a plate, stealing food from what was simmering on the stove and some leftovers in the refrigerator. “I’m sorry I haven’t had a chance to welcome you yet.”

“No. I’m sorry I haven’t come in before. The duck you prepared was delicious.”

His shoulders drew back, and he smiled, presenting the plate with a flourish. “Breakfast pasta.”

The long strings of spaghetti were covered in a white sauce, chopped ham and green vegetables mixed in. I began eating immediately, glancing up to make an exaggerated face of pleasure.

He grinned, all the laugh lines and crow’s feet going deeper with the expression.

“Excellent!” He turned back to the stove.

I waited until he was already working before asking, “So, how long have you worked for House Bartlett?”

“About a decade now. No, wait, eleven years,” he said. “I was hired on when Siobhan went to the night shift.”

For a second, I stared at my pasta, thinking about the timing, the way that Siobhan never wanted to meet my eyes. I had to keep it cool. I wasn’t interrogating him, and I couldn’t be too obvious.

I nodded. “Is there anything to drink?”

Louis went over to a cabinet and pulled out a glass and some melon-and-mint water from the fridge. It was sweet and

refreshing, a perfect complement to the pasta. I lingered on the food before asking the questions that I couldn't *not* ask.

"Siobhan used to work the day shift?" I asked. "Why did she switch? That seems like a demotion."

"I don't know. She said she was struggling with the pace of the day work. I get it." He nodded at the four pots on the stove. "Day shift is hard, but nights are relentless. It's hard being up all night and not seeing the sun."

"Huh," I said. "That was about the time that Cade's parents were killed, right? Did it have anything to do with that?"

Louis looked around, glancing toward the hallway. I listened, but there were no distinctive heartbeats, no footsteps or breathing.

"We're alone," I told him.

"I wouldn't know. I was hired on after." He leaned his elbows on the counter. "Has Prince Bartlett told you anything about that night?"

"Some." I hesitated, unsure what else to say.

One of the pots on the stove began to boil, and Louis turned around, speaking over his shoulder. "You'd have to ask Siobhan if she switched shifts because of the attack."

"Help me out," I said, spinning strands of pasta onto my fork. "I don't want to say the wrong thing with her. Every time I talk to her, I feel like she's flinching away from me."

"I think she's like that with all new wolves," Louis said. "I wouldn't take it personally."

"Still, is there anyone I could ask? Anyone who *was* around then?" I took a bite of the pasta. *Al dente*. Perfect. The salty ham layered in with the rest of the flavors.

"I don't think there is. From what I heard, after the attack, they cleaned house. The only servants left were Siobhan and Keith." Louis turned down the heat on one of the burners, leaning on the counter again.

From his body posture, he was ready to tell me a secret. No, the opposite. He was waiting for me to divulge something. Information with him was quid pro quo; I wasn't going to get anything from him unless I gave up something of equal value.

The trouble was, I didn't have anything of equal value, or at least nothing I could sacrifice.

You didn't win a chess game by sacrificing your queen when a pawn would do.

"And Cade just fired Keith." I said the last with false glumness, as though simply mourning the loss of information.

"I heard it all went down in the middle of the night," Louis said. He pulled over a bowl of fruit, popping a grape into his mouth.

"Keith was listening at doorways when he shouldn't be. Cade found out he was selling information." I twisted another ball of pasta. "You don't know anything about that, do you?"

"Listening at doorways? No. Believe it or not, the kitchen keeps me busy enough that I never even see doorways except for that one." He pointed to the entry to the kitchen.

"Still, I'm sure plenty of little birdies come tell you secrets that *they* hear listening in doorways." I put the pasta in my mouth.

"The only birds in my kitchen are ones I'm about to cook." Louis gestured vaguely toward his ear. "If you're looking for someone who *does* hear all the gossip, you need to talk to Rhys."

"Rhys is a mage. Keith was a servant. I bet *you'd* know who he was selling information to more than Rhys would." When Louis started to pull back, eyes narrowing, I shrugged. "From one person who's heard lots of birds sing to another."

"All I know was that he liked to go into the city on his day off. I always thought it was a girlfriend, maybe a boyfriend, but he always had airs." Louis rolled his eyes. "Thought he was better than the rest of us just because his family had been serving House Bartlett for the past hundred-some-odd years."

I finished the last of the pasta, pushing the plate forward. “Thanks. It was delicious.”

I heard the back door of the house open, footsteps coming down the long hallway. A man in a rough work shirt stopped at the entry to the kitchen, a box full of vegetables in his hands.

“Where’s Jesaiah?” Louis asked, blinking.

“Out sick,” the man said. He glanced at me, the grooves between his brows going even deeper.

He smelled human, the dirt under his nails fresh and his skin pinked from the sun. I smiled at him, but he still glared.

I raised my hand at Louis before heading toward the back door.

In the back, I hesitated for a moment. I should go check out the garage, talk to the mechanic myself, or check in with Jay to let him know what Cade had told the servants. But birdsong caught my attention. The tall trees rustled from the wind.

I headed into the forest.

The birds quieted as I approached, and brush rustled quickly as some small woodland creature hurried to escape. When I inhaled, every scent of the forest filled my nose. My shoulders relaxed.

I found the path we had taken the night before easily, and my eyes tracked the footsteps. I didn’t see any fresh ones; the morning dew would have made them deeper and darker than the ones we had left the night before. Tracking in the forest was different than tracking in the city. Some things were more obvious, while others were a complete mystery to me.

I followed our steps, all the way to the three cabins. They looked more ominous in the daytime.

The thick cinder block walls were placed on concrete pads that stretched between the three cabins. The roofs were silver metal, sloped to avoid pooling water but rusting in patches of orange red.

In the daytime, you could see what the cabins were: prisons. I would ask how many bodies were buried behind them in the endless forest, but the night before had taught me better.

Ashes were the only thing left behind from the people who had gone into those cabins kicking and screaming. With the daylight filtering through the high canopy, I walked around the cabin. My assessment the night before had been accurate. No one had gotten in without magic. There were no holes, no one had dug under the foundation, and everything on the outside looked secure.

I tried the door and found it still unlocked. Other than the heavy iron chains attached to the concrete floor, the prison cell was completely empty. There was no sign that Keith had ever been there, no indication that this was where he had died.

Even the scent of blood was gone. I examined the walls for any sign of magic—spellwork, traces of the tattooed lines that Cade used. Nothing.

I left the dark, small little cell and approached the other two. Neither was locked, which surprised me. I would have to ask Jay about it. He'd implied he needed keys to open the cells, meaning they should be locked.

When I opened the middle cell, it was completely empty except for a thick layer of dust coating the floor. The walls were water stained, indicating a ceiling leak. Nothing else in the cell was helpful.

At the third cabin, I was hit with the scent of animal urine as soon as I opened the door. A quick check revealed a hole where the roof met the wall. When I approached it, I could see scraps of paper and twigs, nesting material for a rat or some other rodent.

As I turned, a glint caught my eye. I walked back to the nest, ignoring the sound of several animals scurrying away. Reaching up, I dug through the nesting material until I found the shiny bit of metal.

It was a ring.

I stood frozen, staring at it. The surface was scratched, marks from animal teeth nearly obscuring the engraving inside. I didn't need to read the engraving to know what this was, whose it was.

Papers from the rat's nest fell to the ground, and I bent to examine them, hoping for something more. A written note, a clue. But they were all too damaged from rain and animal defecation. They looked like newspaper, and I wondered how a newspaper had gotten all the way out here in the forest.

I searched the room again, ignoring the scent of urine and the droppings in corners. On one of the walls, I saw scratches, dug deep into the masonry.

Spreading my fingers wide, I traced the claw marks. They had trapped a werewolf here.

As I was making a second pass around the room, I heard someone coming up the path. They stopped, and I recognized Jay's voice when he called out, "Who's there?"

Internally, I swore, but the best way to look guilty was to hide. I shoved the ring deep into my pocket, then stepped out of the cabin.

"It's just me," I said. "I thought I would check it out in daylight, make sure we didn't miss anything. What are you doing here?"

He jangled some keys in his hands. "I forgot to lock up last night. Did you find anything?"

He approached the first cabin, hesitating and glancing toward me. I waved him off. "Nothing useful. Why were these other two cabins unlocked?"

"We opened them first, but that one had rats, and this one Nia didn't like because of the hole in the roof." Color rose on his cheeks. "Then with everything, I forgot to lock them. Why were you looking inside?"

"I like to be thorough. They were unlocked, and I wanted to make sure that there was nothing in them that told us how Keith had died." I shook my head. "I thought the rat's nest might be something—there was a lot of paper in there. It looks

like newspaper, though. Would anyone have left a newspaper out here?”

“Newspaper?” Jay blinked. “Newspaper or *magazines*?”

“I’m not sure.” I walked back into the cabin as Jay locked the other two, returning with one of the scraps of paper.

I tried to hand it over, but Jay shook his head. “I think I know where it came from.”

As he locked the third cabin, I tried not to stare at the closed door, checking for any last clue of what had happened inside. When he was done, he pocketed the keys and gestured for me to follow him. We walked back down the main path, then, seemingly at random, he turned and began cutting through the brush. It was no obvious path, but I followed him anyway.

“The last time I followed you into the forest, I almost got my head taken off. Tell me there isn’t another power-hungry werewolf at the end of this.” My joke fell flat, and I saw Jay’s head twitch. “Jay...”

He turned. “I am really sorry about Jesaiah. I had no idea that he would try anything like that.”

“Of course. It’s not your fault.” I put all the confidence I had into the words.

He was looking down and away, focused on the bushes near my feet.

“Jay, did you actually see him attack me?” It had been niggling at me since he’d spoken up for me. Did he lie for me?

He nodded quickly, a bobblehead doll on a shaky dashboard. “Only the end of it. I’m sorry I didn’t try to stop him. I should have jumped in.”

“Don’t worry about it.” I waited for him to look at me. “I mean it.”

Nodding, Jay turned back to the path that wasn’t there. He fished around in his pocket, and I thought he was looking for the keys again, but then he pulled out a handful of pebbles.

Seemingly at random, he began throwing them in the bushes. I heard them land, sizzling.

“What’s that?” I asked, gesturing to where he’d tossed one of the pebbles.

“Habit,” Jay said. “When Isaac and I were training, I was trying to learn some offensive spells, but I don’t really have the build for fighting, so we were trying some other ways. I still try to keep practicing.”

“Training?” I asked, watching another rock sail off into the brush.

“Training with magic?” Jay frowned at me before his brows cleared. “Oh, you and Cade probably haven’t gotten the chance to yet.”

“Uh, yeah,” I said, realizing that asking anything more would only reveal that Cade and I weren’t actually consorts.

For a while, we walked in silence, and then Jay said, “Most of the consorts need to get away sometimes. There’s a gym in town, but some of them come out here.”

Something about the way Jay phrased it made it clear Jay was a consort, but not like the rest of them.

I heard the sound of flesh on flesh, a grunt, then the sound of wood breaking. Someone laughed. The clearing came into view suddenly as we pushed through the tree line.

A half dozen wolves in workout gear turned to stare at us.

“Well, well, well. If it isn’t the man who took down the geriatric alpha.” Tyson smirked. “Are you here to get your ass kicked?”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE

“So I’m wondering if you don’t like me. This is the second time you’ve taken me into the woods and dropped me off with homicidal werewolves, Jay,” I said.

I looked around the clearing. Outdoor workout equipment had been placed around the edges, leaving an empty ring in the middle. In the center of the ring, two wolves had backed off each other, both turning to face me.

“Little rabbit, you usually don’t come here,” Tyson said, smirking at Jay.

Raising his chin, I could smell the fear when Jay said, “I’m allowed to go wherever I want. I’m showing Miles around.”

“Is that a problem?” I stepped forward, baring my teeth. “Because we can make it a problem.”

“You want to have a go at me?” Tyson spread his hands. He smelled salty like sweat, the forest bringing his wolf to the forefront.

“I just came to show him the workout area,” Jay said, stepping between us.

His fear was more distinct now, and it set my teeth on edge. A packmate was scared, and I had to deal with whatever had his heart going so fast.

That thought alone brought me up short. Jay was not my packmate. I could never have a packmate, not until I figured out what happened to my parents and cleared their name.

Not to mention, he belonged to a mage. The consort collar around his neck showed exactly whose property he was.

A soft breeze flowed through the other werewolves, bringing me each of their distinct scents. Interest, intrigue. Were Tyson and I about to fight for the recently vacated top spot?

“I thought all you house pets used the workout gym in town,” Tyson said. His canines were growing longer, the words clear despite his partial shift. “This out here is for real wolves.”

“Real wolves?” I snorted and made a show of looking around the area. Punching bags, weights, ropes, even some tires in the corner, I spotted a couple of lawn chairs with workout magazines on the ground next to them. “This is clearly CrossFit for outdoorsy types. You pay them the affiliation fee, or is this just a knockoff? MossFit? Caveman Bootcamp?”

Tyson growled, the sound making the wolf rise under my skin, every hair on my arm standing on end. I wanted to shift; I wanted to take him on, wolf to wolf.

But my wolf still wouldn't come. No matter how hard I pulled, it was stuck there, and the rage I felt almost made me punch him anyway.

A cool hand touched my arm, the contact snapping me back to myself. My skin was oversensitive. I could still feel the echo of Cade's wrist against my throat, my own brushing over his pulse point. I glanced at Jay, and his eyes were wide.

“We aren't here to fight,” he said. I wasn't sure who his words were for, Tyson or me.

Either way, he was right. I couldn't afford to fight. I couldn't afford for anyone else to find out I couldn't shift. That would make Cade vulnerable.

I blinked, the thought like a bucket of ice water first thing in the morning. I couldn't afford to make *myself* vulnerable. Not Cade. Cade was my employer. The only time I had ever worried about Declan's well-being was around paydays.

“Thanks for showing me your survivalist CrossFit. If someone reports you for copyright infringement, it definitely wasn’t me.” I smirked.

Tyson growled again, stepping forward, the hair growing on his arms, his mouth and nose shifting. “Run away with the rabbit. You’re not worth fighting.”

Jay’s hand clamped down tight on my wrist, tugging me back. He pulled us through the brush, not seeming to pay attention to where we were going. When we were far enough away that I couldn’t hear any hint of the wolves in the forest, he turned, irritation clear.

“What is it with you?” he snapped.

“Something about Tyson sets me on edge. He’s setting himself up to be alpha.” I rewound the past few minutes in my mind, remembering each face that had been there. The two wolves standing behind him last night had been with him, but now I had another four faces to add to his pack.

“He *can’t* set himself up to be alpha. We *don’t have* a pack.” Jay turned away, crossing his arms over his chest, his shoulders hunching.

I startled. Jay might as well be showing me his belly.

“Hey, I’m sorry. You’re right. I’ll work on not letting him get to me.” The brush around me swayed in the breeze, scratching against my pants. “What are they even doing out there?”

Jay sighed. When he turned to me, he didn’t look angry. The grooves carved in his face were made by anxiety.

“Like I said, the gym in town feels a little sterile for some of them. We don’t get a chance to act like a pack, so... I guess you’re not exactly wrong. Out in the forest, it’s easier to feel free.”

“Jay, do you feel trapped?” The question was suddenly the only one I could ask. I didn’t care about some wolves playing at an ironman triathlon in the forest.

Isaac and Jay had given every impression they were in love. Every look, every touch of support spoke of affection. The way that Isaac immediately stood up for his lover, the way they smelled like each other created a narrative that they were paired only because of their love for each other, but Cade and I were walking around smelling like each other, and I knew exactly how much appearances and scents could hide.

“We are all trapped.” Jay looked at me intensely. “*All* of us.”

The emphasis made me start. Who was he talking about? Just the wolves who had agreed to be collared? Or every single person on House Bartlett land?

Jay blinked at me, his soft brown eyes widening as he realized what he had said. He took a step back, the brush rustling like a rabbit fleeing from the scent of a predator.

“Can you find your way back?” he asked.

I nodded, knowing I should let it go but unable to stop myself. He was pack. Or... not pack, but something close, the start of a pack, the way that two teenage boys might form something when they were both outcasts in high school.

“Jay, who’s trapping us?”

He shoved his hand into his pocket, and I heard the click of stones. When he pulled his hand free, he was worrying a small rock, barely the size of his fingertips. Shaking his head, he turned, walking away. When I moved to follow, he held up a hand, saying over his shoulder, “I’ll see you later.”

I watched him disappear, moving through the undergrowth quickly.

I’d forgotten to tell him what Cade had told the servants. Hopefully, Cade had already told Isaac, otherwise it was going to be very obvious that something bad had happened to Keith.

I turned toward the house, beginning my trek back. My ears caught every hint of sound, but none of the wolves from the forest gym followed me. I felt a tightening around my neck. Reaching up, I brushed my fingers across the fabric. I

couldn't feel the tattoo with my fingertips; the ink lay flat against my skin. Still, I could feel Basil shifting and moving.

“Do *you* know what he meant?” I asked.

Yes. The word hissed in my ear, and I jerked away.

Spinning, I tried to find the source, but there was nothing. The only thing around was me.

Feeling like an idiot, I asked, “Basil?”

Yes.

My blood ran cold. Was that why Cade had given me his snake? To spy on me? To see and hear everything I did?

“You know what I'm saying?”

Sentient magic.

The words were dismissive, disdainful almost. A slight English accent hinted in the vowels.

“Right.” I forced myself to continue walking. “So you saw everything?”

Basil tightened around my neck, flexing before relaxing.

Can't see. Covered up. This time, the annoyance was clear.

“Right.” I nodded, feeling some relief. Then I realized how trapped he must feel, only able to see light at night when I was wearing a low-collared shirt. Awkwardly, I tugged at the collar, pulling it down. “Better?”

Scales dragged across my skin.

Much.

“So, what did Jay mean? That we're all trapped? Who's trapping us?”

House Bartlett.

The words were matter-of-fact, strangely bloodless.

“The house itself? Or just the idea of the house? The pressures and the need to serve the house?”

There was silence, and then Basil said, *Yes*.

“Right.” I could see it. Cade might want the crown and the freedom it brought, but that freedom had a cost: his ability to decide his own fate. Once he wore the crown, he was trapped. Everything he did would have to be for House Bartlett.

The edge of the forest came into view, sunlight streaming down on the wide lawn.

“Sorry, Basil,” I said, tugging up the collar of my shirt.

Basil tightened once but didn’t say anything more.

I walked through the servants’ hallways, heading straight to Cade’s room. I needed privacy, and I knew that his room was the only place I would find that.

Once inside, I shut the door, raising my hand to check that the collar was still high enough Basil wouldn’t be able to see anything.

Sitting down on the bench I had been sleeping on, I pulled the ring out of my pocket. It was silver, a wolf’s head taking over most of the face. The wolf itself was fierce, its teeth bared, its eyes narrowed and sharp. She was hunting.

I remembered when my father had given it to my mother, although I had been so young I hadn’t understood the significance.

Mom had held it up, grinning at him.

“Every emperor needs a signet ring,” Dad had said.

Inside, the Latin inscription left my heart beating fast.

Lupus Imperator. Emperor Wolf.

How had it gotten into the cabin? The story was my parents had attacked Cade’s in their bedroom. Then, Leon had killed them. So why was the ring all the way out in the forest? Why was it in one of those small prison cells?

Leon must have captured my mother after the attack. My stomach tightened.

They had kept my mother. They had put her in that small little cell and locked the door, chained her to the ground.

I struggled, keeping my breath even. I didn't need Basil wondering why I was suddenly breathing fast, why my heart was fluttering in my neck.

The door handle turned, and I shoved the ring back into my pocket. Cade came in, his brows drawn together, his lips pursed so tightly they turned white. When he saw me, he opened his mouth.

I could see the venomous words before they were even formed. He was going to say something that was going to hurt. Then he closed his lips tightly. Striding into the bathroom, he slammed the door behind him.

“What was that about?” I asked.

Council session, Basil hissed. *Unpleasant*.

When Cade came out, his hairline was damp, his skin dewy. He narrowed his eyes at me.

“What are you doing here?”

“I went and I checked out the cabins again. We didn't miss anything last time. I was going to go talk to some servants after I ate.”

Cade nodded, but I could see his eyes were focused on something beyond me.

“I thought you had house business,” I said. “Is it over already?”

Cade turned to me, and I saw that flash again. If he was a wolf, I would have said that he was going to shift. Instead, a sharp line of magic spilled from his fingers, lancing across the room and piercing the window.

We both turned to stare at it, Cade blinking rapidly. The glass began to crack, a single line that quickly split again and again, until the entire window was fissured.

“Did you... Did you just lose control?” I kept the tremor out of my voice with effort. I couldn't afford to be afraid.

Cade swallowed, then turned to me. “I need you to come with me.”

His throat bobbed, and his wide eyes kept returning to the shattered window.

Cool air came in through the broken glass. A soft tinkle was the only warning before the entire window came down with a crash onto the soft carpet.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

Cade turned to the window, his shoes crunching across the broken glass. He pressed a hand down, and a seething mass of tattoos left his fingers, moving like shadows come to life. They gathered all the broken pieces of glass, and the scent of the burning wool carpet made me sneeze.

Cade held the shadows in his hands, and in the center of them, the shadows cradled a perfect orb of glass, heated so hot it was bright orange. Gently, he pushed the glass forward, and it smoothed out, taking the shape of the window. It was opaque, the red-hot coloring making it impossible to see outside. As it cooled, flakes of char came off, until we could see outside. Except for the round, blackened mark on the carpet where the shadows had superheated the glass, it was as if he had never broken anything.

When he turned to me, his face was still, every hint of emotion wiped clean.

“The council will understand I’m serious.” He turned to the window, reaching up with his thumb to wipe away the last streak of black, leaving it pristine. “And if they don’t believe me, then it’s your job to convince them.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX

“This is creepy. You understand this is creepy, right?” I raised an eyebrow at Cade.

Cade looked at me out of the corner of his eyes. “Are you serious?”

“I’m serious that I have seen episodes of *Law & Order* that start like this.” I gestured to the library wall.

A stone archway was built into the drywall, the bookshelves on either side filled with ancient leather tomes. The rocks of the archway looked old, covered with a thin layer of moss. Runes were carved into them in some language I couldn’t read.

Inside the archway, instead of the pale peach of the rest of the wall, the surface was dark, something between the darkest green and blue, depending on the angle I looked at it. It fluttered, undulating like water in a sharp breeze. The archway went all the way up to the ceiling, and when I got closer, squinting at it, I could see the wear from age.

“Where does it go?” I asked. “Somewhere else on the property?”

“It’s hard to explain. Think of it as a separate realm created by my magic. Step back,” Cade said.

I took a few steps away, standing just behind him. He raised his hands, and the familiar black ink dripped off his fingers, flying through the air until I saw patterns emerge on the moving wall. Black on top of black on top of black layered

until the entire wall under the archway was covered in ink. Cade walked forward.

He paused, half his body consumed by the black. “Are you coming?”

“Do I have a choice?” I muttered.

“I’m not paying you to have a choice,” Cade said.

I snorted but followed him through.

The last time I had traveled via Cade’s magic, it had felt like physical assault. This felt the same. Every centimeter of my skin burned. It felt as though someone was peeling my skin off with a dull knife. I wanted to scream, but I had no voice.

I stumbled out on the other side. Cade was standing a few steps ahead of me. He turned, his expression annoyed.

“Get up,” he said.

“What is *with* that? It doesn’t hurt you?” I stood, dusting off my pants.

“No,” Cade said shortly. His own breath was coming short, and I could see the twitch of muscles in his arms.

“Great. So it’s just torture for me, then. All aboard the Cade express line to hell.”

When my skin no longer felt like someone had taken a fish knife to it, I looked around. The room was dark, except for a massive stone table in the center lit from above by mage lights. There were twelve wooden chairs around it, each ornately carved, decorated with the same beasts and animals as the door to Cade’s room. There was another chair made of the same white stone as the table, and it looked more like a throne than a seat.

“Well, this isn’t ominous at all. It looks straight out of *Secret Organizations Monthly*.” Stepping closer to Cade, I whispered, “I mean, would a few lamps hurt you guys?”

Shaking his head, I saw a twitch of Cade’s lips, as though he wanted to laugh. Then he turned serious. “Are you sure you

can do this?"

"Yeah," I said. Cade had said he needed backup, needed someone to reinforce and reiterate his position to the council, and I understood what that meant. Declan also liked to have someone at negotiations to make sure his position was as clear as the violence I promised. "I've got this. Don't worry about me."

Turning his head, Cade examined me. He reached up one hand, straightening my collar and brushing a finger over my hairline, fixing a strand that had gotten loose.

Then, he walked to the white stone chair, hesitating before taking a seat on it. His black clothes accented every line of his body, making his skin look even more pale, as though he was death himself sitting on a throne of bleached bone. This was Prince Bartlett, heir to House Bartlett.

A soft popping sound went off to my left. I spun, ready to face the threat, but it was only Petrona, the click of her walking stick loud in the cavernous dark space.

She raised her eyebrows, waiting until she was sitting in one of the ornate wooden chairs before turning to Cade.

"Prince Bartlett." She nodded her head at him, although her eyes immediately strayed to where I stood.

"Councilwoman," Cade greeted.

More pops echoed, coming frequently, like kernels in a popcorn machine. Members of the council appeared, most of them startling once they saw me standing behind Cade's throne.

Eleven seats filled quickly, but the one across from Cade remained vacant.

"Let's begin," Cade said.

Half the table glanced at the empty chair, and one older member, his reading glasses slipping down low on his nose, said, "Without the seneschal?"

Cade looked around the room, one eyebrow going up. "The break was only for half an hour, wasn't it? I recall

several council sessions that had already started when I arrived late.”

“And several that occurred when you deigned not to show up at all,” Sonja said. She was dressed in a high-collared peach shirt, a formal blue robe draped over her shoulders. “You can forgive us for starting when you weren’t present, given that your presence was never guaranteed. Unlike our seneschal.”

“Either way, we agreed a half-hour break, so I am starting.” Cade leaned back in his throne. “We have not come to a conclusion regarding the purchase of property in Los Santos.”

“The expense alone makes it unfeasible. The property you’re talking about is valued at tens of millions of dollars. And given that we won’t be able to rent it out to anyone not in our house, and we will have to lease it exclusively to mages, it’s unlikely that it will bring in even a fraction of the expense.” A man further down the table shook his head. His robe was a shade darker than Sonja’s.

“I will admit, there is some appeal to returning to our former glory,” Petrona said. Her own robes were silver, and when I looked down the table, the only robes were blue or silver.

“Some of us do remember when Los Santos was House Bartlett territory,” one of the council members agreed. His robes were silver as well. “Taking back what was once ours will assure the world of our return to glory.”

“To what end?” Sonja said.

“Because we need to expand the house,” Cade snapped, clearly losing patience.

The gasp around the table was audible, even Petrona’s eyes going wide. Cade went pale, as though he hadn’t wanted to say that. I remembered what he’d said about the council not wanting to build more housing, despite the miles and miles of land they were sitting on.

Murmurs began immediately, multiplying until Cade had to raise his voice nearly to a shout to be heard.

“We expand, or we die!”

“Well, that’s rather dire, isn’t it?” Leon’s voice cut through the quiet room, and he stepped out of the shadows into the light. Sweeping aside his blue robes, he took the seat directly across from Cade. “My prince, I’m not sure whose counsel you have been taking, but no one on this esteemed body would advocate for such an extreme, imprudent move.”

“You suggest that reclaiming what belongs to House Bartlett is imprudent?” Cade’s voice was a whip across the room.

“I suggest expanding the house allows in those with untrained magic, no pedigree, no understanding of their station or the hierarchy that is integral to our house.” Leon’s words were calm, and he shook his head. “I understand that you wish to begin your tenure as king with more allies at your back, but you can only blame yourself for not courting those on this council who would already be in your corner. House Bartlett has all it needs.”

“Does it?” Cade’s eyes glittered, and I saw a hint of black curl out from under the cuff of his shirt.

The mage on his right saw it too, her eyes going wide. She leaned over and whispered to another blue-robed member beside her.

“It does.” Leon nodded. “House Bartlett will return to its former glory through its own strength, not through purchasing power or allowing in the riffraff.”

“And when House Morrison overtakes us? When they drown us with the number of powerful mages they have acquired through careful selection? Will we still be the most powerful when they could crush us with a single raid?”

Leon exhaled sharply through his nose, his cheekbones looking sharper. He tapped one finger on the table. A silver ring glinted on his finger. “They will never get that powerful. They have diluted their bloodline too much. How much Morrison blood can actually run through the veins of their

house when they let in members who have never had a house affiliation?”

“It will not *matter* how much Morrison blood runs through their veins when they have the most powerful mages in the country in their house.” Cade looked around the room. “We are dying. The new generation has a fraction of the magical ability on this council. You would hand me a throne which has no stable footing to sit on.”

“We are not dying yet,” Petrona said. “Do you look around this table and see only our desiccated skeletons? Give the new generation time to grow their abilities. One does not become a powerful mage overnight. No one here wants to hand you a house without a foundation, my prince.”

Cade stared at her, his chest barely rising and falling. He opened his mouth, his sharp tongue about to be unleashed on one of the few members of his council who seemed to support him.

“If this house is satisfied being one of the minor houses, then Leo’s got a point,” I said. Cade flinched, as though he’d forgotten I was behind him. “After all, *Leo*, I’m sure that it’s a lot easier being seneschal of the house when it’s so small. Taking on property in Los Santos would mean more work for you, and I hear most people in their golden years like to take a load off.”

Every eye in the room focused on me.

Leon glared at me, his eyes narrow. There was rage behind his gaze, the implication clear: he blamed me for what happened to Jesaiah.

“We have never before allowed a consort into this most sacred chamber,” Leon said. “I assume that Prince Bartlett wanted you because after all the threats on his life, he’s frightened of being alone.”

There were plenty of implications in the sentence that I didn’t like.

“Does he have anything to be afraid of here?” I asked.

“No, but I understand how he might want the sense of security.” Leon’s dismissive smile made it clear what he saw me as—a security blanket, the teddy bear that Cade wouldn’t let go of even to walk the short distance to the bathroom in the middle of the night.

“I’m not here for Cade.” I crossed my arms over my chest, using my height and width the same way I had with Declan. There was something about being taller and more muscled than anyone else in the room. Murmurs started up, mages glancing surreptitiously at my arms. As soon as I looked over, trying to catch their gazes, they looked away, quickly focusing on anyone else.

“My consort has a unique perspective on this, as his most recent place of residence was Los Santos.” Cade gestured to me, and because I was a wolf, I was the only person in the room who could hear how fast his heart was beating.

I had gotten it wrong. I thought Cade wanted me for the same reason that Declan did. Having a big wolf, a powerful alpha standing behind you, made it clear that you were the most powerful person in the room. But Cade wanted me to help sell his idea. He wanted me for an entirely different reason.

“So, what do you think of the proposal?” a woman in a silver cloak asked. She looked to be in her late forties, making her one of the younger members of the council. Her smile at me was genuine, small wrinkles in the corner of her eyes giving her away.

“Like I said, House Morrison has more people than you. Maybe you think they’re weaker, but the truth is, it doesn’t matter if they’re weaker. An ant can’t kill a lion. But a thousand of them, a hundred thousand, that could do some damage.”

The woman nodded, looking around the table. “It has been a long time since House Morrison has made any aggressive movements against us. So what if they have a hundred thousand ants? *We* are still the lion.”

“For how long?” I asked. “I’ve lived in Los Santos; I see how it is on the streets. People walk around wearing House Morrison crests.”

The woman widened her eyes. She looked down the table at Leon. “It has always been understood that Los Santos is House Bartlett territory, even if we have withdrawn from actual ownership. Is it true that House Morrison has claimed what is ours?”

“Yes.” Cade’s words cut across the table. “We are at a crossroads. If our house is comfortable sliding into obscurity, becoming nothing more than a *lesser* house, then we do nothing. But I will never be comfortable watching what entire generations of Bartletts have built become *lesser*. House Bartlett will once again be the name that every other mage house aspires to. We will once again be the house that leads others; our direction will determine the direction every other house takes. We have the ability to make strides in magical practice, to move mountains and create the world we want to see.”

Cade’s words built on each other. He was not angry, not even passionate. Everything about him was cold and calculated. His vision for the future was an inevitability, a glacier that couldn’t be moved.

“And your plan is to do that by purchasing enormously expensive property?” Leon asked. The question sliced across the table. The expressions that had been warming to Cade, defrosting into agreement, disappeared as the entire council turned to Leon.

“For a start,” Cade agreed.

“Then let us have the council vote. Let us find out whether or not this staid institution which has kept the house steady while you have been... distracted believes that we need to spend so much of our money on something so frivolous.” Leon gestured around the table. A piece of golden magic slid from his hands, gliding across the table and landing in front of each council member. It was about the size and shape of a Post-it sliding, settling like a piece of paper.

Each council member tapped the gold magic in front of them, pressing down for a long beat before releasing them. Then the pieces of gold flickered into the air, forming a collage that hung above the table. When the last council member had tapped theirs, Leon snapped his fingers, and the gold changed colors. Silver and blue squares fluttered in the air. Of the thirteen squares, only four were silver. The rest were blue.

They shimmered like scales from an enormous reptile. Cade's face tightened, as pale as the white stone table under his hands.

Leon clapped his hands. "Now, on to the next order of business. The dryad visit is approaching, and we still have some details to resolve."

The discussion turned to what sounded like a state dinner House Bartlett was hosting for the local dryad population. There was some disagreement over the menu and a few points about the safety issues. Cade stared straight ahead, seeming not to hear any of it.

Leon took a note down with his finger, the magic lingering in the air. "That was our last order of business, was it not? If so, this session is adjourned."

Everyone began standing, except for Petrona. She raised her walking stick, bringing it down with a sharp crack. "Seneschal, you forget yourself. The head of our house brings sessions together and ends them."

The room dropped to silence, every head turning to Cade. Slowly, he stood, resting his fingertips on the table. He bowed his head. "Session is adjourned."

I saw significant glances exchanged and a few raised eyebrows as people left the session. I assumed they were waiting until they were back home before beginning to gossip in earnest. Leon was one of the last to leave.

He circled around the table, his expression gentle.

"I am sorry, my prince. I know you had pinned many hopes on this. You are still young. You do not understand the

ways of a principal house.” He reached up and clasped Cade’s shoulder. “I understand your concerns. We can work together with members of the house, offer more rewards to families whose offspring retain their power. It will prompt a few of them to sire more heirs.”

Cade turned to Leon, his blue eyes blank. “I appreciate your counsel, Leon.”

Leon nodded, walking off into the darkness and disappearing with an audible pop.

“Well.” Petrona sighed, the air blowing out of her. “That did not go as you wanted.”

“No.” Cade shook his head. “Thank you for your support.”

Petrona stood, striding toward us, the click of her walking stick loud in the cavernous space. “It was not a bad idea to bring your consort, to remind them who you are and who you will be. But the idea of spending so much money... Many of them suckle at the teat of House Bartlett’s coffers. Even speaking of taking that much money out of the bank scares them.”

“I understand.” The words were ground out, Cade’s patience clearly running thin.

“If I might offer another suggestion? One old woman nosing where she isn’t wanted?”

Cade bowed his head. “Your counsel is always appreciated.”

“There is still some tension between you two in public. Resolve it before any other member catches on.” She glanced between me and Cade significantly.

With that, she turned, striding into the darkness and disappearing without sound.

“What was that about?” I asked.

“She wants us to have sex,” Cade said. He looked at me, his eyes traveling from the top of my head to my feet. “And I agree with her.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN

The silence of the room seemed to double and triple as I gaped at Cade. He might as well have suggested that we move laundry day to Wednesday for all the emotion he'd shown.

Cade's expression closed in on itself, shuttering until he finally said, "Come on."

I followed him into the darkness, feeling something drag across my skin. It was still agonizing, but I was so distracted by what Cade had said that I barely felt it. Light came slowly, first dim, then brighter and brighter, until we were inside the library again. Cade strode through the tall shelves, the books just as silent as the council chamber we had left behind.

In the main house, I could hear servants in the distance as they moved around, dusting and straightening, speaking to each other in low voices.

Cade stalked through the house. Even though he was shorter than me, he moved so quickly I was almost jogging to keep up. At the bottom of the stairs, I caught his wrist.

"I'm sorry, I'm just confused—"

He tore his hand free, glaring at me. Without speaking, he walked up to the second level. Basil tightened around my neck, and I wasn't sure if it was in warning or in comfort.

Silently, I followed Cade up the stairs. He threw open the door to his room, and I caught it before it slammed into the wall. He went inside without turning around, and I shut the door behind myself.

“What’s the problem?” Cade asked, his back still to me. I leaned against the closed door, crossing my arms over my chest. I waited silently, letting the quiet stretch until it became awkward, almost suffocating.

Cade’s heart was beating fast, his shoulders rising and falling. When he turned around, pink was high on his cheeks, and he lifted his chin, as though looking down on me, despite our height difference.

“What. Is. The. Problem?” he bit out.

“The problem is I don’t understand why we actually have to have sex. I’m not sure you *want* to do it. And it wasn’t in our original contract.” I tilted my head, my hair brushing across the thick wooden door behind me. Something in my stomach twisted. I wanted Cade, but not like this, not frost lining his skin and a look of terror hiding beneath the anger on his face.

“I’ll pay you more money,” Cade said.

I laughed. “I am not some GI Joe at the Goodwill. I do *not* have a price tag on the bottom of my foot.”

I tried to catch his eyes, but he looked away.

“How much will it cost?” he asked insistently.

I stared at him before shaking my head. “How much will it cost *you*?”

He blew out a breath, ruffling his bangs. “That’s what I’m trying to figure out. Will another five hundred thousand do it?”

“Cade...” I trailed off, not even sure what my next move was going to be.

“More?” He opened and closed his hands at his sides. “How much?”

“I don’t mean how much *money* it will cost you,” I said. Petrona and Cade were both thinking about one moment from the meeting: Cade had flinched away from me.

It had been fast, and everyone else had been focused on me, but I had seen it, and apparently, Petrona had too.

I stepped forward, and Cade took a half step back before firming his stance. Reaching out with my hand, I nodded at him. “It’s about the fact that you don’t want me to touch you.”

“I’ll be fine.” Cade shook his head. “Let’s just get on with it.”

“Cade. If we have sex, I don’t want it to be the sort of thing that you *just get on with*.” I took in the rapid flutter of his heart at his neck, the rise and fall of his chest, the flicker of tattoo that appeared at the cuff of his shirt before disappearing again. “You weren’t willing to take one for the team. That’s why you hired me instead of getting a real consort. And I don’t have sex with people who aren’t interested in having it with me. There’s more than enough regrets in my life. I don’t like adding that one.”

“I need to get used to you,” Cade said sharply. “People have noticed we don’t touch or smell like sex. One of the other counselors was talking to their werewolf before the meeting this morning. They mentioned to me that after a passionate courtship, sometimes things... decrease in the bedroom. They offered me *tips*.”

“What?” I gawked, my mouth working for a moment before I shut it. I had no idea what I was going to say.

“We’ll do this. And likely need to do it again.” Cade looked behind me at the door. “You saw how they are. The last thing I need is it getting around that we aren’t having any sex.”

I blew air out, digging my hands into my hair. “Why does it matter? Why would it even be remotely important?”

Cade looked at me, his head tilted. “Because of the magic.”

“What?” I blinked at him, feeling as though I’d missed some key points.

“It’s hard to explain without explaining the whole of it.” When I opened my mouth to protest, Cade held up a hand. “I can’t. I’ll tell you everything I can, but it’s... Revealing this would be revealing the deepest secrets of magecraft.”

Cade walked toward the window that he had broken earlier, looking out over the grounds. He put his palm against the glass.

I came up behind him, making enough noise that I wouldn't startle him. Still, his shoulders rose before he forced them back down.

“There are two relationships in a mage's life: a spouse and, if he has the ability, a consort. Your spouse is for political gain and offspring. Sometimes affection, but love is fickle. The benefits of marrying for money or power last for the entire relationship. A spouse is always opposite sex, regardless of preference.” Cade's tone was flat, and he withdrew his hand from the window, clasping it behind him. I saw his fingers twitch.

I fought the urge to reach out and touch him, to brush my forefinger over the soft flesh of his palm. I had good evidence that wouldn't actually help him relax.

“And the consort?” I asked.

“The consort is a sign of your magical ability. Back when consorts were slaves—” He seemed to choke out the word, swallowing before continuing. “—it showed your magical prowess to be able to subjugate another person, especially one as strong as a werewolf. When it became obvious how immoral slavery was, a consort was taken more for affection. The ability to keep another safe, to give them the powers to keep themselves safe, that was seen as magical strength.”

“Why are most consorts same-sex partnerships?” I asked because I had done the math, and with the exception of one, all of the consorts here were same-sex. I'd never noticed it in the real world because consorts were falling out of fashion, and freelance mages didn't usually take a consort anyway.

“Offspring,” Cade said shortly. “The last thing anyone wants is a mage pregnant by a werewolf or the opposite.”

“So people think that the passion went away between us. You're stressed-out. I'm in a new situation. Maybe we just

don't like having sex when everyone knows it." I raised my eyebrows, but Cade still didn't turn away from the window.

"I can't explain it, not without revealing secrets that would get me killed. They *must* believe we are having sex." Cade's shoulders slumped, and he brought his fingers to his eyes, scrubbing. "For now, just know it is a sign of my magical ability and my magical control."

"Okay." I nodded. "So you want us to smell like sex because it's like showing off your girlfriend's underwear in the locker room. We don't actually have to *do* it. We'll get sweaty, paint our come on each other, and walk around like the world's most clueless teenagers with me wearing your letterman jacket."

Cade turned, his eyes searching my face. "Am I so unattractive that you would rather do that?"

I stared at him, my gaze going to his soft lips. How many times had I fantasized about laying him down on his massive four-poster bed and making him completely come apart?

His lips parted, his pink tongue darting out to run along his bottom lip. I swallowed.

"We're just doing this for cover?" I asked, my voice rough. "I see how you flinch away from me. I don't want to make you do something you're going to regret."

"Miles—" Cade swallowed, staring at me with wide, blue eyes. "I'll be fine. It's not about *you*. The flinching. It's not about you. People are never actually on my side. But you are. I trust you."

The words were like a knife made entirely of ice, piercing my chest and stabbing me straight in the heart. He trusted me. He believed in some version of me that wasn't real.

"Cade, you shouldn't trust me. I betrayed Declan. He wanted me to do a job, kill someone for him, but I didn't. There was a woman, an alpha, giving out an antidote for Reaper to Declan's junkies. I was *supposed* to kill her, but I hesitated. I let her get away." Because it was impossible to kill

her when she reminded me so much of my mother. I finished lamely, “You shouldn’t trust me.”

“I do, though.” There was something soft and vulnerable in Cade’s voice, and when I looked into his eyes, I saw fear underneath the chill he cloaked himself in. Cade didn’t trust anyone. How could he, growing up the way he did? But somehow, for reasons neither of us understood, he trusted me.

And that scared him.

“How should we do this?” Cade asked, swallowing. He lifted his chin, false bravado as he walked over to the bed, gesturing with his hand toward it. “I suppose if we do it in the bed, then we’ll continue to smell like each other even tomorrow.”

I frowned at him. “You want us to share a bed after?”

Cade turned away, tugging at the hem of his shirt. “One of the servants told a councilor we weren’t sleeping in the same bed. That was part of the gossip.”

Nodding, I approached Cade from behind. His breath hitched, but he didn’t flinch. “Look at me.”

He turned, his eyes finding mine, and I felt a thrill flicker in my chest at how easily he listened.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

Cade rolled his eyes, then reached down and tugged off his shirt. He didn’t look at me, instead unfastening the narrow leather belt at his waist. He unbuttoned his pants and shoved them down his legs, kicking them aside, standing naked except for his underwear.

He tilted his head, gesturing to me with his hand. “Hurry up, let’s get on with this.”

With a shake of my head, I stepped forward. “If we are going to ‘just get on with this,’ then we should just lie next to each other and jerk off.”

Slowly, I reached out, touching his elbow and dragging my fingertips up to his shoulder. He tensed, then forcibly relaxed, gritting his jaw.

“How long since you had sex with someone? Someone else. Your own right hand doesn’t count.” I slid my fingers down his shoulder, watching the ink on his skin swirl away from my fingertips. I traced down his forearm, appreciating the muscle, and found the fine blue veins on the back of his hand.

“Why do you need to know?” Cade asked, his voice breathy.

“I like both of us on the same page,” I said.

“A while,” Cade said uncomfortably. “Why? When was the last time *you* had sex? Because when I found you, you looked like you hadn’t showered in days, and you smelled even worse. I think even the prostitutes in that bar I dragged you out of would have had higher standards than to approach you.”

“It’s been a few months.” I cupped his hand in mine, then used my free hand to trace his fingers, watching them twitch. “No one had caught my interest for a while.”

“Oh?” Cade sounded breathless. “And what catches your interest? Tall? Muscled? A... werewolf?”

Shaking my head, I thought about the last person I had had sex with. It had been a fellow hired gun, someone working for one of Declan’s contractors. He’d been my size, just as rough as I was around the edges.

Cade was panting, as though this touch was more than he could bear. I looked up at his face, and he was staring at me, his eyes wide, wanting more. His tongue flicked out to trace his plush bottom lip.

“Miles...” He yanked his hand out of mine, wrapping his arm around his chest. “Get undressed.”

“Bossy,” I noted. Even still, I pulled my shirt off and pushed down the pants. As I kicked them off, I looked up.

Cade was staring at me, his eyes focused on my throat. I reached up, feeling nothing but muscle under my fingers.

“Basil,” Cade said softly.

Boring anyway, the snake hissed. Although I like the flushed skin. Let him get you hot and bothered more often.

Then, something dragged itself out of my neck, and suddenly, I had a live snake around my throat. Cade came close, his breath hot on my chest.

He reached up, his hands trembling before he stilled them. He loosened Basil from around my neck and quickly put him back in his terrarium.

I stood awkwardly, watching him. Part of me wanted to crawl onto his bed and savor the scent of his sheets and pillow, but that felt too intimate. Cade was showing me a part of himself that I wasn't sure I had the right to see.

When Basil was tucked away, Cade turned around. He wet his lips again, and I could see the dark of his pupils almost consuming the entirety of the blue in his eyes.

“Get on the bed,” he said sharply.

My cock jerked, and I took a couple of steps back until I felt the mattress. I sat down, scooting back a few inches. Everything in the bed was soft, from the mattress to the down comforter.

Cade clenched his jaw, then strode forward, tilting his chin up before climbing onto the bed, his knees on either side of my hips. My cock jumped, but he was still soft as he trembled above me.

“It's me.” I swallowed. Even thinking the next words was like eating glass. “You trust me.”

Slowly, giving him a chance to move away, I reached my fingers for his collarbone, dragging them across the sensitive skin, then down his chest to his navel.

Tattoos spread across his chest. Just when I thought I understood the pattern, when I felt like I could almost read it, it disappeared under my fingers. They whirled, forming intricate designs. I traced one with my fingertip, circling his nipple, getting ever closer until I pinched the pink bud between my fingertips.

Cade jerked forward, and I felt his hardness against my own.

His eyes were shut tightly, breath coming in short pants. With my other hand, I reached up and let my thumb drag across the waist of his underwear.

He trembled, although this time not from fear. I desperately needed to ask him what was the last time anyone had touched him. How long had he let himself go without feeling the most basic of human connections?

When I traced down the line of soft, pale hair that descended from his navel, he almost fell forward, one of his palms hitting my chest, his fingertips digging in. With his other hand, he grabbed hold of my wrist, bringing my hand to his mouth and sucking on my fingertips.

I moaned, the sound starting in my chest as Cade licked and suckled from my thumb to my forefinger.

Automatically, I thrust up, unable to not, unable to stop myself from needing more, more friction, more of Cade. Cade rolled his hips, as though he was riding me, as though he was fully seated on my cock and trying to get more. At the image, I thrust up again, the friction of the underwear and the pressure of his body against my groin edging me ever closer.

Pressing hard against my chest, Cade pushed all the way up on his knees and shimmied his underwear down until they were stretched across his thighs, his cock springing free.

I stared at the long, hard length. The pink tip was dripping with precome, and he followed my gaze, a warm blush rising on his cheeks.

“Cade,” I moaned.

He reached down, tugging my boxer briefs down just far enough that my cock was freed, my balls trapped by the tight band of elastic at the waist. It rubbed against the underside of my dick, and when he reached forward, wrapping both hands around our cocks, I couldn't help but push up into his grip. His palm was dry, the friction impossibly too much.

Everything was too much. I wrapped a hand around his bicep, and he shuddered, so I pressed my fingertips in harder.

“More,” I commanded.

And bless everything, Cade squeezed our cocks harder.

I moaned, the groan building in my chest and coming out of my mouth in desperation. At the sound, he sighed, his eyes squeezed tight. I lifted my hand further, placing it right at his neck.

His eyes flew open, hips jerking forward, his cock sliding against mine, the precome at the tip creating enough lubrication that it was perfect.

“Look at me,” I commanded.

Cade’s mouth fell open, and he gasped, his wide eyes finding mine.

“Good,” I growled.

His mouth was open, and I pressed my thumb against the corner of his lips before sliding it in, tugging his lip down. He ducked his chin and caught my thumb between his teeth, working it, biting hard and releasing it, soothing the injury with soft licks and gentle kisses.

He thrust forward again, and I met him halfway, both of us sliding in and out of the perfect pressure of his hands.

His eyes met mine, his blue gaze perfection, and I was struck again by the image of a frozen lake. The ice was cracking. I was going to drown in his eyes.

He cried out first, his come hot and sticky, and I thrust into it, enjoying the feel of his softening cock against my still-hard one. He squeezed harder, and I couldn’t help myself—I thrust two fingers into his mouth, watching him suck and swallow.

I came so hard that my vision whited out. Panting, I came back to myself in increments. My skin felt electrified, each sensation overwhelming. With a sigh, I used my free arm to tug him down. Cade released our cocks and dropped onto my chest, shivering and shuddering as though he was still experiencing the aftershocks.

Fondly, I placed my hand on his back, rubbing my fingertips in small circles across his shoulders. I could feel his breath against my chest, the warm in and out, the sigh as his breathing lengthened, his body going slack with sleep.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-EIGHT

Someone at the table was going to be murdered; they just didn't know it yet.

"Surely Prince Bartlett can see reason." One of the counselors tossed a glance at Cade before returning to the argument. "The dryads have been impinging on our territory for years. They should not be treated as our allies. I'm sure even the prince agrees with me."

My money was that I would end up killing that guy. Perry Shephard, who kept backhandedly speaking for Cade, even though he was slouched in his chair, his fingers steepled in front of his mouth. I wasn't even sure he was awake.

Over the past two weeks, my time had been split between these *endless* council meetings and looking into anyone on the estate who might have a motive to want Cade dead. It turned out a *lot* of people had a motive to kill Cade, and most of them were in the room during council sessions.

Isaac had been over the members of the house with me, outlining the complicated family tree that made up House Bartlett. Everyone was related to everyone else, in a twisted cousins and in-laws and hey-isn't-that-incest way. Even Leon was Cade's father's first cousin, a tongue twister of a relationship that meant he was closer to the crown than I'd expected.

It took some careful finagling, lots of implication that maybe I wasn't as loyal as assumed, and hours spent just hanging out in the kitchen and resting room, where servants

and consorts hung out. Word was if Cade died, someone on the council would be elected to take his place.

Unfortunately for me, all the information dried up there. The servants weren't willing to gossip about the people who paid them, and lower-level members of families weren't willing to flip on the heads of their households. They were happy to throw suspicion on *other* members of House Bartlett but not the ones that directly benefitted them.

It would take time to earn everyone's trust, and if someone was trying to kill Cade, time wasn't something I had in abundance.

"Frankly, I don't understand why we're inviting our enemies into our territory," Shephard said.

"They are our neighbors," Petrona corrected, her voice severe. "How would you expect the prince to treat them? Lock them up as soon as they enter House Bartlett lands?"

"You cannot be serious. There is a large gap between *giving them a banquet* and *imprisoning* them." Shephard rolled his eyes. "I am merely suggesting that since they are coming to us, this is exactly the time when we should reassert our power, show them who is stronger in our relationship."

"Why make enemies when we can make friends?" Petrona pressed. "We did not always have such an antagonistic relationship with them."

"And they did not always take our territory inch by inch," Sonja said. She stood, drawing a large metal tube from behind her chair.

She unscrewed the top and pulled out a paper that smelled its age. Delicately, she unrolled it, spreading it over the table.

It was a map of House Bartlett and the surrounding lands. Certain lines moved and glowed, showing the boundaries of House Bartlett. Once, it had spread from well inside Nevada, all the way over the mountains, straight to the ocean, including all of Los Santos.

Below, I could see the borders of House Morrison territory, House Doyle extending above Bartlett borders.

“This was the original agreement with the dryads.” Sonja pointed to a small sliver of green inside the stretch of House Bartlett territory. “I asked Leon to find this map, which showed the original boundaries. This was what we agreed to. They would care for our forests in exchange for this small amount of autonomy. This is what our territory looks like today.”

She wiped her hand across the map, and the lines changed completely, the red of her magic covering the old ones and showing new. House Bartlett’s territory shrank. It was still massive, a spread of forest and land that was larger than most major cities.

But it was clearly a fraction of what they had once owned. There was no property in Los Santos; House Doyle was completely gone. Even House Morrison’s territory shrank.

But the dryads’ territory had grown. Now, it wasn’t a small blip of green but a massive swathe of forest that bordered House Bartlett to the east.

“They are *not* our allies,” Sonja said severely, looking around the table. “They have picked at our borders, picked at our mercy, and taken more than their fair share of our territory.”

I stared down the row of counselors, my eyes fixed on Leon. His expression was purely neutral, giving away nothing of his feelings.

“We should take them hostage.” Cade slouched in his chair, looking every bit the insouciant royal.

The words were like a gunshot fired in the room. Everyone turned to him, their expressions shocked. Even Petrona frowned, the lines on her face deepening.

“That is the solution you wanted us to come to, isn’t it? We kidnap them, then force them to return to a way of life that has been dead...” Cade gestured at the map, his own black magic seeping from his fingers, darting across the table and overwhelming Sonja’s, wiping the map clean. “One hundred years? We all should return to the way things looked when my

great-grandfather was still in charge, with us at the top of the food chain, regardless of how the world has changed since then.”

Cade’s magic spilled over the entirety of the map, blacking it out completely.

“Unless you were simply suggesting that we uninvite them. That we act as rudely as possible to our closest neighbors, the ones who have ties to our forest, who have kept it safe from fire and disease.” Cade raised an eyebrow, staring Sonja down.

Sonja narrowed her eyes, her words coming out tight. “I was merely suggesting that we consider our options. We are assuming they want friendship. We are assuming they will not attack us. We have been misled before. Your own father was misled by those who claimed friendship.”

The entire room stilled, and my chest tightened. No one looked at me, although I could feel the pressure around Cade mounting. My ears popped, and the shadows around the table grew ever darker.

“I’m sure Sonja is speaking without thinking, my prince. She doesn’t mean what she says,” Kari Frost said, her eyes darting between Sonja and Cade. Her blue robes showed she was allied with Sonja and Leon against Cade. Frost cleared her throat. “How would you like to handle the dryads?”

Cade stayed silent, and I couldn’t tell his expression from the back. I stepped forward. I had been in enough of these meetings that I understood more and more the position he found himself in.

“Cade.” I barely breathed the word, stepping forward until the side of my hip brushed his shoulder.

He startled, and around us, the room lightened from the impossible darkness to a more normal shadow.

“We are going to treat the dryads as our honored guests. They are our neighbors. They have protected our eastern border for many years, and any attack that comes from that direction would need to go through their lands first. There is

no reason for us to antagonize our allies.” He stood, his chair screeching on the stone floor. Looking around the room, he said, “That is all for today. Council is dismissed.”

“My prince, we still have other matters—” Leon began.

Cade held up a hand, silencing him. “Council is finished, seneschal. You can bring up any other matters with me personally.”

Cade turned, and I shadowed him, standing between him and the council as he walked away into the darkness. We emerged in the library, and I thought Cade was going to go straight to his room, but instead, he walked out of the house, stalking deep into the forest until the house itself was invisible behind trees, and the only sounds were the rustle of leaves in the wind and the hesitant chirps of birds in the distance.

“Which of them is it?” Cade asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “From all the digging Isaac and I have done, everyone in that room will lose power, prestige, or money when you ascend. The trouble is, no one will admit to trying to kill the king.”

“You can’t smell them out? See which of them is a turncoat?” Cade dug his fingers into his hair, scratching hard at his scalp. “It’s driving me *mad*. They undermine me at every chance. They whisper. They *gossip*.”

“Unless one of them starts monologuing like Brutus, convincing the senate to stab Caesar, I need another lead,” I said.

“Cassius,” Cade said, still pacing back and forth.

“What?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Cassius convinced people to stab Caesar,” Cade said. “You don’t go to museums, but you remember *Julius Caesar*?”

“I contain multitudes.” I shrugged at his annoyed look. “The people attacking you are the ones who have the most to gain from you being weakened. And despite the fact that most of them look like they’re trying out for the role of Crypt

Keeper on the *Tales of the Crypt* reboot, *anyone* in that room will gain power if you died.”

“So *which* of them is it?” Cade demanded. The sun was setting, casting the forest in an ephemeral orange light. As it filtered through the trees, catching on motes of dust and pollen, everything looked magical.

“If I knew that, there would be a lot more screaming, begging, probably some broken kneecaps.” I shrugged. “All those trees I’ve shaken, nothing has fallen out.”

Cade turned away, his shoulders rising and falling. Then he began to laugh, the sound unhappy. The laugh morphed, becoming an enraged scream that echoed through the trees. Birds flew away, and as the sunset disappeared into darkness, we were surrounded by only dim light.

I squinted. That was no sunset. Cade’s magic was pouring out of him like it had in the council chamber. It consumed every speck of light around us, drawing strange shapes and patterns on the trees. He swiped his hand through the air, tearing apart the trees themselves, massive twenty-five-foot pine trees exploding into sawdust. I raised my hand to block some of the larger pieces.

“Well.” I looked around at the devastation. We stood in a newly created clearing, the trees that had once guarded us completely gone. All that was left was pulp and debris. “I bet you were loads of fun as a teenager. No wonder the dryads are annoyed with you.”

“Actually, the dryads are probably the only ones who don’t want me dead.” Cade knelt, picking up a pinecone. It was green, and when he turned it, the back of it had been completely burned away by his magic. “The way things are currently, they’re at a stalemate with House Bartlett until I ascend. It’s only then that we can make any new treaties.”

“Oh, good, I’ll cross them off my suspect list.” I hesitated before stepping forward, nudging him with my shoulder. “Now we’re down to Professor Plum, Mrs. White, and Reverend Green.”

“It’s Miss Scarlett in the library, of course,” Cade said. He dropped the pinecone, dusting off his hand and turning to me. “You didn’t run.”

I looked around at the devastation.

“Well, if I run, I’m out half a million dollars, plus another five hundred thousand for the sexy bits.” I winked at him. “You aren’t paying me to run.”

Cade gaped at me, and then slowly, his lips quirked up.

“No, I’m not paying you to run,” he agreed softly. He stepped forward, pressing his hand to my chest. “I know that when we first met, I wasn’t... the most open. But my instincts were right. You’ve been everything I could ever need and more. Thank you.”

His words hit me hard, and I sucked in a sharp breath.

He had no idea. Absolutely no idea. I had to tell him who I was. I had to tell him because he was trusting the wrong person. He was trusting me when he definitely shouldn’t, when he should be running as far away from me as he could get.

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

Cade turned. “Come on. I asked them to make you something special for dinner.”



I woke in the middle of the night, Cade panting beside me in his bed. The tattoos on his body moved rapidly, panicked. He thrashed, and I made the mistake of reaching out.

“Cade. You’re having a nightmare.” My hand touched his shoulder, and the ink jumped from his neck to my fingertips, spiraling up my arm, pinning me to the bed. I felt it sink into my flesh, drawing blood, piercing my chest.

I let out a pained moan, still trying to reach out, shaking Cade.

His eyes were screwed tight, his mouth forming words. Shadows seemed to fall from the canopy of the bed, wrapping around me. One landed on my throat, pressing down, squeezing, like a hand tightening.

But there was a sharp hiss, and I felt Basil slither. The pressure was gone, and Basil said, *Wake him.*

“I’m trying. If I was trying any harder, there would be a cartoon rabbit, a Rube Goldberg machine, and a bucket of ice involved.” I struggled up, scrabbling for the ink that was still piercing my chest, but there was nothing for my fingers to grip onto.

I grabbed Cade’s shoulders with both hands, shaking him hard. “Cade!”

His eyes snapped open, but they were covered in black, not even a hint of sparkle or alertness. His hand snapped out, wrapping around my throat, and then, to my shock, he lifted me up.

Cade didn’t have that strength. He wasn’t weak, but I was taller and larger than him, and he was lying flat on the bed. He lifted me up and tossed me, and I landed hard on the carpet, rolling before leaping into a crouch.

Cade stood from the bed, his movements echoed by the odd dripping shadows of his tattoos behind him. I couldn’t let him get me again.

He darted at me as fast as a predator scenting prey in the forest. I was faster, letting him slip by me, then wrapping my arms around his chest so that my front pressed to his back. I leaned in, whispering into his ear.

“Cade, it’s Miles. I’m here to keep you safe. Can you hear me?” I tightened my grip around him, his magic scraping up my arms, leaving bloody scratches behind.

He hissed, thrashing.

Basil loosened from around my neck, and then the snake slithered from my neck and curled around Cade’s. The flesh-and-blood version of himself wasn’t safe from injury from

Cade's magic. He hissed into Cade's ear, his tongue flicking out to Cade's earlobe.

Cade went still, then collapsed in my arms. He slid to the floor, and I went with him, my arms still wrapped around him.

He turned to me, burying his face in my chest, gripping my shirt tight with both hands.

"I thought I was better. You've been in the room, and it hasn't... I haven't..." He trailed off.

I rubbed my hand over his back, the injuries on my arms stinging even as the shallow ones tried to heal.

"I thought you didn't pay me to deal with nightmares," I said.

Cade chuckled darkly. "Sometimes I think that the council set me with an impossible task, forcing me to choose a consort. They know how I react to werewolves... Maybe it is Sonja behind everything. Because she *has* her wolf. She doesn't try to kill him with her nightmares."

"What..." I licked my lips. "What do you dream about?"

"Blood. There was so much blood. And teeth. And Leon saved me. After my mother gave her life to protect me while I was locked in that closet, *he* killed them. I think that's why he's overprotective. That's why he feels like he still has to protect me now, because he's protected me since then."

I kept my hand circling on his back, Basil's scales coolly sliding across my arm.

"Come on. Let's see if we can get any more sleep," I said.

Cade allowed himself to be pulled up, and I couldn't let go of him, couldn't seem to stop touching him. I needed more information, more details, but now wasn't the time. He looked fragile and defeated.

When we were both back in bed, I started to settle on the far side, watching the line of his back. I wouldn't be getting any sleep tonight. In fact, I doubted I would be able to sleep again in the same room as him.

“Miles?” Cade whispered.

“Yeah?”

“Are you scared of me?” he asked.

Swallowing, I realized he couldn't hear the rapid beat of my heart. He couldn't feel the tense line of my body, ready for the next attack.

“Terrified.” I tried to turn the word into a joke, smiling as I said it, trying to make it just as sarcastic as it should be.

But somehow, this mage who would want me dead if he even had an inkling of who I was had wormed his way into my heart. I couldn't leave him, even if it meant staying awake for the next year.

Cade curled further in on himself, his shoulders shaking, and I smelled the sting of salt.

“Cade...” I scooted forward, wrapping my arms around his waist, letting the heaviness of my body weigh him down.

“You should be afraid of me,” he said.

“You?” My lips brushed his soft white-blond hair. “Do you think there's anything you could do to me?”

The words echoed our first meeting, which seemed like it was a hundred years ago. Back then, I *had* been scared of him.

“Thank you.” Cade swallowed, tucking his head into his pillow.

His body was warm, and before I knew it, we had both fallen asleep.

Pounding on the door woke us. The light streaming in through the window indicated morning, possibly even late morning.

“Cade!” Isaac shouted. “Something is attacking the dryads!”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE

I followed Cade and Isaac through the house, a rush of people coming in and out, although I didn't see Jay anywhere. They stopped in front of the closed doors to the formal dining room.

Cade closed his eyes and grabbed hold of the doorknob. Under his hands, the doorknob changed, going from the stylish brass of the rest of the house to something older, made of silver. The door itself transformed into a massive wooden structure that resembled the chairs in the council chamber and the doors of Cade's bedroom.

He threw them open, revealing a room I had never seen before. Inside, several council members and their werewolves sat at a large, circular wooden table, examining a detailed map of House Bartlett lands. Younger mages I'd never seen before stood around the room, awkwardly clumping together, some gaping at the array of weapons on the walls. They stilled when Cade entered.

"What's going on?" Cade demanded, turning to two of the younger mages.

They both snapped to attention, their eyes wide. They were dressed in what looked like military garb, black and flexible, but with zippers in odd places and knives and guns strapped to their waist and legs.

"We were escorting the dryads from their territory. It was just the four of us, but then we were attacked. Finley said for

the two of us to jump here, alert the compound so that protections could be set up.”

“What attacked you? The dryads?” Cade frowned at them.

The two mages exchanged a look.

“No, it was... some sort of magically animated statue.” The guard looked helplessly at his companion.

“We think the dryads are fine. They were defending themselves.” The woman was frowning.

“They are our guests. They had *better* be fine. Once they stepped onto our land, the rules of hospitality applied.” Cade stared at the map. “We leave at once.”

The room went silent. I glanced from face to face, watching the expressions. Cade looked completely dispassionate, as though he didn’t care at all.

“Cade, you didn’t,” Isaac breathed. “The rules of hospitality apply?”

“The moment they passed into our territory. Possibly the moment they left their own homes.” Cade gestured to the map. “Where are they?”

Everyone in the room stilled, like mannequins on display in a storefront window. The rules of hospitality were ancient and unbreakable. Rumor had it that they held magic together in the world. When invoked, a host had to provide food, shelter, and safety to any guest in their territory. If a guest came to harm, if the laws were broken, the rumor was it could kill the host.

The two security mages rushed forward, pointing to the map, using their magic to enlarge it. Three pops startled some of the council members, and they jumped, turning in their seats to see the new mages joining us.

As soon as she teleported in, Sonja stepped forward, bracing her hands on the table. She didn’t ask any questions, letting the two security mages finish their explanation.

“Miles and I will go immediately,” Cade said, turning to Isaac. “Follow as soon as everyone else is ready.”

There was a loud pop, and suddenly, Leon was walking into the room through his teleportation spell, Jesaiah following behind him. The alpha looked... the same. No evidence of the torture he had been put through showed on his skin. Shirtless, he displayed his thick leather collar around his neck and a physique that, frankly, I would love to have at his age.

Cade turned around, ignoring his seneschal.

“Are you ready?” he asked me.

The wolf in me howled, clawing at my skin, desperate to get out. But it couldn't. It was trapped under my skin, as though it was an actual wolf I had consumed, from the old fairy tales that said werewolves were made from humans eating wolf pups, swallowing them whole and letting them grow in their bellies.

I didn't hesitate. “Yes.”

“What's going on?” Leon said sharply.

“Cade is going to go save the dryads.” Isaac frowned. I wasn't sure if he didn't like Cade's decision to go off on his own, he didn't care for Cade's desire to risk his life for dryads, or it was something else altogether.

Either way, Leon and Sonja spoke immediately, their voices overlapping.

“My prince, you cannot think to risk your life—”

“Cade, Tyson and I will be ready in minutes—”

“Wait for everyone else,” Cade said sharply, overriding both of them. “My life is mine to risk. I will not sacrifice my house in what might be a trap.”

For half a second, the room was silent, and then it exploded into noise again. Cade looked at me, the corner of his mouth twisting up. I understood what he was saying. I nodded.

Rolling his wrist, Cade twisted his magic, and I felt it wrap around my chest, then spread over my body, the inky blackness familiar and welcome. I remembered being afraid of Cade's magic. Being afraid of Cade. Now, I knew exactly what was coming next. Pain.

We arrived in the middle of what looked like a fire road, the sun high and bright in the sky, every drop of the morning fog burned off.

I heard a scream and turned, facing east. Further down the road were three SUVs, the windows tinted dark. One of the cars was completely destroyed, as though an invisible boulder had dropped on top of it, smashing the frame and cratering the roof.

I recognized the flash of magic, the scream of metal as it sheared away from sharp talons. Still, it took a moment for me to understand what I was seeing. Gargoyles spun in the sky, their enormous forms oddly disproportionate, massive torsos and spindly little legs. They screeched and screamed in an unfamiliar language. The mages were immediately recognizable by their high-necked shirts, the fluidity of their movements. They had created some sort of shielding spell, which spun above them in silver and purple. The enormous trees of the forest surrounded them and—

My eyes saw something my brain refused to understand, like I was getting an error message for my own mind.

The trees reached out, grabbing at one of the enormous gargoyles and slamming it into the ground. The gargoyle screeched, loud and unhappy, and forced its way out of the thick wooden trap, shards of wood and leaves dropping to the ground. The tree lost a limb, and the gargoyle's front talon was shattered, but both the tree and the gargoyle escaped mostly intact.

"Prince Bartlett," the tree nearest us said, its voice a crackle of dried leaves. "Is this how you greet your guests?"

"Elder," Cade said. It sounded like a title, but he didn't bow his head or make any movement of deference. "It's not."

I could hear his heart speeding up with each passing second. When he looked at me, his eyes were wide and searching. This might be familiar territory for me, but he was a novice when it came to war. I had enough experience with combat to know inexperience was a good way to get killed.

And I couldn't afford for Cade to get killed. Not because of the loss of a million dollars but because I needed him. I *wanted*—I cut off the thought, unwilling to promise anything for a man I hadn't even known three weeks ago.

There were four gargoyles. One was injured; the other three circled. I watched their patterns for just long enough to tell that they were guarding the injured one, protecting it as best they could.

"How many of you are here?" I asked the dryad.

The elder tree paused, her words taking longer than I liked. Battle was always a matter of seconds, and we were wasting the only advantage we had.

"Five," the elder tree said.

"Can all of you fight?" I asked.

"Yes," the tree said.

"For now, keep yourselves and the other two mages safe," I said. "Cade and I will take care of the rest."

"We will?" Cade asked.

I grinned at him. "We're the dream team. We can do anything."

"I'm sorry, are we a nineties basketball team? Is Michael Jordan around here and I'm just not aware of it?" Cade raised an eyebrow, arch and annoyed, but I could hear his heart pounding in his chest, hear the carefully controlled fear.

"You're Jordan, I'm Scottie Pippin, and we can do this," I said.

Then I was off, Cade behind me, moving swiftly. When we reached the SUVs and the mages hiding behind the doors, Cade shouted, "Protect the dryads!"

They were so focused on the gargoyles our sudden appearance startled the mages, and one of them let loose their spell early, the magic exploding wildly against one of the gargoyles. It chipped some of the stone, dust drifting down, but didn't do any real damage.

“Prince Bartlett!” The older of the two gestured. “You should get out of here. I’ve never fought creatures like this.”

“Leave them to us. Take the dryads back to the house.” He lifted up his hand, and a black net flew into the air, wrapping around one of the gargoyles and dragging it down.

The mage gaped, his mouth working for a moment. “My prince, I will not abandon you.”

“Now!” Cade ordered. A gargoyle swooped down. I wasn’t shifted, but I could feel it under my skin, the strength, the pop of bone and muscle that made me stronger, faster, able to do more than my human body should be able to.

I leapt up and wrapped my arms around its wings. As I bore it down, I heard the pops of mages disappearing.

Gargoyles were creatures made of stone. There was some argument about whether they were even sentient or just creatures ruled by the magic that had breathed life into them. They came in multiple shapes and forms, but these ones looked like the classical ones you’d find on cathedrals: massive wings, demonic faces, clawed hands and feet.

The one I fought had eyes that were larger than its face supported, and sharp teeth snapped at me as it tried to shake me loose. The two of us plunged into the earth, its claws and weight digging a deep groove in the soft forest soil.

I leapt up immediately, pointing at it. “A net!”

Cade didn’t need to be told twice. He thrust his hand forward, and a net sprang into existence, slamming over the gargoyle.

It struggled but couldn’t get up. That left us with three remaining gargoyles. They shrieked, spiraling higher and higher in the sky until they were like carrion eaters circling a carcass.

“The spell you used to melt the manacles,” I said shortly.

Cade nodded, immediately understanding. “How are you going to get them close enough?”

I looked down at the gargoyle at my feet. It snapped at me, tearing at the magic, but it was impossible for the creature to break free. Looking back up at the three circling gargoyles, I made a face. I didn't like what I was about to do, but I would do it anyway.

I slammed my foot down on the creature's leg.

My foot cracked the stonework, and I felt the reverberation up my leg. Despite my werewolf strength, even I couldn't break solid stone easily. The circling gargoyles plunged, heading straight for me, but Cade was ready. The spell flew from his hand, landing true on one of the gargoyles. It slithered across his body, a tattooed line like graffiti marring the stonework.

In its wake, it left molten rock falling to the forest floor, burning patches on the ground.

The gargoyle screamed, loud enough that trees trembled around us. It rolled its body, the molten bits of rock flying to the trees. My eyes widened. California was always a tinderbox—one spark and the entire Bartlett forest would go up in flames.

“Do not worry. You take care of the creatures. I will guard the forest as I have for two hundred years.” Someone spoke next to me, and I spun.

The woman was tall, taller than me, and as thin as a narrow tree trunk. Whorls and lines of grain marked her polished wooden flesh. Her hair was a long cascade of green leaves.

“Elder,” I greeted, making an assumption based on her voice.

The gargoyle with Cade's magic crawling over it crashed into one of the trees, dragging its claws down the trunk, leaving deep grooves and burning wood in its wake.

The other two gargoyles immediately plunged, circling it, trying to get it back aloft.

I was ready. My legs ached with the desire to shift. Every part of me wanted to be a wolf. I needed the sharp claws and

tearing teeth, the strength in my muscles and the endurance of my body.

When the gargoyle came crashing to the ground, I leapt on top of it, grabbing hold of one of its wings and wrenching it off entirely. The creature flipped itself over, its claws facing me, its mouth opening in a scream as its eyes flashed. But I was ready.

I slammed its own wing down on one of its claws, using the heft of the stone to smash its paw. It shattered, and the gargoyle went still for a moment before curling in on itself, shrieking and thrashing.

“Net!” I shouted, not even turning to look at Cade.

I felt the magic coming up behind me and leapt out of the way as it landed on top of the gargoyle. Immediately, something hit my back, and I was thrown into the undergrowth. Branches scraped my arms and face, and I struggled to turn. But something was on top of me, digging its claws into my back, wrapping sharp teeth around my neck.

If I was in wolf form, I would know exactly what to do, and I felt a hint of fur emerge, but not enough to bring forth the full wolf.

Careless, Basil hissed in my ear. Then the snake moved—I felt it as it left my throat, and the gargoyle flew backward, thrashing as Basil burned his way across the gargoyle’s paw.

I grabbed hold of the wing I had torn free and used it like a shield, running forward and slamming into the gargoyle, my entire weight falling on top of it. I felt a crack, but that wasn’t enough.

I extended my hand, pressing it on top of Basil where the snake was moving across the gargoyle’s torso. The snake slithered up my arm immediately.

“Fire,” I said. The snake understood, squeezing tightly around my forearm.

I pulled my arm back, then slammed it forward. It was enough to break bones, pummel organs, do damage.

It was *not* enough to break through solid stone. But Basil had strengthened my arm with magic, and when I hit the gargoyle, there was an explosion. Pure magic warped the air between us.

I was thrown backward, hitting the tree trunk hard. The gargoyle had been fully decapitated, its limbs going limp, its head rolling to the side.

The remaining gargoyle screamed, diving toward me, but a net hit it, sending it off-balance, trapping it against a tree trunk.

Tree limbs wrapped around it, tighter and tighter, even as the creature thrashed and screamed. Finally, there was a horrible crack, and the gargoyle went still.

The dryad elder stood at the roots of the tree, bracing both hands against the trunk. We had won.

I collapsed down to my knees, my muscles trembling and jumping. A hairline fracture drew a crooked line of pain up one of my arms, from the bones in my hand straight to my shoulder.

Looking around, I searched for Cade. He leaned against one of the cars, sweat dampening his hair, turning his pale skin waxy. I was across the field of battle in only a few steps, standing next to him, taking some of his weight.

“Are you okay?” I asked stupidly.

“I’m fine,” he said shortly. “Just polishing the car with my ass.”

“I’m going to have to speak with your manager,” I said. “You’re missing a few spots. Careless.”

He’s used too much magic, too quickly, Basil hissed. *Help him.*

I wasn’t even sure how to begin to help him. I leaned against him, taking his weight, letting my fingers linger as I looped one of his arms over my shoulders.

He slumped, trembling against me. This was the first time I had ever seen him weak. Even when he was losing control,

shattering windows, his magic spilling off his skin like ink, he was never weak.

“Can you hold out for the rest of the mages to get here?” I asked, my voice low so the dryad elder wouldn’t be able to hear.

“Yes.” He swallowed hard, and he got his feet back under him, straightening. With his knees locked, he trembled, gasping in enormous breaths of air.

The dryad elder circled the gargoyles, observing them with dull wooden eyes. Finally, she approached us, and I felt Cade tense against me. I used the hand wrapped around his waist to pull him closer, give him stability.

“Prince Bartlett. I am glad to see you again, glad to have your support in this battle.” She nodded her head.

“I’m sorry the guards I sent to protect you fled to the house. They needed to alert the rest of us.” Cade’s voice was rough, but it strengthened the more he talked.

“I think we both understand the guards were not there to protect *us*,” the elder said dryly. She shook her head, leaves rustling. “Since I have you alone, I must tell you. This is not the first time we have been attacked recently.”

Cade straightened on his own, his brows drawing together. “What do you mean? Other gargoyles?”

“This is the first time we have seen these creatures. They are not native to these parts. But humans and... something we do not recognize are carving up our forest. Tearing it apart.” It was hard to read her expression, the wood giving it a statuesque stillness.

“What did they say when you confronted them?” Cade asked.

“That is the crux of it. We have not been able to catch them. They come, destroy trees precious to us, and disappear before we can find them.”

Cade inhaled another breath, ready to ask more questions, but there was a loud pop, and twenty mages with a dozen

shifted werewolves appeared.

The wolves immediately circled the captive gargoyles. They were led by a massive wolf, his shoulder coming up to my elbow. He was gray, with bright yellow eyes, spittle dripping from his open lips.

By scent, I knew who he was: Tyson.

Isaac jogged across the battlefield, taking in the shredded trees, the smoking bits of rock on the ground. “You took out four gargoyles by yourself?”

Cade’s face was just as stony as the gargoyles. Leon appeared at his elbow, a familiar wolf at his side.

“Take the gargoyles in. Lock them up as best you can.” Cade turned to Leon. “Summon the council of war.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY

The war council was held in the same room as the rest of the council sessions. Only six people were invited, several who weren't on the house council, and the rest of House Bartlett mages dismissed until Cade decided on a course of action.

Petrona took her usual seat, but Sonja sat in the seat to Leon's right. Isaac was there at Cade's insistence, despite Leon's reminder that his position was informal and he wasn't on house council. He chose the chair to Cade's left and jerked his head to the seat on Cade's right.

I frowned at him. I'd been watching, and it was very clear that werewolves were not supposed to sit at the council table. Isaac raised both of his eyebrows, and I shrugged.

Cade, who hadn't seemed to be paying attention to us at all, tapped his finger pointedly at the spot next to him. I pulled out the chair, the legs scraping loudly on the floor, and sat.

The older guard who had been with the dryads arrived with another woman behind him. Pale robes dragged on the floor as she walked, and her eyes seemed to stare beyond us even as she nodded to the other mages at the table.

The guard guided her to a seat before taking his own, and I struggled to remember their names. Cade helped solve the issue.

"Finley, report," he said. Sweat had dried to his brow, leaving Cade's skin tacky and pale.

Across the table, Leon looked over Cade's face, a tense expression tightening his mouth. With a gesture of his fingers, he wrote something in the air, the words disappearing into nothingness.

Within seconds, a plate of cheese, crackers, and some fruit appeared in front of Cade. Absently, Cade grabbed a cube of cheese and put it in his mouth.

Finley stood, clearing his throat. He wore the high-necked shirt of a mage, but everything else about his outfit spoke of combat professionalism. The cargo pants, the weapons holster at his waist, the heavy boots.

He was either military or trained by one of the mercenary units specializing in magecraft. His blond hair had been shorn close to the scalp, and his eyes were almost green, with hints of light brown, giving them a muddy appearance.

“We met the dryads at the border of our territory. They were ready, although they had come on foot as we expected. We invited them to ride in the cars, which they did. About a mile before we were attacked, the cars began acting irregularly: radios jammed, electronics shorting out.”

“Magecraft?” Cade asked.

“We thought initially it might have been something the dryads were doing. A magic-based EMP or other paramagical attack. Then the cars stopped altogether. We instructed the dryads to remain in the vehicles, and when we got out, the gargoyles attacked. I instructed Henson and Young to return to the compound and alert security to what was happening. We tried to fight them off, and with the dryads' help, we managed to hold our own until you arrived.” Finley finished with a nod.

“Was there any indication where the gargoyles had come from?” Cade asked.

“No.” Finley shook his head. “They were waiting in the trees for us. They didn't attack until we were all out of the vehicles. We would have returned to the vehicles, reinforced them with magic, but the gargoyles made it clear they weren't going to allow that.”

I thought about the crashed car, flattened by tons of rock landing on top of it.

“Gargoyles aren’t native to the forest,” I said. “They’re city creatures. They need buildings. Are you sure they don’t belong to any of the buildings on the property?”

“No. No one in our family line has the ability to weave life into inanimate objects. Weaving is a precise art. House Doyle used to be able to do it, and I’ve heard House Morrison has taken on some mages with the ability.” Cade looked around the table. “Leon, have any of the buildings on our property installed gargoyles recently?”

“No, my prince.” Leon shook his head. “And I’m greatly troubled if they came from outside the territory. Nothing should be able to get in or out. Our wards should protect us from even woven objects like gargoyles.”

“Wait, explain it to me,” I said. “I understand that the wards prevent any sentient being from entering or leaving without permission, but what about everything else? Tree limbs that grow over the boundary? Squirrels that come looking for nuts on your side of the border? I mean, it’s not like you have lines of dead raccoons around your property.”

“No,” Cade shook his head. “The boundary prevents anything with a human’s level of intelligence or anything magical. Gargoyles—though made of rock—*would* count as magic.”

“Did you sense any magic when the car was initially acting up?” I asked Finley. “Or did you sense a lack of magic?”

That had been one of the things that Cade had mentioned when I asked him about the car explosion. He had said the only reason he knew to put up his own shields was because he had felt a lack of magic, like a fish suddenly being thrust into the desert.

“I didn’t notice anything different,” Finley said. His eyes were slightly narrowed, staring at the distance just over my shoulder, as though he was reviewing the past few hours, searching for the feeling I had mentioned. “Up until we saw

the gargoyles, we were focused on the threat the dryads presented.”

“Lynn, is there any chance someone created a hole in our wards?” Cade asked.

The woman who’d come in with the guard had been staring off into space, her eyes fixed somewhere over Sonja’s head. She seemed to come back to herself visibly. As she looked around the table, her presence was a tangible weight when she focused on the rest of us. The heavy attention made me shift in my chair, adjusting my seat.

When she spoke, her voice was featherlight, but the power she wielded took up the entire room. I had almost no sensitivity to magic but could feel the press of her magic against my bones, wrapping tight around me, binding the cells of my body together.

“There are no holes in our wards,” she said firmly.

I twitched. I knew there was at least one hole in the wards.

“Is it possible that another house created a hole temporarily and then allowed it to heal naturally?” Cade asked.

“There are *no holes in our wards*,” she said, her voice echoing in the chamber. I wanted to raise my hands to my ears, even though she hadn’t been shouting. Further down the table, Sonja winced, her head jerking to the side. Even Leon made a face, rubbing at his ear.

Cade blinked, seemingly unaffected. “I am not challenging your power, nor your attachment to the magic. But we have four gargoyles who say that our wards are incomplete.”

“You know what I have promised. You know what it would cost me if there were any gaps in the magic.” Lynn hissed her words, her eyes turning silver. “There are no holes in our wards.”

Cade’s lips compressed, his blue eyes narrowed. Lynn brushed long hair over her shoulder, shaking her head. Incrementally, I felt the pressure around me lessen. She’d

removed a few handfuls of the mountain of granite she'd buried us all under.

"If there aren't any holes in our wards, that only means that one of the other houses has found a way to transport *through* our wards," Sonja said. Her eyes flicked to Lynn. "Which is *their* strength, not *our* weakness. If that's so, we must trust that this was merely a diversion, a test of the ability."

Finley nodded. "They sent through the gargoyles because the gargoyles can't die. Which means they're going to send through something sentient soon."

"Finley, call up anyone on staff with you," Cade said. "Leon, activate all our defensive magic, every alert system we have. Miles, coordinate with the other consorts to run patrols through the forest. Sonja, can you work with Lynn to investigate what sort of magic they would need to be using to teleport through our wards?"

"Yes, of course," Sonja said, turning to Lynn. She looked between me and Leon, a quick glance before raising her chin. "Tyson would be happy to round up all available consorts and schedule the patrols. He knows everyone's abilities."

The feint was obvious. Cade had given me an order, and she was trying to take it back for herself. If Tyson made the schedule, he would be the head of the House Bartlett consorts, and I'd be relegated to a supporting role, a side character who lost their one line in rewrites.

"Have him bring all the consorts to the dining room." I bared my teeth in something close to a smile. "I'll shower before we meet."

Sonja opened her mouth, her eyes narrowed, breath coming short for a moment. Before she could respond, Cade stood.

"That's all for now. We'll reconvene tomorrow morning with any new information based on what Sonja and Lynn find." Cade looked at Leon. "Please have Jesaiah go over the

grounds for any evidence of tampering. He can take anyone from the staff he trusts.”

At the dismissal, the other members rose, nodding awkwardly before teleporting out. Cade slumped heavily back in his seat, rubbing his temples.

“Leon always takes charge of these things,” he said. “I remember after my parents were killed, the estate was locked down for days.”

“He seemed to let you take over now,” I said. I rested my back against the chair, shifting uncomfortably at how hard the wood was, the carvings a kind of torture where they dug into the tight muscles.

“I suppose this must be what it’s like the first time you see your parents as people and not as gods.” Cade pressed his palm flat to the table, and I saw a curl of tattoo spiral on his wrist. I reached out, touching my finger to it, watching it dart away under the cuff of his shirt.

“You saw Leon as a god?” I asked, tracing over his wrist. He turned his hand, and I drew a long line over his palm, watching his finger twitch, his breath catch.

“No. Obviously not. But all of them, all the counselors, even Sonja, they all seemed older and wiser than me. I could never match them. I could never lead them. How could I? When I was a child and they were them?” He seemed to struggle over it, his hand opening and closing.

“You did fine.” I looked at the chairs that were now empty. “There *are* holes in the wards. Jesaiah shoved me through one.”

“I know,” Cade said.

“Why is Lynn so insistent that there aren’t?” I asked.

“Her family is tied as closely to the house as mine is. She inherited the wards. They’re tied to her bloodline, but more importantly, they’re tied to her life. Just like the laws of hospitality would have killed me if the dryads had been murdered on House Bartlett territory, she would die if the wards didn’t do their fullest to protect House Bartlett.” Cade

stared at Lynn's empty chair. "Holes in the wards would feel like holes in her own soul. She wouldn't be able to bear it."

"Unless Lynn convinced the magic that the holes were protecting House Bartlett," I said. When Cade turned to me, I held up both hands at his wide eyes. I looked away before I could get lost in the blue ocean of them. "If she's one of the people trying to kill you, then for some reason, she must have convinced the magic that your death is better for House Bartlett."

We stared at each other, and Cade's jaw trembled before he clenched tightly. He stood, sending the chair flying backward, crashing onto the floor behind him. Turning away from me, he clenched both fists but flexed them open when I put a hand on his shoulder.

"Let's meet together after you deal with the werewolves," he said.

I followed him out of the room, not surprised when we ended up back in his bedroom. He went to the closet while I took a shower, rinsing off the blood and debris from the forest. A chunk of rock washed out of my hair, and I stared at it in the drain before kicking it to the side and turning off the water.

Cade was gone when I emerged, but he had left behind a fresh set of clothes. When I touched my finger to them, I saw a hint of a dark line moving, magic he had left behind embedded in the threads.

Clean, well-dressed, my chin itching from the shave I needed, I strode out of the room, inhaling deeply and trying to imbue every movement with the strength of an alpha. Alphas didn't fight for control, my mother had said. Alphas owned control from the moment they stepped into a room.

When I entered the dining room, the wolves went silent. None of them were sitting in the chairs. The kitchen had provided trays of food and small plates, and everyone was spread to corners and along the walls.

I saw Jay huddled together with Coral and Theo. Nia was on her own, picking at a plate of cheese and crackers. Her eyes

looked me over before she turned back to her plate, dismissing me. I would have felt insulted, except she kept glancing at me out of the corner of her eye, the way I might look at another alpha who came into my territory, unsure if I was going to give a black eye or get one.

Tyson had his group of followers near the head of the table, and when he saw me, he raised his chin. It wasn't a greeting; it was a challenge, and I ignored it in favor of gesturing at Jay.

He immediately came over. "What do you need?"

"I need someone to take notes," I said low, even though every wolf in the room could hear me. "I know most of the names, but I'm still missing some."

"If you don't know the names, you can't possibly know capabilities. I'll just do the assignments. You can sign your name at the bottom if you want to get credit like a teacher's pet," Tyson sneered.

"If I put my name on a homework assignment you turn in, Tyson, I would fail the class." I gritted my teeth in a show of mock humor. Then, I stepped toward him.

He tensed, ready for a fight, but before I reached him, I pulled out the chair to the right of the head of the table. Everyone stared.

I sat. "Coral, you and Tyson will be team one. Go along as much of the ward line as you can. Look for any holes or signs that something has broken through the wards. Does the house have trackers for the wolves?"

It was a common practice in packs that had children. It was a lot easier to follow a GPS tracker than try and trace a puppy by scent alone. You would be back and forth three dozen times before you caught them.

"We have clips for the collars," Jay said immediately.

"Good. Each team will use one. Shifts are four hours long. At the end, the next team will use the tracker to meet up with the previous shift. Exchange information on-site, then return to the house and check in with me. Any questions?" The wolves

who weren't standing in a tight-knit group with Tyson shook their heads. Tyson's crew turned to him, waiting for his verdict.

I didn't say anything else, staring into his eyes, waiting for him to make a decision. Finally, he nodded.

"Go now. I'll continue making teams. Team two will meet you at"—I glanced at Jay because I didn't have a watch or my phone. He flashed his phone in my direction—"seven tonight."

"You got it," Coral said. She raised her chin at Tyson. "Let's go."

The two of them left, although by the heavy stomp of Tyson's feet, he wasn't happy.

Jay took notes on his phone as I divided up the rest of the wolves by those loyal to Tyson and those who had been standing apart from him and his little brat pack.

"Go back to your mages. Get as much sleep as you possibly can. I don't think this attack is going to be the only one." I stood, surprised when most of the werewolves stayed. "Was there anything else?"

I glanced at Jay, but he was staring at his phone, so I looked at Nia. She raised an eyebrow, scrunching her face together and shaking her head once like she was trying to dislodge a pesky fly.

For a woman who didn't say anything, she definitely made her opinions clear.

"I know most of you don't know me. I'm new to the house, and what happened with Jesaiah was regrettable. But I'm here to protect the house. I'm here to keep Cade safe and anyone else who claims House Bartlett as sanctuary." I looked around the room, meeting the eyes of each wolf. "I know what it's like to lose a pack, to lose a family. I came here with no last name, no pack name. I am going to do *everything* in my power to keep this house and this family safe."

I glanced at Nia, who pursed her lips and tilted her head, offering half a shrug. It would do.

“Go home. Sleep. You will be called to protect the house soon.” I watched as wolves trickled out. They looked a little more relaxed, relieved. Even the wolves that had stood with Tyson seemed to have heard me.

I ran over the words in my head, like tracing my thumb over a river stone. I was trying to keep the family that had killed my own safe? I was trying to protect the house that had slaughtered my parents?

But when I thought about House Bartlett, I didn't think about the murder of my parents, the unmarked graves their bones had likely been tossed into. I thought about Cade's blue eyes, the frozen blue that I could drown in.

“You gave me a partner and a shift. Theo too,” Jay said when we were alone.

“You're a wolf of House Bartlett. Is there a reason I shouldn't have?” I raised an eyebrow at him.

Jay looked down, speaking into his phone. “I'm weak. I'm not like the other wolves.”

“I don't know who told you that. You're a wolf of House Bartlett. You're one of *my* wolves. And it doesn't matter who told you that you're weak because you *aren't*.” I watched as Jay shook his head, pulling his lips back from very human teeth. He sniffed in and out shortly but still wouldn't meet my eyes. Standing, I gestured for him to follow me. We walked up the stairs, through the house, all the way to Cade's bedroom.

At the door, I hesitated, then opened it, gesturing for Jay to enter. It was the only place in the house I knew we'd have privacy, and Cade made it seem like he let in servants, so clearly, it would be fine if Jay came in for a moment.

With the door closed, I put both hands on his shoulders. “I am an alpha. It is my *job* to know the wolves under me. The wolves in my pack.”

At my words, Jay startled, trying to tug away, but I didn't let him, staring into his eyes.

“I *see* you, Jay. I see your strength. If every wolf in a pack is powerful physically, there would be no pack. There would

be *fights*. You are one of the wolves that keep a pack together. You have empathy and mercy and kindness. That's the only sort of strength that matters."

Jay's mouth fell open, his chest rising and falling, but he was no longer struggling to escape. Tears leaked from the corner of his eyes. Finally, he nodded.

I let go. "Take as long as you need. I'm going to go get freshened up."

Jay sniffled. "Oh, yeah, the *soirée*."

I stilled. "Are you *kidding* me?"

CHAPTER
THIRTY-ONE

The soirée was for the dryads. Apparently, even with the whole *murder attempt*, House Bartlett was pressing on with an enormous party to celebrate the dryads' arrival. The house usually had events for any visiting dignitaries—politicians, other houses, power players.

It had been a focus on the council meetings, but I'd thought that it would have been postponed until everyone's adrenaline had settled or at least until we could confirm dessert wouldn't be interrupted by a rival house sending in *more* sentient statues.

As Jay explained how the balls usually worked, I stared at him, wondering what kind of dinner my parents had attended. Had they danced before their execution?

I realized I hadn't heard the last couple of minutes of his explanation, and I excused myself to the bathroom, splashing cold water on my face until I felt present again.

When I came out, Jay was standing near the window, gazing out at the grounds. He jerked, startled by the door opening. "Sorry. Lost in thought."

I waved him off. "What will I be expected to do there?"

"It's not like a formal house dinner," Jay said. "Usually, only the consorts of important members attend."

"So, Jesaiah, Tyson, and me?" I guessed.

Jay nodded. "Tyson probably thought that you were purposefully nudging him out of the honor by sending him out

first.”

I tried not to wince. The antagonism between me and Tyson was on both sides, but I couldn't afford to feed the fire, not if we were going to be fighting battles together.

“I'll let you get ready,” Jay said. He rushed out of the room, closing the door behind him. He'd left a note on the desk in the corner, a list of all the different werewolf pairings I had put together. Each consort pair was marked with their shift start time, and I felt grateful that at least he had been paying attention.

Shaking my head, I looked around the room, then glanced down at my own clothes. They would have to do. I didn't feel comfortable taking anything from Cade's closet without his permission. I needed to find him and update him.

Pocketing the list of werewolves, I left the room, using my nose and ears to track Cade down. If he was in whatever secret room council sessions were held in, it was a lost cause, but I should at least be able to track him to the library entrance.

I found him sitting in the library, bare feet digging into the thick carpeting under one of the sitting chairs. In a different world, I could sit next to him, let him rest his bare feet on my lap as I massaged his calves, paid homage to the perfection of each toe.

When he saw me, he blinked slowly, as though he was coming back to himself. Then he straightened, looking behind me before relaxing into the chair.

“Just me,” I said unnecessarily.

He nodded tightly but bent to put his shoes back on.

I updated him about the patrols and found out from him that Jesaiah had cleared the grounds, the areas directly around the house and farm.

He gestured at the book he had been reading. “From what I can tell, gargoyles shouldn't be able to survive too far away from their buildings or nesting grounds. Whoever sent the gargoyles here intended for them to die.”

I frowned. “Nesting grounds? Could they have moved the gargoyles nearby? Given them a tree or something to guard?”

“I thought about that.” Cade flipped open the book and held it out to me. I skimmed as he summarized. “It has to be buildings, something about the magic involved. People have tried different things—outbuildings, trees, plants, even other statues. None of it lasts for very long.”

“So unless they figured out an entirely new way to make gargoyles...”

“They expected the gargoyles to die before we could get any information out of them,” Cade said.

I cursed, shutting the book and handing it back to him. “We need to question the gargoyles before the magic that’s animating them disintegrates. *Can* you question gargoyles? Or is it literally like talking to someone with a head full of rocks? What do they even talk about with each other?”

“I’m sure they have all the gossip on pigeons and whoever else lives a hundred feet off the ground.” Cade shrugged. “We can try questioning them now and see if they can tell us more than which pigeons are sitting on eggs and which window washer isn’t doing a good job.”

He pulled on a short dark coat, the interior lined in fluorescent purple. It turned the outfit from casual to formal instantly. I followed him as he walked out of the library, but before we could even leave the house, Leon stepped in front of him.

“Prince Bartlett, thank goodness I found you. Dinner is about to begin, and the dryads are getting antsy without your presence.”

Cade waved his hand. “I need to question the gargoyles before any dinner. I’m sure the dryads will understand—”

“They might understand, but the rest of the house will not,” Leon said. “Ask Isaac to question them, or I can go myself. But the house needs to see you, see that you are safe and that you have emerged successful from your battle.”

Cade stared at him, his shoulders stiffening, his spine going straighter.

Leon leaned forward, bowing his head slightly. “Please, my prince. This is your opportunity to win over some of those who see you as an echo of former kings.”

The words seemed to hit something inside Cade, and he nodded, swallowing. When he opened his mouth to speak, he had to clear his throat several times before he could say, “All right, Leon.”

He turned, striding down the hall, and I had to jog to catch up with him.

Cade wasn’t looking where he was going, instead typing into his phone. I glanced at the screen and saw it was a chat open with Isaac. Cade turned to head into the dining room, and I caught his elbow.

He startled, jerking away from me, his eyes wide. He fumbled his phone, and it dropped to the marble floor with a sharp crack. I bent, picking it up, offering it over to him with two fingers, and waiting for him to take it.

“The ballroom,” I murmured.

After all of the council sessions I had been dragged to, even I knew where the dinner was being held. It made me wonder what Cade had been thinking about in those meetings if he hadn’t been paying attention to the details at all.

He shook his head, face freezing in a neutral expression. It gave him a pissed-off look, and he snapped, “Of course.”

“I didn’t even know I was invited to this shindig,” I said. “Did my invite get lost in the mail, or does Jay have his information wrong?”

“You were on the guest list. You know how the Postal Service is these days.” Cade gritted his jaw.

The ballroom was on the far side of the house, taking up more square footage than my past two apartments combined. I had only visited it once, during the tour that Jay had given me. Stepping into it now, I was struck by the opulence on display.

Mage lights floated in the air, and the entire ceiling looked like a sky of stars. Music played from invisible speakers, and the buffet stretched the entire length of the room. There were tables set around the room in discreet corners, allowing for some people to sit, but clearly, the intention was for everyone to be able to move freely around the room, and gossip as much as possible.

More mages than I had ever seen at House Bartlett were in attendance. They wore robes, long and flowing, and more modern apparel, like Cade. Some had used magic to alter their appearance, making butterflies flap their wings in their hair or their dress glisten like flowing water.

A man in the center of the room wore a white suit that gleamed like a pearl and changed color as he moved, going from pale white to brilliant blue and forest green. He had a crowd around him, and when he turned, I recognized Brett Kulsa.

“Kulsa,” I noted.

Cade’s cheek twitched. “He’s fairly popular. His family has managed to become quite wealthy, even without extensive access to the Bartlett coffers.”

“Is this everyone in House Bartlett?” I looked around the room. There were dozens and dozens of people. When I did a quick estimate, I came up with a hundred and fifty, maybe slightly less.

“Everyone except the children,” Cade said.

“And you guys aren’t concerned at all about House Morrison? Because by the numbers, they’re twice, maybe three times as big as you.” I shook my head again. “You better hope you don’t have to go hand to hand against them. They could take you out two or three to one. It doesn’t matter how weak Leon thinks they are, a chair to the back of the head works just as well as a spell in a fistfight.”

Cade tilted his head, rolling his eyes to me. “Fortunately for *all* of us, mage houses are not in the habit of getting into WWE fights.”

“Oh, I know how it works. You guys all do dance numbers, ballet moves. I saw the musical.” I hummed a line from *West Side Story* under my breath.

Cade stifled a laugh. “Everyone knows it’s not ballet when we attack other houses. It’s tap dance.”

“How could I forget? Fred Astaire, the last great mage warrior.” I grinned at Cade.

“Prince Bartlett!” Kulsa’s voice rose from the center of the room. “Our returning hero who single-handedly took out four gargoyles by himself. Let us raise a glass to him!”

From the titter that circled the room, Kulsa was clearly mocking Cade. However, he did raise his literal glass.

“To Prince Bartlett!” The cry was taken up, and Cade’s face turned stony.

His jaw tight, he nodded and swallowed twice before saying, “Thank you.”

“Regale us! Tell us all about how you managed to take out gargoyles by yourself. Finley is being so tight-lipped about it.” The smirk on Kulsa’s lips made it a challenge, a subtle rumor he could imply with a look. He didn’t even have to give it voice to make the implication clear: Cade had done nothing, and Finley had done everything and was letting his prince take the credit.

“Tell us!” The voices echoed through the room, and I saw snickers hidden behind glasses, sly eyes exchanging amused looks.

Cade’s shoulders went back. His body grew straighter and straighter, muscles tightening.

“I’ll tell you,” I drawled. I let my eyes sweep over the room like I would look over a pen of fatted sheep. “If you want to hear the real story.”

I finally brought my eyes to Kulsa, my lips curled up, but my eyes reminded him exactly what I had done to him the last time we were alone. I remembered the grind of his bones, the

way he had yelped and turned tail to run like the coward he was.

His eye twitched, his smile turning wooden. “Oh? Were you there?”

“Cade teleported us halfway across the property to a fire road. As soon as we emerged, we saw four gargoyles, one injured. They were full-size, not the miniature ones you can buy in a gift shop. These had been designed to protect skyscrapers. They’d already crushed one of the vehicles. I helped lure them into traps, and Cade used his magic to net all four of them and keep them down until the cavalry arrived.” I watched the faces in the room, looking for anyone who looked out of place, anyone whose expression didn’t quite match the others.

The scent of dark forest entered the room, old trees with roots plunging deep into the earth. Kulsa’s eyes flicked behind me, his eyes widening.

I turned to the dryads. All five of them had entered, their wooden skin shining, their green hair rustling in an invisible breeze. Their clothing was carved into their skin, patterns and markings that covered every inch of skin except their faces.

“Isn’t that how it happened, Elder?” I asked.

“You give yourself and Prince Bartlett far too little credit,” the elder said. “He managed to turn one of the gargoyles to molten stone, and you tore the wings off another.”

Cade finally seemed to come back to life, the windup boy given a direction to march in. He offered his arm to the dryad. “Would you care for a plate of food?”

She placed her arm on top of his and allowed herself to be led into the crowd of mages.

The dryads stood a foot taller than any of the humans in the room. Even I had to look up to see the face of the nearest one when I offered over my arm.

“Can I, uh, take you to dinner?” I asked the dryad.

I had missed most of the important parts of being a teenager. I had definitely missed prom and junior prom, any of the dances that would have given me some context for how to formally invite someone to an expensive buffet and awkward slow dancing.

Luckily for me, the dryad didn't seem well versed in formalities either. He took my arm, placing his own on top of it, elbow to hand. To my surprise, the wood felt warm.

He leaned down so that he was speaking quietly. "Yes, despite appearances, we *are* flesh and blood."

"But is that comfortable for you? Doesn't your wood dry out?" I led him through the path that Cade and the elder carved through the groups of mages, meeting the gaze of anyone whose eyes caught mine. They always looked away first.

I could hear soft footfalls behind me, barely audible. The other dryads were following us. Conversation began quietly, rising in volume only after the dryads passed.

"It is how it is. Is it comfortable for you to wear a collar?" the dryad asked.

Self-consciously, I raised a hand to my throat, even though I knew I wasn't actually wearing the collar, just a high-necked shirt that guarded where Basil was looped around my neck.

"I'm sorry, I overstep. We dryads do not believe in ownership. So, the mages' habit of claiming another as their property is one we find difficult to bear."

We stopped where Cade and the elder had turned to face each other, near the table, but not lingering over the food.

"Oak," the elder said sharply. "We have spoken about this."

The dryad's face was blank, nothing except a vague curve in the corners of his lips, but he bowed his head. "I apologize in earnest."

"Do you really?" Sonja asked, approaching.

Her robes were long, the blue color trailing behind her, leaving sparkles on the polished floor that disappeared after a

few moments. On her brow, something silver glowed. It wasn't quite a crown, but the hint of one, the indication that one should be there.

"I do. We have come in friendship and been accepted in friendship," Oak said. "It is in poor taste to be so critical openly."

"You're apologizing for the words but not for the sentiment," Sonja noted.

"Sonja, have you met the elder tree?" Cade interrupted. He gestured to the dryad next to him.

"The last time I met you, you were but a child, no bigger than my knee," the elder said.

"I don't remember meeting you," Sonja said, frowning.

"But I remember meeting you, Sonja Harvey. Just as I remember meeting your father, your grandfather, and his father before him. Your great-grandfather was the one who planted the tree we hold in the heart of our lands, the one symbolizing the peace that was offered." The dryad nodded her head. "The Harvey family has been friends of ours for generations."

"Friends for generations, yet you are so critical of something integral to House Bartlett," Sonja said.

"Although he should not have spoken, Oak is correct. We abhor ownership." The dryad looked at the buffet table. "Oak, would you make us a plate?"

"You'll find that everything available is edible for you. No meats should be on the table," Cade said.

The dryads took Cade's overture as the change of topic it was. They discussed the foods available on the table with some interest, each clearly trying their best to ignore the gathering crowd.

I couldn't ignore it. After so long as Declan's guard, I was aware of every new person who came close, every new person who wanted to see whatever the drama was going to be between Sonja and the dryads.

When the crowd was large enough, she said, “Surely creatures as old as you have seen generations of consorts. Were any of them unhappy?”

The elder tree turned to look at Sonja. Her face was entirely made of wood, her eyes carved into it. It was impossible to read the expression in her gaze as her eyes trailed over Sonja’s face.

I realized where I had seen the moving wood before. It came from Cade’s door and the chairs in the council room, some long-ago gift from dryads to House Bartlett.

“A great many wolves have been made unhappy by wearing a collar when they did not want to. You remember consortship as it is today, a meeting of two mostly equal parties—given that one has more power and more money and more freedom than the other. I remember when wolves would be hunted to the ground, stalked until they could walk no further, muzzled and branded by magic.” The dryad accepted the plate of food that Oak brought back. “I remember a great many wolves who were unhappy, even at House Bartlett.”

Sonja went pale, her skin almost the same color as Cade’s. She opened her mouth, but I moved forward automatically. It was my job to protect Cade and his guests. If Sonja hurt them, it was Cade who would pay.

The movement brought her attention to me, and she smirked, lips pulling back.

“You’re right. In the past, it was a gruesome sport. However, there are wolves today that choose to be consorts. Like Cade’s new pet.” She gestured to me. “Well, Miles? Why don’t you explain to the dryads why you chose to be a consort? You speak on it so eloquently and wear your collar so proudly.”

The snicker that filtered around the room wrapped tension around my neck, choking me almost as tightly as if Basil had decided to squeeze. There was only so long Cade and I could go with the pretense that I was still getting used to the collar because I was *never* going to wear it. That was a step too far,

even if it meant never finding out what I needed to know to free myself from the past.

“You’re right, Sonja. It is awkward for me to wear a collar.” I brought my hand to my neck. “But the fact that I don’t want to look like I get fashion tips from Hot Topic doesn’t change why I decided to become a consort.”

Wolves could hear everything. I could hear the shift of mages, their heavy cloaks and expensive clothes sliding against their skin. I could hear all of the different heartbeats, the soft rattle in someone’s chest, the food someone was now afraid to chew, given how quiet it was.

And near the wall, I could hear another wolf. The sound was audibly different than the humans. The heart beat slower, the breaths more even, the sub-audible growl I could almost feel in my feet.

Jesaiah.

“I decided to become a consort because I met someone worth sacrificing myself for,” I said. Cade’s heart suddenly sped, and I could smell him next to me, a spike of panic and fear that I ignored. “Because I understood protecting House Bartlett would mean protecting something greater than myself. It would mean finding a cause that was worth my time, my devotion, my life. Wolves spend our entire lives looking for something greater than ourselves. Some find it in their pack. I found it here.”

I thought about that moment when I had given assignments, when I had been an alpha of the pack that wasn’t a pack. Everything in me had sung with the truth of it. I wanted that, more than I wanted anything else. I wanted my mother’s ring on my own finger. Emperor Wolf. *Lupus Imperator.*

Sonja cleared her throat and offered three slow claps. “Well spoken. Quite rousing. There, you see? *That* is what consorts are today.”

The elder tree nodded, but there were grooves carved in the wood between her brows and beside her lips. “As you say.”

Leaves rustled, and one of the dryads made her way close to me. She bent near my ear. “The elder dryad would speak to you in private at your convenience.”

Frowning, I glanced between the dryad next to me and the elder dryad, who had turned back to Cade, speaking about some disease attacking House Bartlett trees. Cade was asking for the dryads’ help examining and curing it.

I hadn’t seen the elder dryad speak with the one who had approached me. I hadn’t even seen the elder dryad glance at her.

Then again, there were rumors that, like the trees they took care of, dryads were able to communicate through their roots, through subtle chemicals they released into the air.

“I will make time for it,” I murmured. Offering my arm to the dryad, I walked back to Cade, standing just behind his shoulder.

Music filtered through the invisible speakers, and several mages took to the dance floor. They clasped hands and began an old-fashioned waltz, moving around the floor like dolls on top of a music box.

Petrona made her way over to us, the click of her walking stick as distinct as a metronome. When she was close enough, she extricated Cade from a conversation with one of the council members about water management. Then she nudged both of us toward the dance floor.

“This would be the time to put some of the rumors to rest, Prince Bartlett,” she murmured.

Cade turned to me, his eyes wide. I shook my head, “I don’t dance.”

“Learn quickly,” Petrona said, her smile masking the insistence in her words. “The king always dances, either with his spouse or his consort.”

I was about to argue again, but Cade grabbed hold of my hand, a slight tremble in his fingers that made them tighten. “Of course, thank you for reminding us.”

He pulled me onto the dance floor, and there was some shuffling until we ended up in something approximating the right position, his hand on my shoulder, mine resting on his back. I could feel the heat through the shirt, the movement of his ribs as he took an uneven breath in.

“Follow my lead,” he muttered, starting an awkward one-two-three-four.

He yanked on my hand like a lead, trying to pull me where he wanted me to go. For a second, I thought about letting him, but then I used my hand at his back to pull him close. No tissue box between us here.

His eyes widened, and he gasped. “What—”

“I said I don’t dance, not that I can’t,” I said, bringing us into a more even box step. His mouth dropped open slightly, and I focused on the curve of his neck so I wouldn’t press my lips against his and take him in front of everyone.

His body was tortuously close to mine, his hand perfectly shaped to fit inside my own. I could feel the warmth, the heat where his skin and mine weren’t touching. His hand on my shoulder *burned*. The music faded out, and the universe condensed down to him and me, moving together in sync.

The fluttering pulse at his chest slowed until he was barely breathing, his body following mine. I wondered where else I could get him to follow me, how he would react if we were doing some other activity together. Would he be this responsive if I laid him down across his bed with its silky sheets? Or if I lifted him up and placed him on the solid granite countertop in his bathroom?

His breath puffed out against my neck, almost as though he was thinking the same thing I was. I saw his eyes look up at my face, but then he looked down, the delicate sweep of his eyelashes on his cheek making me nearly stumble.

Around us, the other couples fluttered like distant butterflies, adding color but not worth the attention. Then the music stopped.

Everyone applauded, and Cade stilled, his eyes widening. I wanted to grab him close, pull him against me again, but he yanked himself away, stalking toward the food and drink. By the time I caught up to him, he had a glass of alcohol in his hand and a blank expression on his face. If he had been at all as affected as I was by the dancing, he had already recovered.

Without speaking, I took my place guarding his back.

After dessert had been set out, I smelled panic outside the ballroom door. I made a quick excuse to Cade before slipping out.

Jay stood outside, staring at his phone. His shoulders slumped when he saw me. “Coral and Tyson are back. They won’t talk to me.”

I glanced at his phone, reading the time as seven thirty. “Take me to them.”

Jay led me through the house to one of the servants’ doors and then straight to the relaxation room. Coral was pacing, streaked with dirt and dried sweat. Her muscles trembled.

Tyson was still half shifted, long gray hair on his skin and a mouthful of sharp teeth.

“Report,” I commanded.

“There’s an enemy werewolf pack in the forest,” Coral said.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-TWO

The rabbit carcass looked profane sitting in the middle of the council table. It had been torn apart, and it was one of several carcasses they had found. The deer, Coral had said, was more obviously killed by a werewolf pack, however, the rabbit had been the easiest to transport.

The bones had been stripped clean, but Tyson had said the intestines were set aside, bowels and all. Tufts of fur still clung to the body, and the rabbit's face was mostly intact.

As councilors entered the room, they covered their mouths and noses, put off by the sight.

When all the seats were filled, Cade turned to me. "Are you sure it's not just a fox or some other predator?"

"Yes," I said.

Cade waited, clearly needing more from me. The councilors shifted, and I heard someone murmur further down the table about my competency.

"Coral and Tyson smelled other werewolves near the site. Besides that, real wolves don't leave anything behind. A pack will strip a deer down to its bones." I picked up one of the bones. Ignoring the gasps, I turned it in my hand. The blood was already dried, everything slightly tacky, sticking to my fingertips. "And these marks right here are human teeth."

"All right." Sonja stood, pressing her palms to the table. She wasn't one of the ones who had leaned away, disgusted by the rabbit. "I will immediately begin working with Lynn to reinforce the wards. We're going to need some volunteers to

go over them with a fine-toothed comb. The werewolves have been walking them, but they wouldn't notice any missing magic. Tyson will lead a hunt, so the consorts will need magical support. Does anyone have any ranged spells ready?"

A few blue-robed members of the council lifted their hands, explaining what they had on hand.

Further down the table, Petrona was staring hard at Cade, even as he was focused on the rabbit, his face pale. Leon said nothing, his hands gripped in front of him.

I leaned slightly sideways, my hip brushing Cade's shoulder. He startled, trembling in his seat. Terror seeped from every pore, the stink of it heavy in his sweat. He gripped the armrests of his chair so tight that I saw his knuckles go bone white.

"Cade," I murmured.

Sonja was still giving orders, still taking down details, and this was exactly how long it would take an alpha to lose control of their own pack. Reaching out, I hesitated only a second before gripping Cade's shoulder tight, squeezing enough that it had to hurt.

He turned to look at me, no emotion visible on his face. The only indication of the terror he felt was in his wide eyes. We stared at each other, and I tried to tell him that no matter what this was, I would keep them safe. No matter who was out there, I would make sure that they never laid a tooth or claw on him.

Cade stood. "Councilwoman, sit down."

His voice was soft, but the table stilled. Sonja turned to him, eyes narrowed. "Prince Bartlett. You know I have experience in these matters. I am merely bringing my background and abilities to bear."

"If that is the case, then you should go with Lynn now. Begin reinforcing the wards." Cade gestured out into the darkness around us, his hand trembling before he gripped his fist tight and placed it against the table.

Sonja's mouth snapped shut, and she narrowed her eyes at Cade. "My prince, clearly I have more to offer at this meeting."

"Then sit down and wait until I call upon your *vast* knowledge." I could only see the back of Cade's head, but if his expression was anything like its usual coolness, then the edge of sarcasm was no accident.

Sonja's lips tightened, but she retook her seat, nodding her head and rolling her wrist as though to indicate Cade should continue.

"We will use the GPS trackers on all of the wolves. A handful will stay in order to protect House Bartlett. Every child or mage who cannot fight is to immediately come here to the king's house. They can sleep in the ballroom until this matter is resolved. Finley and his team will be stationed here for security but also to act as backup to the consorts." Cade hesitated, turning his head slightly. In his profile, I saw the firm set of his mouth, the cut of his eyes as he looked at me. "My consort will lead the hunt."

"A very good plan, Prince Bartlett," Petrona said. "However, it has been many years since any mage other than you has slept in this house. Can you promise House Bartlett's children will be safe in your home?"

"Yes. The matter of the excess magic released by my father's death has been dealt with," Cade said. "Alert all of the consorts that their presence is required in the back of the house. The council is dismissed."

The members of the council dressed in silver stood, including Petrona. It was a handful of them, less than a quarter of the table. The blue members looked at Sonja.

"My prince, I must ask you to reconsider. Your consort does not know the abilities of the other werewolves in this house. He assigned Isaac's consort and even *Theo* to search the property." Her eyes flicked to me, and I could read the rage behind her expression. She had never learned how to hide her emotions the way that Cade had.

“Should I have ignored consorts of House Bartlett?” I asked. “They’re capable wolves. They can protect their home the same as any of the rest of us.”

“Prince Bartlett—”

“The prince has made his decision,” I said firmly. “And he has dismissed the council. Every minute you waste, Councilwoman, is a minute that another house has a chance to further their invasion of our territory.”

Sonja stiffened and stood, glaring at me. She swept into the darkness, the pop of her teleportation spell louder than usual.

Sometimes the trick to protecting Declan had been to distract his enemies just long enough to give him the upper hand. If Sonja was looking at me, she wasn’t looking at Cade. If she had half a brain to realize the threat I was, then she was reconsidering how much of a threat Cade and I were together.

“Everyone else is dismissed to get your children and your elderly here to the house, then prepare your spells.” Cade stared down the table until they left, one after the other.

Petrona lingered, waiting until almost everyone else was gone before nodding in approval. “It is a good plan, Prince Bartlett.” She collected the remaining counselors with her, and they teleported out. On the far end of the table, Leon stood. His eyes were focused on the rabbit carcass. “In the past, Jesaiah has always led the hunt. I realize he has lost favor, and he is still in disgrace, but...”

I stared at him, trying to read his expression. The overhead lighting shadowed most of his face, giving his wrinkles more depth, making him look older. He was very much a man who had been betrayed by the person who should have been closest to him.

“Cade has made his decision,” I said. “But I will respect Jesaiah’s experience. He is welcome to run with us.”

Leon’s shoulders rose, then fell. He dipped his head even further. When he straightened, there was a blandness to his expression, a complete lack of emotion on his face. “I will

make sure the ballroom is ready for guests and have the kitchens begin preparing enough food.”

“Finley should be able to put together temporary wards around the house,” Cade said. “I want as many layers of them as we can make in such a short time.”

“I will let him know,” Leon said. He bowed, low and respectful. When he rose, there was a brightness in his eyes. “There is very much of your father in you.”

With that, he left, disappearing in a swirl of gold.

“We need to talk,” I said quietly.

“Not here,” Cade said shortly. He strode into the darkness, then stopped. I almost ran into him. He reached out, wrapping his hand around my wrist. I felt how hot his palm was, the way it seeped into my flesh. His magic wrapped around both of us, a cocoon of pure power. When we burst into the light, we were back in his bedroom.

Cade collapsed down on his knees, his legs giving out completely.

“Cade.” I bent, kneeling next to him, wrapping my hands around his shoulders. He was still trembling. “Was it the rabbit? It reminded you of your parents?”

“I’ve used too much magic.” Cade swallowed, his throat working. “I’ll be fine. Get me some water.” He paused. “Please.”

I stood, striding into the bathroom and finding his cup. As I filled it with cool water, I heard him in the next room, panting.

When I came back in, he was sitting on the ground, his legs pulled tight against his chest. I handed him the glass, and he nodded in appreciation. “What did you want to tell me?”

“I still can’t shift.”

Cade stopped, the glass halfway to his lips. He turned to me, his eyes wide. “*What?*”

“I still can’t shift. Whatever drug they gave me, it’s... I just can’t. I can feel my shift, I can feel the wolf, but when I try to pull it through... nothing.”

I stood, my frustration getting the better of me. I walked across the room, fisting my hands.

Closing my eyes, I tried again. I could feel my wolf under my skin, feel the shift, a caterpillar that no longer fit in its chrysalis. But when I pulled, when I started the movement in my body that should shift me into my wolf form...

It felt like I was digging the butterfly out of the chrysalis, tearing it open only to find pulp and half-formed wings inside. Pulling at it left me with a half-shifted monstrous thing that had almost no form at all.

Cade struggled to his feet, walking over to the desk and placing the glass on it with an audible click.

“You can’t shift.” He spoke low. “When were you planning on telling me?”

“I did tell you!” I bit out the words, frustrated.

“*Two weeks* ago,” Cade said. “You said it was going to get better. You said *you* were going to get better.”

“Well, it hasn’t.” I fisted my hands, then stretched out my fingers, trying to force the claws to come. “*I* haven’t gotten better.”

I heard Cade come close, his footsteps soft on the plush carpet.

“Well, you’d better fix it, or both of us are screwed.”

The word was so foreign in his mouth, as though he had suddenly started speaking a language I didn’t know. I turned around. His eyes were narrowed, brows drawn tight. He crossed his arms in front of his chest.

“If it were that easy, I already would’ve done it,” I snapped. “I am not refusing to shift to make *your* life difficult.”

“We are *both* dead unless you can become a wolf.” Cade stared at me, his blue eyes bottomless. I was slipping into them. I was going to drown, swallowed up by the endless blue.

He dropped his gaze, staring at my shoulder. “I’ve seen your wolf.”

I blinked, frowning. “What?”

“I see him in you. He’s strong. Big. Bigger than any wolf I’ve seen since...”

Cade swallowed. “He’s strong and big. He wouldn’t leave you abandoned.”

I stared at him, and he reached out, putting his hand on my bicep and then looking up at me. And I was drowning again—I was plunged into arctic water, and there was nothing for me to do but desperately take mouthfuls of frigid salt water like it was air.

“Your wolf is a protector. And it’s going to protect us now. You are going to save us, just like you saved that woman that Declan wanted dead.”

I shook my head. “That was different. I wasn’t saving her. I was betraying Declan.”

Cade’s lips twitched.

“You were saving her. And you’re going to save us,” he repeated. “You’re the only one who can.”

I wet my lips, my tongue slick across the sensitive skin. “How can you be so sure?”

“Because that’s what I hired you to do. I’m not paying for you to get us both killed,” Cade said.

I stared at him, surprised into laughing. “Should I charge extra for saving your life?”

“How about this. If you save my life, if you save *both* of our lives, I promise you a very good bonus.” He wasn’t laughing, but the corners of his eyes crinkled, like he wanted to laugh, like he wanted to join me in my mild hysteria.

Cade leaned forward and pushed up on his toes so that his lips were millimeters from mine. “You’re going to shift. Right now. You’re going to save our lives because that’s who you are, because that’s who your wolf is.”

He kissed me, and there was the oxygen I needed—there was the air I needed to save me from drowning.

I hadn’t noticed that before Cade, I had already been underwater. Declan had wrapped chains around my ankles and thrown me into the ocean. And maybe after so long underwater, I had gotten used to it. Gotten used to giving up who I was, who my parents had raised me to be. Maybe I had even gotten used to being nothing more than someone who hurt people.

But Cade was offering me a chance to do something else. I could save him. I could save myself.

I kissed him back, sucking on his lips and pressing us together, chest to chest.

Something broke inside of me, shaken free, a rotten branch that was poisoning the tree it was attached to.

I stumbled back, holding up my hand when Cade moved forward, reaching out for me.

“Stay back,” I said.

I stared at him, keeping my eyes focused on his, waiting for the horror and the fear. I was a werewolf in his bedroom. This was what he had nightmares of.

But I didn’t dare to try and stop the shift, not now that it was happening. I managed to pull off my shirt, shove my pants and underwear down, and step out of them as I lurched around the room. It was more painful than the first time I had ever done it, the first time I had heard the wolf howl in my chest and answered by sacrificing my own flesh, my own blood, my own pain for it. I bit off a scream, forced to shut my eyes, and stumbled forward again, kneeling on the ground.

I took in great gasps of air, trying to fill my lungs, but nothing could fill them. I could taste blood in the back of my throat, and then... there.

My claws sprouted, digging into the soft carpet, slashing through it as I fisted my hands in pain.

My bones cracked and reformed, everything painful and overwhelming even as the world seemed to shift on its axis, coming back to rightness.

My senses, always slightly overwhelming in human form snapped into focus, every smell and sound available to me. I detected danger, and I shook my head hard, trying to dislodge whatever it was.

There was no conscious thought, no words, nothing except sensation and instinct. Consciousness came back slowly.

The threat I felt was Basil, squeezing tight around my neck in warning. Cade had pressed himself back against the wall, surrounding himself with magic. His eyes were wide, and his mouth was moving, but it took a moment for my wolf ears to make sense of the human words.

“Miles. Miles, can you hear me?”

The terror that permeated the room was sending me into high alert. Something was scaring my packmate. Something was scaring my *mate*.

I forced human thought between the instinct and the urge to do something.

Cade was *not* my mate. He was not even my packmate. He was a job, and I was his employee, and that was all there was.

Still, I was scaring Cade. He was terrified of me. With great effort, I went down on my stomach, whining and tilting my head to the side. Slowly, Cade’s hand dropped, the magic around him swirling into his flesh.

He inched forward, each step jerky and forced. He extended his hand, and I raised my head to sniff it. As my breath touched his fingertips, he winced back.

Then, with slow movements, he reached forward and stroked along my face.

“There you are,” he said. “Miles, it is good to meet you.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-THREE

I whuffed out a breath.

Cade inhaled sharply. He moved his hand to the nape of my neck. Scratching there for a moment, he said, “This is going to be a problem.”

There were no problems. My wolf was free, my soul was complete. The only problem right now was that I wasn’t already running in the woods, already free.

Cade walked over to his bedside table, and I stood, sniffing the air of the room experimentally. There were a thousand interesting scents, most of them Cade. One under the bed wasn’t Cade. It was something...

The clank of metal snapped my attention. I spun where Cade was standing. He had a long strap of leather in his hand, the buckle making the noise that had gotten my attention.

Collar. Collar meant trapped. Collar meant chained. Collar meant danger. My lips peeled back from my teeth in a growl. Cade’s heart began beating fast, the terror in the air soupy-thick and making it impossible for me to think.

“All of the other consorts are going to be wearing their collars.” Cade struggled to keep his voice even. “You will be incredibly obvious if you don’t.”

I growled again but took several steps back. I wasn’t about to attack him—he was pack. Cade shook his head in frustration, throwing his hands up.

“Now is *not* the time. The hunt starts as soon as you get downstairs.”

I took even more steps back, and Cade turned to the window. He crossed his arms, the collar still fisted in his hand.

“Okay.” He was staring at the window, but his eyes fixed on my reflection in it, taking my measure. “I’ll work it out. Come with me.”

He walked toward the door, but I stepped in front of him, and he froze, the scent still thick. I moved forward. He needed to calm down.

I could shift back, become human and explain it, but that would defeat the purpose. He was calm with me when I was a human. He needed to be calm with my wolf.

Every single wolf would sense how afraid he was of me. They would smell the terror and anxiety, the trust that just wasn’t there. I couldn’t afford that. *He* couldn’t afford that.

Slowly, giving him time to back away, I walked forward, no creeping, no predatory slink. I pressed my head against the back of his hand.

He shifted uncomfortably, the collar in his other hand clanking again. I rubbed my face harder against his knuckles until he turned his palm, scratching under my chin.

“You’re so soft,” he murmured. “I didn’t think you would be.”

His fingers were scratching itches I didn’t even know I had, making me whole and complete in a way that I didn’t understand. This was pack. This was mine. *Cade* was mine.

The thought forced its way through the primal wolf part of my brain, forcing me back into reality. Cade was just the guy signing my paycheck. He was my employer, that was all.

But I knew it was more than that. He was the man who had given me a pack again. He was the man who saw the alpha in me where everyone else saw danger.

He dug his fingers into the thick fur at the nape of my neck, scratching down my spine. I came up well past his hip,

my head reaching as high as his elbow. I nuzzled against him as he continued to work his nails against my neck.

“We should go,” Cade said, but he made no move toward the door.

I turned my head again, pressing my nose against the soft fabric of his shirt. When I inhaled, all I smelled was him. No sour terror, no spike of anxiety.

“Will you be okay to lead the hunt?” Cade asked.

Stepping back, I let my mouth loll open, a grin parting my lips.

“If this is overconfidence...” He narrowed his eyes, and I chuffed another laugh.

““Was it overconfidence when Babe Ruth called a home run before he hit it?’ That’s what you’re going to say.”

I whined, rubbing my head against his hip, then trotted toward the door. As if I would ever use a reference that dated.

Shaking his head, Cade opened the door and began to walk down the empty hall. My wolf senses picked up more people in the house. Children and the cough of an elderly woman. The servants were talking amongst themselves, their panicked words tumbling over each other, water rushing over river stones.

“No. You’d say something like ‘Johnny Cash recording Nine Inch Nails’ song better than them wasn’t overconfidence. It was just what happens when you’re the best at what you do.” Cade rolled his eyes to me, and I snorted at his impression of my voice.

We reached the bottom of the stairs, and the voices became clearer. A child whispered to his mother, “But I thought no one could sleep here. I thought the house was haunted.”

The mother hushed him as we passed, her eyes following us. We must have looked like an odd pair. I hadn’t been lying when I told Tyson I had been taught not to shift in a house. It was considered rude, like putting your shoes up on the dinner table.

“He’s massive,” one of the younger mages whispered to another. She raised her eyebrows. “Did you know he was that big?”

“Only the best for our prince,” the other said with a smirk.

We walked out the back doors, and the sounds of the house faded. Immediately, I smelled wolves. House Bartlett had just over forty consorts, and they were spread out on the wide lawn with their mages. None were shifted yet, and my eyes roved over the pairings.

Rhys was fluttering around Nia, fixing her hair and adjusting the fall of her shirt. She tolerated their attention with a patient expression but nudged them when we came out the door.

Theo was off to the side, leaning heavily on a cane, his mage whispering in his ear. “I’ll speak to Prince Bartlett. We can get you out of this.”

Isaac and Jay approached first.

“He’s already shifted.” Isaac stared at the heavy leather collar in Cade’s hands. “He’s going uncollared?”

“I haven’t had time to perfect the magic on his collar. I have no desire to strangle him while he’s hunting.” Cade drew the leather strap tight between his hands, then let it go.

With every eye on him, he lifted his hand and rested it between my shoulder blades. I felt the pressure settle into my bones. My mate—no, Cade was my employer. I had to remember that. Why did I keep forgetting when I had *never* forgotten with Declan?

Cade, my employer, needed me to be strong. He needed me to be an alpha.

A familiar scent came out the door behind us, and I turned my head just far enough to see Jesaiah and Leon.

The older werewolf stared at me, his eyes sharpening and shifting. He pulled back his lips, but before he could do anything, Leon’s hand tightened on his shoulder, and he looked down at the ground.

I turned away, dismissive.

“Do you have a tracker on Jay?” Cade asked.

Isaac nodded. “We’ll know where they are at all times.”

Jay was staring at me, eyes wide. He swallowed. “I don’t know if I can keep up with him.”

I growled low, the rumble vibrating through my chest. Cade’s hand tightened in my fur, but I didn’t smell fear.

Jay’s eyes dropped. “I don’t know if I can.”

I walked forward, then opened my mouth, just wide enough to grip his hand. Gently, the way I might take the scruff of the cub’s fur between my teeth, I bit down. Not hard enough to break the skin, nothing more than a warning. I had already told him. He was a wolf. He was a member of the pack we couldn’t admit to being.

He trembled, and I released his hand. He was still staring down at the ground, but he nodded when I looked up at him.

With one last glance at Cade, I moved through the pack of wolves, collecting them behind me. At the edge of the forest, Sonja and Tyson were locked in an embrace, both of her hands pressed to his cheeks, his arms wrapped around her waist.

Ignoring them, I lifted my head and howled. The sound echoed, loud and encompassing, calling every wolf in the vicinity to me.

Bones cracked, skin split, and screams of pain turned into harsh, ragged growls.

The shifted wolves approached me, shaking off the vestiges of their humanity as they yipped and snapped, the hierarchy falling into place quickly. I recognized Jay immediately. He was smaller than the rest, more coyote than wolf. Theo was in the back, magic bracing one of his hind legs, glowing in the dark like a bioluminescent bone.

Coral trotted up next to me. I recognized her by scent alone. Nia was already at my shoulder. Her black fur was as dark as the deepest forest shadow.

When I lifted my chin, howling again, the sound splitting the night, one voice after another joined me.

This was pack. This was how we were supposed to live.

Tyson moved forward, trotting into the woods, and I growled, warning him off.

He paused, eyes narrowed, teeth bared. As I stepped forward, he pulled his shoulders back, lifting his chin. Then Nia was between us, bumping him off-balance, and Coral followed her, nipping at Tyson's shoulder.

Backing off, he bowed his head, although I could see it wasn't a surrender so much as picking his battles.

I moved into the woods, a slow trot at first that became a run as my body readjusted to wolf form. Nia was beside me, and I could feel the rest of the House Bartlett wolves, their feet silent, the only sound the occasional swish of leaves.

As Jay caught up to me, he panted raggedly, struggling with the pace. Whatever he was, it wasn't pure werewolf, but I had never heard of a halfbreed surviving or being able to shift.

Tyson and Coral had found the rabbit a few miles along the border of the wards. With a yip, I directed her to lead the way, keeping my nose focused and my ears twitching.

The foreign pack wouldn't have stayed near their kill; all other prey would have been scared off. But it would provide us with a scent to guide our search. In the wild, wolves could go six or seven miles in an hour, but I wasn't sure how trained the House Bartlett wolves were.

Declan kept his men in peak condition. We could run the whole length of Los Santos faster than most cars could crawl through city traffic. But consorts weren't used to that sort of work.

I wasn't surprised that some of the wolves dropped off, falling behind. They would catch up. Jay was able to stay with me, although I slowed when I saw frothy spit at the corner of his lips.

Coral yipped to my left, and we all turned, immediately following her. Tyson pulled in front, sniffing at the ground. He barked, and Coral sneezed, shaking her head and jerking it to the left again.

Tyson growled, but this was what an alpha was for. I stepped up, standing between them and sniffing the ground. I could smell rabbit blood, the sour stench where one of the wolves had nicked the intestines. Coral circled me, sniffing.

Underneath the smell of the rabbit carcass, I could smell another wolf. Several other wolves.

It was hard to tell who they were because I was surrounded by new wolves. If this was actually my pack, I would have been able to tug apart the scents quickly, but this wasn't a real pack, even though it felt like one.

The strange wolves had split off into two groups, one going in the direction that Tyson wanted, one to the left, where Coral was standing. Were they just that smart that they were trying to muddy the waters? Or had something happened that had scared them off and they weren't well trained enough to stay together? Maybe Tyson and Coral hadn't been as far behind them as we suspected.

I inhaled hard, catching the scent. I trotted off in the direction that Tyson had started in. When he moved to follow me, I gave a sharp bark, pointing my nose at Coral. He and Coral needed to work together, following her trail.

He growled, but with everyone's blood going, hunting in a pack was the only smart thing to do. They were clearly two of the strongest wolves, so I needed them together because, by nature, most of the pack, when they caught up with us, would follow me.

My mother and father used to play what they called war games, running with the pack, teaching everyone how to split up and come back together. My siblings and I always used to follow her, and when I asked my older brother, Jorge, why we never went with Dad, he said that it was natural for the pack to follow the alpha.

Nia looked between me and Coral and Tyson, already running off. I barked sharply.

She huffed out a breath but followed them.

Jay whined, panting so hard that his spittle dripped onto the forest floor. I probably should leave him here so he could direct the pack when they finally arrived. No, I needed someone with me, someone who could run if things got bad like I expected they would.

I jerked my head, then moved through the brush, slower as I followed the scent trail. Jay stumbled behind me, pulling up short when I growled at him sharply. He moved more cautiously, following me, but as I moved deeper into the forest, I lost him. He could follow my trail, though. And until the rest of the consorts caught up, I wasn't about to take on a strange werewolf pack myself.

Running in the woods like this had brought up something I hadn't expected. It was different from running in the city, where every scent was strange, rubbing against heightened senses like sandpaper against skin. In the woods, there were just as many things to attract my attention, but every part of it felt natural. Every part of it felt like this was what I should be doing every day.

I tried to ignore the feeling that wrapped around my heart at how good it had felt to be running as a pack, slowing for the weaker members, keeping pace with the stronger. Even Tyson had felt like a puzzle piece clicking into place.

Suddenly, the scent became brighter under my nose, lighting the way through the darkness. I followed it quickly, every instinct urging me to track it down.

Conversation broke the quiet night, a laugh that was muffled, cut off by a cuff to the head. Something flashed briefly in the dark, a lone flashlight extinguished just as quickly as it was lit.

They were barely older than pups; I could tell that from their voices.

I got low on my stomach, inching forward until I could see through the thick brush. They had found a cave, one massive boulder lying flat on top of two others. It protected them from the cool breeze, gave them something to sleep under that was more protection than the stars.

There were seven of them, none older than sixteen, and they were dressed in ragged clothing. The streaks of dirt on their cheeks spoke to how long they had been out in the wilds.

If some other house had sent them, they were the cannon fodder, just like the gargoyles. Disposable people who no one would care about.

I heard a crack behind me. The rest of the pack was catching up. In the distance, I could feel Coral and Tyson.

We weren't a pack, but running together, howling together, it had made us close to one. This pack, forged by a loyalty to House Bartlett, was going to tear these children to shreds.

I didn't have any time.

Pushing through my shift, I came out human and stumbled into the circle they made, lounging on the ground, enjoying a quiet night of peace after so long scared.

Barely human, I forced the words out. "Kneel."

They gaped at me, the naked man, only half shifted, appearing out of nowhere. One of them stumbled to his feet. He was older than the rest, and I didn't have to know their dynamics to see that he was acting as the alpha. He was going to try and fight me, and it wouldn't leave enough time for them to submit, for me to think of another way out of this for them.

Pulling on every ounce of alpha that ran through my blood, every hint of power, I roared the words. "Kneel before your alpha."

All of them fell to the ground, prostrating themselves in front of me.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-FOUR

Coral and Tyson crashed through the brush a minute later, growling. Tyson was on the wolves in an instant, but I held up a hand, my voice low.

“Stay.” The command echoed through the clearing.

One of the child werewolves began to cry, soft whimpering that caught in his throat, nearly choking him. Tyson spun on me, glaring fiercely. He growled, but I stared him down.

Coral was already snuffling at the wolves, as though double-checking to make sure these were the wolves that we had been so afraid of. With them on the ground, their necks exposed, whimpering, they looked even more pathetic, even more like children. In a normal pack, children this age would be playing, dancing between the adults, coddled and loved. They would run with some hunts, to help train them for when they ran as young adults.

They would be learning their place among their peers but also in pack hierarchy.

But this was not a normal pack. These children had invaded House Bartlett lands, had formed their own pack, and had made the mistake of doing it when House Bartlett was already on high alert, ready for an attack by another house.

I crouched down in front of the one that considered himself alpha. Looking at him, he seemed even younger than my first impression. There was no way he was older than fifteen.

“My name is Miles. No last name, no pack name. Do you know you are in House Bartlett territory?” I kept my voice low, following Tyson out of the corner of my eye. Coral had placed herself between the children and Tyson like I knew she would.

“No.” The baby alpha shook his head, dragging his forehead across the dirt. He didn’t push up or even try to look at me.

“This is House Bartlett territory. You are trespassing. You admit guilt and fault and submit to me as your alpha.” I didn’t have much time. I could hear the rest of the pack, sense them getting closer. I needed complete submission by the time everyone got here, or it was going to be a bloodbath.

“Yes.” The baby alpha nodded, breath coming fast. He must have been able to hear the other wolves, to hear their number, to hear their bodies as they pushed through brush. The wolves that were coming were not children.

Jay arrived first and took in the situation with a glance. He sat down, then lay on his stomach near the youngest child. The little girl curled against him, whimpering into his fur.

To my surprise, Theo arrived next, panting and limping, but the magic that braced his hind leg held steady. He immediately approached Coral, nuzzling under her chin. She accepted it for a moment before barking. Theo settled next to her, further blocking the children from Tyson’s view, where he continued to pace back and forth.

Nia was suddenly at my side, werewolf form huge, and she settled onto her haunches. On her neck, a silver collar gleamed.

It brought me up short, and I pushed a hand to my own neck, realizing that everyone would see Basil. I didn’t have any time.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Justin,” the baby alpha answered. He introduced the rest of the pack, but their names slipped through my mind.

“How did you get into this territory? It’s guarded by wards,” I said. “Did someone let you in?”

“No.” Justin trembled as the rest of the pack filed in, silent, encircling the children.

No one had made any moves to hurt them yet, and between Coral, Theo, and Jay, it was clear that violence was not going to be tolerated.

“So how did you get in?” I asked, bringing his attention back to me.

“We followed a scent. It was a deer or... something. But we were so hungry. We didn’t know this was mage lands. We promise. We didn’t know. We’ll leave.” He was begging, and the pleading tone in his voice made something in my stomach clench.

“It’s a little too late for that, kiddo,” I said.

The first pop of a mage’s teleportation spell echoed loud in the forest, startling a night bird, who screeched and flew off. Then more, like we were inside a popcorn machine.

I smelled the salt of tears, but Justin’s voice was firm when he asked, “Are they going to kill us? Are they going to make us slaves like you?”

I fisted my hand at my side, silently wishing I had a better answer. “They aren’t going to kill you.”

I swallowed the second half of the sentence, unable to say, *I promise you that as your alpha*. In order to get them to submit, I had claimed them as mine, and part of my soul knew that I was not going to give them up easily.

Mage lights lit the clearing, as bright as daylight. Cade was at the head of the mages, wearing all black, his expression grim when he looked over the pups.

He turned to me, his eyes focused on my neck. “Is it safe?”

“Yes. They’re pups—children. They didn’t know what they were doing.” I opened my mouth to say more, but Cade shot me a sharp look. Now wasn’t the time. Now, I was supposed to be performing the role of the obedient, perfect

consort. We both had an audience, one that was hungry for us to fail.

If we couldn't pull it off, they wouldn't be throwing tomatoes.

"Isaac and I will take them to the cells," Cade said. "We thank the rest of you for your service."

"Wait," I said.

Cade narrowed his eyes at me, his expression blank. His shoulders tightened, his spine so straight that it almost had no curve.

"Peterson, Vince." I chose the names at random, saying the only pairing I could remember off the top of my head. "Do the next stretch of the perimeter of the property. Someone will relieve you in three hours."

Mages were staring at me. I could feel their eyes on me, crawling over my skin. At my neck, Basil tightened once, shifting slightly before settling. How would I deal with the situation if it was Declan and it looked like I had just disrespected him in front of his employees?

I bowed low, speaking to the ground. "I'm sorry I forgot to alert them earlier, my prince."

"I'm glad you remembered before we went back." Cade flicked his hand at the consorts. "Go now."

Two wolves broke off, one pausing to rub his head against a mage's hip before sprinting into the darkness.

"We'll send out the rest of the assignments when we get back to the house," Cade said.

I heard a few pops of magic as mages left with their consorts, but most of them stayed. Tyson stalked over to Sonja, letting her ruffle the fur at the back of his skull. Both of them watched us.

Cade extended his hand, and black, shadowy ink dripped from his fingers. At the first touch, Justin began to struggle, but I dropped to my knees, pressing my hand against the back of his neck, tightening my fingers around the tight muscle.

“Submit,” I murmured, an order from an alpha to a member of his pack.

His chest rose and fell quickly, his heart racing. With my hand right there, where my mother used to grip me when I was acting too big for my claws, Justin kept still, the rest of his little pack following his lead. The magic wound around their arms and legs, going tighter and tighter until they couldn't move without breaking their own limbs.

From the back of the crowd, I heard someone whisper, “How is he doing that when it's clear he has so little control?”

“Do you see? Even his own consort won't wear his collar,” someone else murmured before being hushed.

Cade looked at Isaac. “Do you want to do the honors?”

Isaac nodded quickly and looked around at the remaining mages. “You should step back.”

“I'll come with you,” Sonja said.

Cade narrowed his eyes at her. “Take your consort and rest. He's been on his feet for seven hours. We'll convene a war counsel as soon as Isaac and I have the wolf pack secured.”

Sonja's nostrils flared, but just as she opened her mouth to argue, Isaac waved his hand through the air, swiping it like he was spinning a massive ball. The feel of his magic was different from Cade's. With Cade, I always felt pain, like my own skin was paying the price for the magic.

With Isaac, I felt nothing. One moment, we were deep in the woods at the heart of House Bartlett territory. The next, we stood outside the three little prison cells.

Jay was with us, and he shifted back into his human form, his skin jumping and his body trembling. Isaac rushed over, snapping his fingers, and a robe appeared in his hand. He put it over Jay's shoulders, wrapping him tight, rubbing his forefinger right at the edge of Jay's collar.

Cade looked at me, blinking, before awkwardly grabbing hold of his shirt. For half a second, I thought he was going to

take it off, expose that perfect pale skin to the filtered moonlight of the forest. Then, his shirt seemed to split, double itself. He was holding an identical one in his hand. He handed it to me, then did the same with his pants.

Both the shirt and the pants were too tight, but it was better than being naked.

The werewolf cubs began crying in earnest, the sort of hysterical sobs of a child who had fallen and skinned their knee in front of their mother.

Isaac blinked, his lips going wide, his eyes turning down at the corners. It was horrifying.

“Open the cell,” Cade said.

“Cade, we can’t leave them—”

Cade looked over sharply before repeating, “Open the cell.”

Isaac fumbled for his keys, walking over to the one in the center. His key jammed against the lock with a discordant sound before he managed to slide it in. With the door open, Cade lifted his hand, and the werewolves levitated off the ground, moving into the cell one at a time.

When they were all inside, Cade walked in.

I followed, looking around in surprise. The cell had grown. The last time I had been inside, it had only been big enough for one person comfortably. Now, the small pack fit in easily.

Cade snapped his fingers, and mage lights glowed in the corner of the room.

“How did you get into my territory?” Cade asked.

Justin spoke, repeating the same story he had told me. He had followed a scent that had led him into the territory. They had no idea it was House Bartlett land.

“We never would’ve come if we had known,” Justin begged.

“What did it smell like again?” I asked.

“A deer,” Justin said.

“No, it smelled like hamburger,” one of the other members of the pack said.

“Cookies,” said another.

Cade glanced at me, and I raised an eyebrow. It was possible that they had all been so hungry that someone had said *something smells good*, and the rest of them had just filled in the blank. But it sounded like magic to me, the Pied Piper leading the children out of town and into the mountain.

“We’ll have more questions in the morning,” Cade said.

He walked out, his magic sliding off the children, following him like a serpent. I looked at the kids one last time.

“Please, don’t just leave us here.” Justin’s eyes were wide, his breath coming fast.

Cade was waiting outside, arms crossed. Jay and Isaac were huddled together close, although both of them kept glancing at me, where I stood still in the cabin.

Closing my eyes, I forced myself to follow Cade, shutting the door on the begging pups. Isaac came up next to me, locking it. I stared at the closed door for a long beat before turning to Cade. “We can’t just leave them here. Keith just got killed here. You know it’s not safe.”

Cade narrowed his eyes, and I saw my mistake. Declan would have sneered, an implied *don’t ever question my orders in front of the help* in his curled lip. I had only made that mistake once. The second time I had made it, I had ended up with a bounty on my head.

“Let everyone know we’ll have a war council as soon as it’s light,” Cade said to Isaac. Then he moved his hand through the air, and darkness encircled us both.

I landed in his room, panting. The pain felt worse than it ever had before.

“So, this pain thing, it’s something you save special for me, like your older brother giving you the toy at the bottom of

the cereal box?" I asked. "Because I definitely didn't feel this way when Isaac took us halfway across the property."

"Yes, I save the agony for you because I know how much you love it. It's not like you complain every single time we go anywhere." Cade's face looked yellowish, the sweat coating his brow gleaming in the light of his room.

"Please. There's just the two of us here. Don't leave those kids out there. That's how we lost Keith, the only person who had a clue who's trying to kill you." I reached for Cade, counting it as a victory when he didn't flinch back. Gently, I ran my thumb along his forehead, wiping off the worst of his sweat.

"They aren't there." Cade stepped away, walking into the bathroom before I could react.

I heard the sink turn on and splashing as he rinsed his face.

His magic swirled on the ground, creating complicated patterns. More of it seemed to coalesce, seeping from the walls themselves. Frowning, I crouched down low, reaching out to touch it.

Don't, Basil hissed in my ear. Unless you want to lose that arm. Actually, go ahead. You're going to be easier to eat without limbs anyway.

I stepped back, walking to the doorway of the bathroom. Water dripped from Cade's chin, but his eyes were screwed shut, both hands braced on the edge of the bathroom counter.

"What do you mean they aren't there?" I asked. "I saw Isaac lock them in myself."

"I thought it would be a good trap. While you were hunting, I've spent the past few hours creating an alternate prison for them. He locked the door, but no one else knows they aren't there. If someone opens the door..."

"The mousetrap snaps closed?" I asked.

"Exactly." Cade blinked open his eyes, staring at me blearily in the mirror.

“That’s a lot of magic,” I said carefully. “Are you sure you aren’t overdoing it?”

Cade laughed, a low, harsh sound. “Power is one thing I have to spare.”

“You say that now, but I once had a friend who was ’roided out to his gills. He swore he could lift anything as long as it fit on a barbell. He was right, up until he tried to lift a thousand pounds and crushed his larynx.”

Cade shot me a wan smile. “Good thing for both of us that I know exactly my lifting limit.”

“And that is?” I pressed.

“My dinner plate,” Cade said. “Although I can occasionally lift a breakfast tray if the servants aren’t around.”

“The pups are safe?” I asked.

“Yes.” Cade dropped his head. “For now.”

I inhaled sharply.

“They are unbonded wolves on House Bartlett territory.” Cade swallowed, eyes shut, head bowed. His arms trembled.

He didn’t have to say anything more. I knew what the consequences were. Leon had made it very clear.

“They’re kids. They didn’t know what they were doing.” I had promised them. I had forced myself onto them as their alpha. If they died...

“The war council is going to demand it. The *mag*es are going to demand it. It doesn’t matter that they’re kids. What matters is that we have to act. We have to treat them like the danger they are.” He opened his eyes, staring blankly at the basin in front of him. “We’ll have to question them again before they’re killed.”

I sucked in a breath. “Cade, please. I’m begging you. There has to be another way.”

Cade’s knuckles went white. “There is no other way.”

“I’ll...” My mind was blank. I had nothing to bargain with. As much as I might consider myself free, I was just as bound as any werewolf here who wore a collar. I had nothing Cade wanted.

I blinked. No, there was *one* thing he wanted.

“I’ll wear it.”

Cade’s head snapped up, staring at me. “What?”

“Your collar. I’ll wear it if you can think of some way to save the kids.” The words were glass in my mouth. They ate at my throat like acid. But it was the only way forward, the only way that I could see that didn’t leave me hollowed out and empty.

Cade pushed himself off the sink, a sneer pulling at his lip. “For *them*. You would wear the collar for them?”

“To save their lives.” The desperation made it come out softer than I intended. “I would do it to save their lives.”

Cade was close, staring up at me, his blond hair tousled and damp. His lip pulled back from his teeth again.

“Fine.” He pushed past me, jostling me out of the doorway. Stalking over to the bedside table, he picked up the collar and threw it at me. I caught it before it slid to the floor. “Put it on.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-FIVE

The leather felt heavier in my hands, as though it weighed a ton. I hesitated.

“Well?” Cade snapped. “Are you going back on our deal?”

“No. Of course not.” I remembered the wolves, Justin’s pleas for his pack, how young they all were. “You’ll save them, the wolves? You promise?”

“I said I would. Hurry. There’s lives at stake, after all.” The expression on Cade’s face was cold. Nothing about the man I had slowly teased out from under the ice existed in his stiff lips and snapping eyes. “You are willing to collar yourself for them. Complete strangers whose lives are in your hands.”

I stared at his face, my brows drawing together, something tight in my stomach at his tone. I hadn’t heard that level of harshness since the first time I met him, when he pressed his foot down on my face, filleting me open with his gaze. The chilliness of *There’s no way out of this room. Do you understand?*

“This is what you want, isn’t it?” I asked, shaking the leather. “This is what you wanted since we first met.”

Cade stared at me, nothing about his expression giving his emotions away. He no longer felt like a still winter lake. Now, I was wading into a forest stream flooded by debris and ice from melting winter frost.

“This is what I want?” He barked a harsh laugh. “Yes. You collaring yourself does make things easier.”

“Do you *not* want this?” I asked slowly. My legs were freezing from the water, and if I stayed too long, it would chill the blood heading to my heart, and I would die.

“Put the collar on, save the enemy werewolves.”

“They aren’t enemy werewolves. They’re kids who wandered into the wrong place at the wrong—”

“Are you going back on our deal?” Cade’s voice thundered in the room, a cracked tree branch that swept me off my feet and took me under the water.

“No,” I said.

I lifted the leather collar to my throat.

“Shirt off,” Cade barked.

Lowering my hand, I tugged off my shirt. Cade came close, and I thought for a moment he was going to explain the frigid expression, why his mood had suddenly shifted and he was now a strange person I didn’t recognize.

He reached out and paused a second before his hand touched my throat. For a moment, I saw something else in his eyes. Then he wrapped his hand around my neck.

“Basil, come here,” he said.

For a half second, Basil tightened around my throat, and then the snake flowed over Cade’s wrist, disappearing under his shirt. Cade released me instantly, turning around, stepping away.

Slowly, I brought the collar back to my throat, wrapping it around my neck, sliding the tongue into the buckle, and pulling it snug. I swallowed, feeling it press against my throat.

Even with Declan, I had always acknowledged that he was my boss, my employer. At one time, I thought we might be friends, but I had *never* ever let myself be owned by him.

Cade glanced over his shoulder, his eyes skimming the leather. “Get cleaned up. I’ll be back later.”

He walked to the door, but when he put his hand on the knob, I couldn’t help myself. “Wait for me. You shouldn’t go

anywhere without me. Your house is under attack—”

“If there’s one thing we’ve learned from all of the attacks, it’s that I can take care of myself.” He looked at me without any expression on his face. “I can’t sleep here tonight, anyway. Not with this many people in the house.”

With that, he opened the door, leaving me alone in the room. Despite the warm temperature, goose bumps rose along my chest, and I shivered.

One thing was clear: I did need a shower. The hunt in the forest had left me hot and uncomfortable, sweat dried to my skin.

My heart tugged, tightening. I needed to go after Cade. Someone was trying to kill him, probably someone in this house, and it was my job to keep him safe.

But I couldn’t step back into that freezing river again, not until I understood what was going on.

I headed to the shower but hesitated just inside. My hand rose to the leather collar.

Staring at myself in the mirror, I prodded the leather uncomfortably. It was stiff, not broken in. In the mirror, I looked like someone else, the house dog I had always accused consorts of being.

Angrily, I grabbed for it, unlatching it. I headed into the shower, turning it on and stepping in without waiting for the water to heat. My interaction with Cade had been an ice bath; the chilly water was nothing compared to that.

After rinsing off the day, I stepped back out into the steamy bathroom. The collar sat on the counter, brown and accusing.

A thought came to me, one I had to swallow and shake my head to dislodge. But it came back, circling me like a buzzard. I could see it now: Cade’s pale, long fingers, tattoos dancing over his knuckles as he latched the collar around my neck.

Would that have made any difference? If *he* had put it there, what would the expression have been on his face?

Tightening my fist around the leather, I shook my head again. But that wasn't how it had gone. I hadn't been kneeling in front of Cade, staring at his face as he had placed it around my neck.

I stared at myself as I put the collar on. It was just another piece of clothing. Something a teenage goth could purchase at the pet store and wear to piss off her parents.

When I came back out, I expected to see Cade. Whatever temper had overtaken him had to have cooled by now.

Instead, the room was empty. I sat on the edge of the bed, debating what to do. I needed to put on clothing. I needed to go back out in the house and find him, have the confrontation that clearly we needed to have. Instead, I walked into his closet, finding clothes just my size folded neatly on top of the glass-top table in the middle.

As I pulled them on, I considered my options. I needed to wait for him. When he came back and we were in the privacy of his room, then I could ask him about that arctic ice, the thawing winter snows.

I didn't remember falling asleep, but I woke to bright morning light and Cade throwing clothing on my head. Startled, I batted it away, sitting up and glaring at him.

"Where were you?" I asked.

Cade looked terrible, pale and wan, and dark shadows lingered under his eyes. He hadn't slept.

"Get dressed," he commanded.

"Cade..." I stood, approaching him. He shied back, and I stopped, only six feet away, even though it felt further, like I had somehow opened the Grand Canyon between us. "Cade, tell me what's going on."

"What's going *on*?" He looked me over, a sneer pulling at his lip, his expression haughty and cold. "What's going on is my consort is making us late for negotiations with the dryads."

"I'm not your consort," I said slowly.

Cade pointed, dropping his hand down when it started to tremble. “That collar says different.”

“What is it about the collar?” I asked sharply. “You were the one that’s been wanting me to wear it.”

“We are going to be late. Dress yourself, or I can forcibly dress you.” A tattoo vine, covered in rose thorns, curled out from under Cade’s collar, twisting up his neck and spiraling on his cheek.

I picked up the clothes and pulled them on. They were black, matching Cade’s, although his had a hint of gold decorating the hemlines. For the first time since I’d arrived, the neckline was low, a V-neck that exposed my clavicle and, more importantly, the leather collar I wore.

“You finally look like a consort,” Cade said. His cheekbones were sharp, sharp enough to slice glass. He turned away, placing his hand on the door.

Before he could open it, I crowded behind him. “I don’t know what this is about, Cade. It’s just a costume. I don’t like you going out on your own. We know that someone in your house—”

“Right now, all we know is that the wards have been broken. You haven’t even been able to find out if there’s another spy in the house, much less who the traitor is.”

Frustrated, I blew out a breath, ruffling the hair at the nape of Cade’s neck. He shivered, and I spoke to the back of his head.

“We’re still in this together. We’re going to find out who the rat is in your house. And if there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s running a rat to ground.”

“We were *never* in this together,” Cade said sharply. “I’m paying you—this is not a *partnership*. Do you understand?”

Something inside me tightened, as though my wolf was growling and pacing inside my chest. We *were* a partnership, because Cade was my—no.

He was not my mate, and apparently, he was little more to me than Declan was. An employer. Once he got what he wanted—me, collared—I was nothing more than a paycheck he had to sign at the end of the job.

Fine. He wanted to reveal his true colors? I could be professional. After all, that was why he had hired me.

I stepped back, and Cade opened the door. We walked through the hallways silently, stopping in front of the formal dining room. Breakfast had been set out, and the dryads were already sitting. Leon sat on one side of the table, along with Petrona and Sonja. Brett had taken a spot further down the table, the smirk on his face telling me that this was a man who had finally wormed himself into a seat at the table he so dearly wanted.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting,” Cade said.

“We were told it was a long evening for you”—the elder tree nodded her head—“and your consort.”

“Since we’re all here, let us open negotiations on the reason you came and the reason we invited you.” There was none of the exhaustion I saw on his face in Cade’s voice. Instead, he sounded abrupt, verging on rude.

The elder tree frowned. “Is it not common to have the meal first?”

“Are you unwilling to negotiate now?” Cade asked, volleying the question back into their court, making it clear that not negotiating now would be a loss for them.

“If now is when you want to negotiate, let us begin.” The elder tree didn’t look at any of the other dryads, whether because her power was strong enough among them that she spoke without needing their support or because they were silently communicating the way I had seen the night before.

“You are concerned that unknown assailants are invading your territory and destroying trees,” Cade said.

“Yes, we had hoped for help with it from you, our allies,” the elder tree said.

“In due time,” Cade said. “Our concern is the disease which has ravaged some trees in our forest, as well as reclaiming some of what is rightfully our territory.” He leaned back in his chair, tilting his head to stare at the elder tree.

She straightened. “You speak of the reclaimed lands.”

“I speak of our territory, which you were given custody of and failed to return,” Cade said.

“The reclaimed lands were not fit for anything when we were given ‘custody’ of them. They were poison. Much of the land is still poisonous to walk upon.” She looked around the table, her eyes catching on Leon before returning to Cade. “Your battle with House Doyle left every life within the boundaries dying. Your greed cost the forest and its inhabitants. It was not *land* when you gave it to us—it was a graveyard that your grandfather begged us to help restore. And as your friends, we did. Should we give it back to you again so that you might once again drain all the life from it?”

Cade looked at her for a long beat. “So some of the land is healthy again.”

“Is that all you heard?” The elder tree shook her head. “It saddens me, saddens my heart that this is what your family has been reduced to.”

“You have asked for our help in a matter that is great. However, all magic is an exchange. You should know better than most that I cannot simply *give* you something without asking for something in return.” Cade stared at her. “Although I’m sure kindness was the motivator for helping my house with the reclaimed lands, you cannot deny the boon you were given for that help.”

“A pittance compared to the work that we still do bringing life where there is only death.” But the elder tree tilted her head, considering. “We have managed to clean a mile along the border between our two properties. That area is safe again, even for careless mages.”

“Good. Our house may go to war again soon, so I cannot promise help from any of the mages or consorts that pledge

fealty to House Bartlett.” Cade turned his head just slightly. It wasn’t enough to look at me, but I felt as though he was staring at me, as though I was naked before him, wearing only his collar. “However, I can give you your own wolf pack to protect your lands. They will be yours to command, yours to use as scouts or fighters if you choose.”

A sound yanked itself out of my throat, a harsh, growled *No*. It wasn’t even a word, just a partial noise.

Sonja exploded from her chair. “My prince! You cannot seriously be talking about the wolves from last night. They must be questioned first. We cannot just hand them over to the dryads.”

“The wolves from last night must be killed.” Leon spoke for the first time at the far side of the table. His expression was grim, his hands clasped in front of him. “That is what the law says.”

“House Bartlett law says that any unbonded wolf on our property, here without explicit consent of prince and council, will be put to death in a manner decided by the crown.” Cade stood slowly, and as he stood, tattoos flowed from under his collar over his shoulders, draping behind him like a shadowy cape. “Am I not the crown?”

“You are,” Leon said cautiously.

“Then the manner of death I choose is a life sentence of service to the dryads.” He turned back to the dryad. “Do you accept?”

I found my voice again, unable to stop myself. “Cade, no. You can’t—”

Cade’s magic flowed out of my clothing, gagging my mouth, binding me.

The dryad bowed her head. She didn’t even look or talk with any of the other dryads at the table. “We accept this bargain.”

“Good. Everyone else is dismissed. We have war council later today.” To the dryads, he only said, “I will make arrangements so you receive your boon before you leave. In

exchange, you will work with the seneschal to mark the new boundaries between our lands.”

No one moved. With a violent swipe of his hand, Cade threw his magic at everyone else in the room. “Dismissed.”

When his magic disappeared, the dining room was empty. Cade spun to me.

“You dare question me in front of others? You are my consort in public. My word is your word. My opinions yours.” His eyes flashed angrily.

I clawed at the magic over my mouth, digging until my fingers clawed through my own skin. Cade stood, approaching me, then swiped his hand across my mouth so that the magic crawled back onto his own fingers.

“What did you do, Cade?” I asked, my voice raw.

With a cold glance, Cade said, “Exactly what you asked me to. I saved their lives.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-SIX

“Their lives?” I gaped at him. “You condemned them to slavery. You gave them to the dryads like they were Pokémon cards at recess! Like they were a houseplant for a new neighbor!”

Cade looked up at me, a small smirk pulling up the corner of his lip. “Luckily for them, the dryads would probably care just as well for a houseplant as they would for the wolves. What other option do you think we have?”

“You’re the head of House Bartlett! Make your own rules!” I shouted.

“Even the head of the house can’t violate the rules. My hands are bound here.” Cade ended on a hiss, snake scales twisting around his neck, tighter and tighter.

“This isn’t what I meant when I asked you to save them.” My skin felt too tight, my breath coming too quickly. I was an alpha. I had demanded loyalty from the pups, and in exchange, I was selling them into slavery.

I was no better than Cade. Maybe the pups would have been better off if I had let the House Bartlett wolves tear them apart.

“You’re being unreasonable,” Cade said. “Leave.”

My lips pulled back from my teeth, and I was aware of how they were lengthening, how quickly I was losing control of my own shift. That hadn’t happened in years, not since I went through puberty and teenage hormones were rushing through my body.

Cade looked at me, his eyes completely black. “*Leave!*”

Magic spilled from his mouth, wrapping me up until I was contained in darkness. When it cleared, I was in the middle of the forest. I roared. Then, without thought, I shifted.

It was the same as before. Everything hurt. It was harder than I remembered. It shouldn’t be this hard, but I felt like I was carving away diseased flesh, cutting it off and leaving only healthy skin behind.

When my bones had finished rearranging themselves, coming into a form I knew as well as my human one, I ran.

The forest was fresh, and every scent told a story. Here was where squirrels nested; here, a tree had fallen and slowly rotted over the years. The fungus that grew along its fallen trunk released nutrients that fed the rest of the forest.

I smelled small traces of the wolves from last night, hints of them left in the forest.

Curious, I followed the scent trails back to their campsite, then traced them back to where they had killed the rabbit and the deer, then tried tracing them further. I got close to the wards, but I couldn’t smell beyond that. The magic dampened my sense of smell.

I blinked. The magic dampened my sense of smell, meaning if they had come through here, there would have to have been a hole for them to smell anything on House Bartlett lands. I shifted back into my human form, ignoring my nakedness.

Bending down, I lifted a pinecone, tossing it through the wards. It sailed through. Walking forward slowly, I reached out with my hand and pressed it against them.

The magic sparked against my palm, burning it. Hissing, I drew my hand back, cradling it against my chest. The burn healed quickly, leaving only redness on my palm.

This was definitely where they had come through, but now the hole was gone. Justin had been insistent that no one had let them through, that they’d all followed a scent. But if the hole was closed, that meant the hole wasn’t permanent.

Was the hole I'd found fleeing Jesaiah just as impermanent?

Voices broke the quiet of the forest, and I smelled a familiar wolf.

I shifted without thinking, following the sound through the trees. The human voices were high compared to the low rumble that was a wolf's growl: sub-audible, something that got my own voice to answer.

As I approached, I kept low, using the thick, overgrown forest brush to hide me. When I was close enough, I peered through the branches. The dryads stood in a small clearing. One massive tree had fallen, taking two of its neighbors with it.

The roots had been lifted out of the ground when it fell. They smelled foul. My wolf eyes didn't have the color detail of human ones, but I could see something dripping from the roots, shining and slick where it fell to the earth.

"This is obscene," Oak said. He stepped back from the tree, his entire face gnarled. "This is worse than the reclaimed lands. And you say you have more of these in your forest?"

"At least three of the oldest trees in the forest." Leon stepped into view, moving from behind one of the fallen branches. The elder tree walked beside him. "It starts higher up on the trunk, where it drips a similar substance. We sent it out to labs and had our own researchers investigate it, but they can't tell us what it is."

"Poison," the elder tree said firmly. "An ancient form of it."

"Poison? Is someone here doing this on purpose?" Leon asked.

"The poison is magical. House Bartlett's magic is tied to the land. It draws on the ley lines and power in the earth. Something is poisoning that magic." The elder tree reached out, stroking her fingers along the trunk. "You must burn this tree and any others like it."

“But if the poison is in our magic—” Leon broke off when Jesaiah trotted up beside him, his massive wolf form bumping against his master’s hip. Leon stared down at him for a moment, then asked, “Where?”

Jesaiah took three long strides and leapt. Before he could land on me, I burst into the clearing, spinning and growling at him. He was on me in an instant, teeth and claws, but this time, I wasn’t human, and I wasn’t running.

I dug my hind feet into him, pushing him off and following the movement of his body so that I landed on top, my teeth closing around his neck. His breath smelled rancid, stale meat and something rotten deep in his body.

It smelled like his soul was rotting inside his chest.

“Prince Bartlett’s consort has seen fit to join us. Welcome.” Leon bowed his head. Not as low as he would go for Cade, but close. “Would you please let my consort up?”

I tightened my teeth incrementally, giving Jesaiah warning, and then I stepped back and shifted into my human form.

“I’m sorry for sneaking up on you. I was monitoring the wards when I heard you talking.” I nodded at the dryads, although none of them seemed surprised to see me.

Leon shook his head. “It’s no matter. I’m glad you are taking the protection of House Bartlett seriously.”

With my human eyes, the liquid didn’t look quite as dangerous. It looked like golden sap, dripping into the soil. But my nose could still smell how foul it was.

“Isn’t that dangerous, letting it drip onto the ground?”

“As we suggested, this tree needs to be burned, and any like it. For now, we can help cordon off where the poison has reached with a barrier of fungus that will absorb some of it. But you are right.” The dryad turned to Leon. “The poison is in the magic; the *expression* is merely in the soil.”

“What does that mean?” I pressed.

Frowning, Leon turned to me and answered distractedly. “House Bartlett gets magic from its lineage, yes, but when we

took up this place, we poured our magic into the earth as well. The house *is* the family. The land *is* the magic. All houses are built on ley lines so the children might absorb more ambient magic as they grow. Didn't Cade explain this to you?"

I ducked my head, looking at the ground. "He did, but I don't understand magic talk."

Leon released a short breath, shaking his head, but he accepted my slow and stupid façade without suspicion. Jesaiah trotted over to him, nudging at Leon's arm with his nose. With the back of his hand, Leon batted Jesaiah away.

"Well, then, to put it in simpler terms: when House Bartlett was first founded, the original King Bartlett linked his family's magic to the land. It allowed him to have considerably more power than he had before." Leon extended his hand, and his magic blossomed out of it, floating above his palm like a golden sphere. "Everyone else in House Bartlett is related to the king's line by blood. Meaning all of our magic comes from the earth, as well as our lineage."

"So if there's poison in the earth, there's poison in your magic?" I frowned down at the ground, observing how the thick sap-like poison lingered on the surface for only a moment before being absorbed.

I thought of Cade's tattoos, the pain of using them, the way they leaked off his skin, the black of his eyes. Was *Cade* being poisoned?

Leon shut his hand, the magic sphere cracking and falling away. "Let us hope not."

"We will set up the layers of fungal protection," the elder dryad said. "This may take some time. Will you stay with us?"

Leon waved his hand. "Unfortunately, I have other business to attend to. My consort will stay here as the grounds are under his purview."

Leon drew his hand in a circle, and his entire form was wrapped in gold. When the gold fluttered into the air like a thousand butterflies, he was gone.

The elder dryad watched him go, her wooden eyes blank of emotion. After a moment, she and the rest of the dryads formed a circle around the tree, walking out further into the forest until they were able to contain where the roots had been.

I breathed in the loamy scent of forest, the natural smells tickling inside my nose. It seemed to cool my body, taking my temperature down. There was a muffled snort, and I glanced over toward the underbrush.

Jesaiah had settled himself in the shade, lying on his stomach, his eyes following the dryads with interest. I watched the dryads, but unlike the mages' tattoos, their magic wasn't nearly as exciting. They simply closed their eyes.

After a long moment, roots grew out of their legs and feet, digging deep into the earth underneath them. As soon as the roots touched the ground, the dryads themselves grew taller, their hair becoming the canopy of a tree, their arms extending out to form massive branches. After a few minutes, they didn't look human at all. Instead, they looked like massive trees that had been in the forest for years.

When their human features were no more than ridges and bumps along a massive trunk, I slowly made my way around the circle and sat next to Jesaiah.

The twigs and leaves were uncomfortable on my bare ass, but I hesitated to turn back into a wolf. It would be a clear act of aggression, a threat he wouldn't be able to ignore.

"It doesn't have to be like this," I said quietly. "I'm not here to play Yoko Ono and take your pack from you."

Jesaiah turned his head away from me, and I saw him roll his eyes back toward me, giving me an annoyed side-eye.

"I'm serious. The only reason I'm here is to protect Cade." I stared at the massive trees. They began to hum, the musical sound like wind whistling through a hollowed-out tree trunk. "Why did you attack me, anyway? You didn't even bother to give me a chance. For all you knew, I could have just been a gold digger here for the life of luxury. Maybe all I wanted to

do was lie by the pool all day. Did you just want to keep being alpha so badly that you couldn't risk it?"

There was a cracking sound, and I looked away. It was considered impolite to watch an older werewolf shift.

"I told you it's not a pack," Jesaiah said.

"You sure act like it's a pack," I said.

"*You* act like it's a pack. This is the last place most of them have. Tyson can come in and play at being alpha all he wants, but he can't kick anyone out. No one here can be exiled." Jesaiah shook his head. "You should have left when I gave you the chance."

I blinked at him, frowning. Before I could ask any more questions, he shifted back, then trotted off into the woods.

I watched the dryads and found my thoughts returning to Cade. Why had he gotten so angry? It had been a fair exchange. He had been after me to wear the collar for so long, but when I finally put it on, he'd been furious.

The poison glinted in the morning light, dripping onto the ground. I thought again about how Cade's magic had gotten wilder and wilder, his temper shorter and shorter just in the short time I'd been here.

The dryad trees shrank by increments, losing their bulk and size and greenery until it was a circle of mostly human-sized dryads again. The elder tree nodded her head at them, and the other four disappeared into the forest, each headed in a different direction. Then she turned to me. A line carved her face from the corner of her eye to her mouth, as black as a burn mark.

I gestured at my own face. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. The poison ran deeper than we suspected. It has been here a long time." She approached, then sat down next to me, her wooden clothing crunching the dried leaves underneath her.

We both stared at the exposed roots sticking up into the air.

"Will it still poison the magic?" I asked.

“We have given them some relief, but unless the source of the poison is discovered, it will continue to spread.” The elder tree wrapped her arms around her knees, bringing them close to her chest. “I admit to being surprised.”

“At the extent of the poison?” I asked.

“At the fact of your existence,” she said. “Prince Bartlett has long been a follower of his father’s. We have observed this from afar. He wants peace, as his father did. It would have been easy for him to lay claim to every inch of the reclaimed lands that we cleared, yet he let us keep the territory.”

“Until he forced you to give them up,” I pointed out.

“Until we needed something from him that would make it an equal exchange.”

A bird landed on the fallen tree, digging its beak into the soft, decaying trunk.

“What will you do with them?” I asked. “The wolves? They’re children. They’re not a real pack.”

The question lingered on my mind, a carrion eater perched on a telephone wire, waiting for its prey to die. Wolf pups without the protection of a pack had value. Human traffickers would pay top dollar for them.

“Likely use them as intended.” The elder dryad considered me.

I took a long breath in, already planning. As soon as the wolf pups crossed the border to the dryads’ territory, I should be able to get them out. I could sneak out using one of the holes along the wards, track around Cade’s territory, and then —

“On our side, there is a small town nestled in the mountains. It has become a home for those without one. A fae princeling lays claim to it, but we protect it. There’s a school, although there are rarely enough children for a full class.” The dryad closed her eyes. “It is a sanctuary more than a home. Most do not stay for longer than a few years.”

“And for this sanctuary, all they’ll have to do is agree to be your guard dogs. Track down whatever is disrupting your forest.” The image of the small town lingered behind my eyes, though. What would my life have been like if I had found that town rather than Declan Monroe’s open arms?

“We need them for their noses, not their teeth,” the dryad said. “Oak was not wrong. We disagree with ownership of any sort. Should the children refuse to help us, they’re welcome to stay or leave. It is not our collar that they wear.”

Self-consciously, I raised a hand to my neck, feeling the leather. I had almost forgotten it was there. After seeing so many wolves wearing them, I’d begun to not even see them. Last night, I had barely even noticed them on the wolves who had run with me.

“What did you mean that Prince Bartlett was a follower of his father’s?” I asked.

“Simply that his father chose to take no consort, and we had thought Prince Bartlett fell along the same lines.” The elder dryad looked back at the tree trunk, tilting her head and observing the bird as it hopped up and down the trunk, searching for insects.

There was no way I could tell them that Cade did, although likely not for the same reason that his father hadn’t taken a consort. Cade’s decision was born out of fear, out of the sort of trauma no one should have to go through. Why hadn’t his father taken a consort? His dad hadn’t had the excuse of a parental murder to keep him from the tradition.

“Do you know why his father chose not to take a consort?” I asked. “Cade’s pretty tight-lipped when it comes to his dad—you know, because of the whole murder thing.”

“No, he wouldn’t want to speak much of his father.” The dryad shook her head. “From my understanding, he found an alternate way to rid himself of the excess magic.”

I started to ask *what excess magic*, then snapped my mouth shut. This was something she clearly expected me to understand, and if I revealed that I had no idea what she was

talking about, she could figure out I wasn't actually Cade's consort.

"Are there any other wolves in this town of yours?" I asked. "Or is this going to be like the city dancing kid moving into a small no-dancing town?"

"No. It has been many years since wolves have roamed our forests." The dryad tilted her head. "Eleven years, in fact."

"Eleven years? That's a very specific number. Almost like it lines up exactly with the death of Cade's father," I said. "Does it have anything to do with that?"

"Eleven years ago, a pack passed through. As far as I know, they didn't even interact with the town. They used our forests for a month or so, then disappeared. We found out about the death of King Bartlett several months after the fact. Whether or not they aligned, we don't know."

"Yeah, it's not like they were sending out calendar reminders about the death." I frowned, remembering how Cade had said they locked down the estate for weeks afterward.

It couldn't have been the Castillo Pack. My parents had come alone. My siblings and I had been watched over by one of the pack aunties, and everyone else had stayed in Flores.

So who could the pack have been? And why had they been here?

A branch cracked, and Jesaiah trotted out of the woods. He narrowed his eyes at me.

I stood, nodding at the elder dryad. "Thanks for the company. And for reassuring me about what will happen to the pups."

"I'm glad to have helped." She stood, tilting her head down to gaze at me. "Despite my misgivings, I am glad that Prince Bartlett has found a consort who he can trust."

"Yeah, well, someone has to protect him from a shiv in the back." I nodded again. "I'm going to head out."

I didn't wait for acknowledgment, shifting back into a wolf smoothly.

It felt like water grinding a groove through rock. Each time I did it, it became easier and faster. Soon, I would be back to normal.

I needed to talk to Cade, whether he wanted to or not. Turning, I headed straight back to the king's house.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-SEVEN

When I reached the king's house, I trotted up the stairs. Ignoring propriety, I didn't shift before coming in, pacing through the house in my wolf form.

"There you are," Jay said. He was standing in front of the library door, clutching a clipboard in his hands. "People have been looking for you, but I put them off."

I jerked my chin up, then down.

Jay seemed to understand what I wanted. "Of course. Go change. I'll be here."

I leapt up the stairs, taking them four at a time. When I was just outside Cade's room, I shifted into my human form. The house was nearly empty again. It had been strange seeing so many people there overnight. I was used to the quiet, just the two of us and the servants in the house.

Inside Cade's room, I grabbed clothes that had been set neatly out for me. Whether it was Cade or one of the servants, I appreciated the thought. When I was dressed, I walked back downstairs, the feeling of wolf still buzzing under my skin.

"Do you need a cooldown?" Jay asked when he saw me. "The two scouts are in the resting room if you want to meet them."

I needed a cooldown, probably more than I ever had in my entire life. But I couldn't afford to take one. My questions for Cade had to take priority.

“The scouts?” I asked, then shook my head, remembering the pair of consorts I had sent out.

But no, it was well over three hours later. I should have sent out another missive, alerting everyone to a new schedule so no one was pushed to exhaustion.

“Nothing new. No new disturbances, nothing to report.” Jay held out the clipboard, and I took it, seeing four sets of reports.

“You sent out a new schedule?” I frowned down, seeing spaces and names for the next thirty-six hours.

“No, I thought you did. It arrived via magic last night.” Jay squinted at me, but I waved him off.

“Sorry, I was so tired. Cade must have sent it out for me.”

“Of course,” Jay said.

I skimmed the reports again, but Jay was right. There was nothing to report, no disturbances, no indications of any new gaps in the wards.

“Did you send a copy of this to the war council?” I asked.

“Yes. They’re still meeting about it.” Jay looked at me, frowning. “Why aren’t you with them?”

“I had something else to attend to.” If Cade was with the war council right now, that put them in the secret magical chamber, beyond my reach. I would have to wait for them to finish.

As though hearing my problem, Isaac appeared next to Jay, shaking his head.

“Ridiculous.” He blinked when he saw me. “You would have been able to talk some sense into him.”

“I’m sorry to tell you, but that’s beyond me.” I smiled, trying to make light of it. “Sure, I can disarm a nuclear weapon, but talk sense into Cade? Not in my job description.”

Isaac gave me a hard look. “What exactly *is* your job description?”

“To protect Cade,” I answered immediately.

“Well, you need to go protect him from himself,” Isaac said.

Jay put a hand on his wrist, squeezing, and Isaac looked down where their skin touched. He let out a long breath. He covered Jay’s hand with his own, and something passed between them, almost translucent, but it was like looking at a rainbow out of the corner of my eye. I definitely saw it.

“Where is he?” I asked.

“Leon said he had to talk to him.” Isaac frowned at me. Raising his hand, I felt his magic wrap around me.

When it disintegrated, floating off into the air, I was in the chamber.

In his seat all the way across the table from Cade, Leon leaned forward, his lips compressed in a tight line. Cade was standing next to his chair, his back to Leon, one hand grasping the top of his chair tightly. They both turned to stare at me, and I came forward into the light, walking around the table so I could see the expression on Cade’s face.

He turned away from my eyes, but not before I saw the wrinkles on his forehead, the creases between his brows.

“You’re sure?” he asked.

“Positive. The dryads said the poison was magical. It’s poisoning the magic of House Bartlett.” Leon leaned back in his chair, observing me.

“Has anyone felt the effects yet?” I asked.

“As I was telling Prince Bartlett, we have yet to see anyone experiencing the effects.” Leon shook his head. “But that doesn’t mean that no one is. They might be hiding it, or they might not understand what’s happening.”

Leon pushed himself up to his feet. “I must go check in with Jesaiah, make sure that the dryads have finished their work.”

Cade waved him off, still refusing to turn around. When I heard the audible pop of Leon's teleportation magic, I waited a few moments before talking.

"Are we safe to talk freely?" I asked.

Cade swallowed. "It was the only thing I could think of. There is no other way off the property for them."

It sounded almost as though Cade was asking for forgiveness, as though he was apologizing. I blinked but bit down on the growl that wanted to come out, the anger churning in my chest.

Children I had taken under my protection as alpha were being sold.

"Are we safe to talk freely?" I repeated.

Cade looked at me, his eyes wide, his forehead still creased. He waved his hand, and I felt the painful experience of his teleportation magic before we landed in his room.

"What?" he asked.

"The poisoned magic," I started.

Cade tried to wave me off. "Yes, Leon told me what the dryads said—"

"Is that what's poisoning your magic?" I demanded.

Cade blinked, the wrinkles on his forehead relaxing, his eyes opening wide with surprise. "What?"

"Your magic. It's painful when no one else's is. You lose control of it quickly. It turns your eyes black. In the past couple of days, you've been... not right." I looked him over, the waxy complexion, the strain. "You look sick. You *look* like you're being poisoned."

Cade's entire face went slack, and then he began to laugh, tilting his head back and covering his eyes with the palms of his hands. His shoulders trembled, and when he finally regained control, he shook his head at me.

Without speaking, he walked over to the wall, opening the panel that hid Basil's cage. Next to it was a small box filled

with live mice. He plucked out one and handed it over to me.

It was the size of my thumbprint, blind, and nearly hairless. Clearly, it had just been born. It opened and closed its lips, searching for food.

Cade closed the panel.

“Come with me,” he commanded. Raising his hands, he drew a circle in the air. Dark lines of tattoo in a language I didn’t read flowed from his fingertips, creating two interlocking circles that moved in opposite directions.

Cade stepped through and seemed to shrink, as though he was walking away so quickly that he had to be drawn in perspective.

He turned and looked over his shoulder, raising an eyebrow.

“Excuse me for not wanting to walk into a Salvador Dali painting,” I muttered.

“You make fun of museums, but you know about *Salvador Dali*?” Cade snapped. “Follow me.”

I stepped into the circles. The world turned into streaks of color around us, and in the distance, I saw darkness that grew larger the closer we walked.

When we stepped out, we were in a cave. I smelled the moisture that collected on the walls, the moss growing in the darkness. A river flowed underneath our feet, the sound a distant roar, like listening to a waterfall miles away. A single ray of light lit the cavern in front of us from a large hole in the ceiling.

There were stone seats carved into the walls, and a cracked round table that had been worn down with age and damp. A statue of an ancient King was slowly crumbling next to one of the seats.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“When my ancestors took over this land, they stole it from the native population. In the natural course of things, *anyone* who lives here would have a right to the magic that flows

under the ground.” Cade gestured through the air, as though the magic was a tangible thing he could touch. “But the Bartletts intertwined their own magic with the ley lines so only people of our line would have the power of this land. This was where they did the magic. And this is still where we teach the children of our house the cost of magic.”

He walked to the center of the cavern, and I saw an enormous maze carved in the stone ground. Each of the maze walls was only three inches high, and it looked more like a marble maze than anything else. Holding out his hand, he gestured for the mouse I still cradled.

It had curled up into a small ball in the center of my palm, whimpering and mewling for its mother.

Uncertainly, I handed it to Cade. He closed his hand around it and walked to the very edge of the maze. Swirling his fingers in the air, he used his magic to drift the mouse to the center.

The thing cried out at the sudden change in temperature. It whimpered, but it didn't have the leg strength to move very far, lifting its body only to plop down in the same spot.

“Be grateful,” Cade said. “The only people who have ever been here are mages of House Bartlett when they learn the price of their power. If anyone knew I brought you here, I would be killed.”

I watched his expression and saw only cold amusement. Something in him had reached the end of his patience, the end of his ability to care.

“Magic cannot be created or destroyed. Like energy, it can only change form. That means that most magic returns to us once the spell is finished, unless you cut the spell entirely off from yourself.” He held up his hand. “But cutting them off would be like cutting off your own hand. When you are a child, the amount of magic you have is not enough to do you any harm when it returns.”

He walked along the edge of the maze and found a large rock set on the side. Crouching down, he tugged it loose, and

water began trickling in, filling the outer layer of the maze at a sluggish pace.

“For some, that is the amount of magic they have for the rest of their lives. A small little trickle of power. They could live to be a thousand, and they would only ever have that much magic. However, for the rest of us, as we age, we gain more and more power.”

He continued pacing along the edge of the maze, finding another embedded rock. He pulled it loose, and the water began flowing in more quickly, flooding the outer layer and following the complicated pattern of the inner layers.

“When you gain more magic and you cannot get rid of it, there are two options.” He bent, pulling loose another stone. “You cut it off, removing it from yourself, destroying yourself in increments. First a pinky, and a ring finger, then a whole hand, then an arm and a leg, until what is left? Nothing but you and magic.”

Bending, he wrapped his hands around a larger stone, yanking it loose. Water began gushing in. It flooded the maze, reaching the innermost layer. A small amount reached the cradle where the mouse was, and the thing began screaming in panic. My heart raced at the sound, my hands opening and closing, but I couldn't look away from Cade, not with that terribly blank expression on his face.

“Or you sacrifice your mind. You go mad. The power drives you insane. It causes you to do terrible things. Until other mages step up and stop you.” He turned his eyes to the mouse, which had desperately begun trying to climb the edges of its trap, trying to keep its head above water. Its weak legs wouldn't let it go high enough, and it slid down.

Without thinking, I stepped forward, walking on top of the maze until I reached the mouse, scooping it out of the water. It trembled in my hand, and I used my shirt to dry it off as much as possible.

“What are you doing?” I demanded. “That was torture. That was cruel.”

“Look down,” Cade said.

Frowning, I looked down. There was a red circle in the center of the maze, exactly where the mouse had been. Still keeping the mouse cradled against my chest, I crouched down and felt the circle with my fingertips.

The water was freezing, deep groundwater that smelled clean from all the layers of earth that had purified it. I felt the circle with my fingertips. It was a plug.

Grabbing hold, I pulled it loose, and water drained out of the maze. With a gesture, Cade plugged the holes along the outer layer, and soon, the maze was dry again.

The mouse mewled in my hand.

I walked over the maze, leaning heavily, but even all my weight couldn't crush it, couldn't destroy it. When I got out, I strode over to Cade, gripping the stone so tightly my knuckles turned white.

With careful control, I tossed it at him, because otherwise I would have thrown it at his head and cracked open his skull. “That was unnecessary. You could have a metaphor without torturing a helpless creature.”

Cade raised an eyebrow. “That mouse is my mind.”

I looked down at the crying thing in my hand. It was blind, still yearning for its mother. Swallowing, I forced calm into my voice. “Then what was the drain?”

“The drain is a werewolf,” Cade said. “Specifically, a consort.”

“Instead of letting themselves go insane, they force it on a werewolf?” I asked.

“Yes and no,” Cade said. He considered the red stone in his hand. “A mage can force their magic into the werewolf, and it is... extremely painful. It breaks some wolves. But if they survive, they are stronger, faster, larger.”

“Like Tyson,” I said. I squinted, imagining what he must have been like before he'd been soaked in magic. “They become like alphas.”

“Yes. The magic isn’t created or destroyed; it simply changes form into the physical in the form of the werewolf. The mage keeps their own equilibrium by forcing their magic on their consort every time they near the point of drowning.” Cade walked back to the center of the maze and pressed the plug back into place.

“Why don’t more mages just cut their spells loose?” I asked. “Is that what Petrona does? She doesn’t have a werewolf.”

Cade smiled thinly. “Imagine knowing that every week or every month, you needed to cut a part of your body off. How long until you went mad from that knowledge? Cutting off magic might not mean cutting off literal limbs, but it is *just* as painful.”

“The darkness in you, the pain, the lack of control—that’s because you’re nearing your tipping point?” I asked.

For a long moment, Cade stared down at the center of the maze. He was haloed in light, the sun turning his hair white and his features ethereal. “My father thought of another way, but it died with him. I have his notes, but I don’t understand them.”

He exhaled a long breath, and his lips twisted into a mirthless expression. “I suppose everyone is right, and I *am* lesser than the sum of my parts.”

“No one thinks that,” I lied. I had only been here a few weeks, and even I knew how few people in his house respected him.

“It doesn’t matter.” Cade looked up toward the light source at the top of the cave, then down at his hand. Tattoos wriggled up his fingers and down his hand. “They’re right. Soon I’ll be mad, anyway.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-EIGHT

I let my eyes roam over Cade, lingering on the creases in the corners of his eyes. “How close are you? Are you nearing the edge, or have you already tipped over?”

Cade stared at the complicated labyrinth on the ground, his shoulders slumping. “Some days, I have no idea myself.”

“Everyone is so surprised at the amount of magic you can do. Is that because of the quantity? You said that few mages are born with the increasing magic anymore.” I stepped forward, yearning to touch him, even though I knew I shouldn’t.

Cade shook his head. “Enough story time for today.”

He turned away from me, and I saw more tattoos crawl over the collar of his shirt. I did the math quickly. The tattoos were, as far as I could tell, his actual magic in visual form. They covered his skin, leaving almost nothing bare.

What would happen when no more of his skin was visible, when the tattoos crawled over his face and hands? Was that the only way I’d be able to tell that he had tipped over the edge?

I reached out, giving Cade time to pull away, then traced my finger over a complicated swirl of tattoo on his throat. It looked like a stylized wave that spun into a long blade when my fingertip pressed against it.

“Why do you always wear such high collars? Why do all mages wear them?” I asked, my voice low.

Cade's flesh jumped, goose bumps appearing on his skin. "For most, it's fashion. Habit from long-dead traditions. Before werewolves, mages put spellwork in their clothes. They designed the spells to contain their magic, keep it from exploding outward. It gave them as much time as possible before they lost their minds."

I ran my hand down his arm and saw one of Cade's tattoos flicker over the back of my hand, burying itself back in his clothing. "Is that why you wear it?"

Cade nodded. His shoulders slumped, and I stepped forward, wrapping my arms around him, drawing him against me.

He leaned back, tipping his head against my shoulder, extending his throat. His eyes were closed, and I gripped him tighter.

"You haven't slept," I observed.

"I couldn't." Cade's chest rose and fell under my arm, his breath uneven.

"When you sleep, you lose control." I thought about the shades around his bed that he still drew tight, even when I slept next to him. The magic that had leaked out from them the first night I had been in his room.

"With all the people in the house, there was too much of a chance that I might think them a... threat." Cade's knees locked, and he tried to take some of his own weight.

He swallowed, and I watched as his eyes closed, moisture in the corners of his eyes.

"Don't leave," he said.

"You aren't paying me to leave," I said, drawing my thumb over the corner of his eyes, lingering on his skin.

"We need to go," he said, voice low. "I'm sorry, Miles."

Then he pushed himself up, drawing his hands in circles until I could see the strange distance-distorting portal again. He shook his head, sniffing once before striding through. I had no choice but to follow.

When we reemerged, we were in front of the king's house. The dryads stood next to four sleek SUVs. Isaac and Jay were coming out of the forest, whispering to each other, but my focus was on Tyson and Sonja where they stood to the side.

I examined him again, the broad shoulders, the confidence. Nothing about him spoke of the wolf he had been, only the wolf he was now. But now that I knew how he'd gained his size and his strength, his aggression seemed like a purse dog snapping at a Doberman. He was aggressive because he had never been taken seriously. Jay and Theo infuriated him because they were who he had been.

Isaac walked quickly over to Cade. "Where are they?"

"Don't worry." Cade's expression was neutral. "I have them."

I raised my eyebrow when I caught Cade's eye, and he shook his head once. If someone on the property was actively working against him, they hadn't gone after the werewolves. Cade's trap was still unsprung.

"Were you able to help us with the disease?" Cade asked the elder dryad.

"We created fungus barriers around the affected trees. But there are more than you know in your forest that are infected." She turned to watch Leon lead two servants out the door carrying luggage.

"These are some gifts that Prince Bartlett thought might help with the new wolves." Leon bowed his head.

"We accept them gratefully," the elder dryad said.

"There are more than the three trees we found?" Cade asked.

"We counted seven. There might be more, but we did not sense any. Their infection might be too underdeveloped." The elder dryad looked at Cade, tilting her head. "We are happy to return and see if we might discover the cause with you."

"You have given us a good starting point for our own research," Cade said.

He stepped back from the group and raised his hands in the air. Turning away from everyone, he spread his palms, tearing the air in front of him.

Sonja gasped, her hand going to Tyson's forearm. Her knuckles whitened, and I could hear her heartbeat, rapid in her chest. She looked at me and frowned, her eyes assessing, as though she was suddenly giving me more credit than I was due.

As though a tapestry had been torn, revealing the wall behind it, Cade's magic exposed the little cell we had left the werewolves in. The light still burned in the corner, and they gaped at the portal appearing in front of them.

Cade huffed out a breath, and his tattoos dripped from his fingers, crawling across the ground until they wrapped around the werewolves' wrists, binding them.

"Come here," Cade commanded.

Justin looked at me, blinking his eyes, squinting into the bright daylight. I nodded my head once, gesturing with my hand, and the wolves stumbled forward. As they walked through the portal, they cried out in pain but muffled it quickly, clumping together with Justin at the head.

"This is them?" the elder dryad asked.

Cade squeezed his palms together, and the portal closed. "Yes."

"Then, we take possession of you. We claim you as ours. You belong to the elder forest now. Do you understand?" The elder dryad spoke calmly, kindly, but when the younger wolves began to cry, the dryad's face scrunched, turning gnarled.

They cried harder, and Justin turned to me. "You said you wouldn't let them enslave us!"

"I said I wouldn't let them kill you," I said.

"Liar!" Tears were leaking from Justin's eyes, but he pulled his shoulders back, his chin going high. "You're no

alpha. You're a traitor. No wonder you have no pack. You *deserve* no last name."

The words hit me as hard as a physical blow. I looked down and away, focusing on the pale concrete under our feet. The driveway had been swept recently, cleaned of any leaves.

"Come, children. The drive ahead of us is long." Oak spoke from behind them, and I heard cries start up harder, a shriek of terror that devolved into helpless sobs.

Something nipped at my hand, the mouse desperately alerting me to its presence before I squeezed it to death. I loosened my grip, and it curled into a small ball again, entirely at my mercy.

When I forced my eyes back up, Oak held the door to one of the SUVs open while the other dryads stood near the other SUVs.

"You should bind them with your own magic," Cade said.

The elder dryad considered Justin, tilting her head to examine him. "I had hoped not to bind them at all, but it looks like it may be necessary."

She extended out her hand, and Justin shut his mouth, tears leaking from his eyes and his lips trembling. My heart wrenched. I had to stop this.

Before I could even think of stepping forward, Cade's hand closed tightly on my wrist. I stared down at him, but he didn't look up to meet my eyes. The cold consolation I had was his promise that this was the only way and the elder dryad's vision of a small village, a perfect sanctuary for children with no home of their own.

I had never been very good at trusting people. Eleven years in his employ, and I still hadn't trusted Declan. How was I supposed to trust these two people who I didn't even know?

The dryads wrapped thin strands of roots around each of the werewolves' hands. Then Cade lazily extended his hand out, drawing his magic back to himself. When it returned, the dryads ushered the children into the SUVs. Mages shut the

door on the cries, and it was silent except for the roaring in my chest, the scream that I couldn't let out.

If I was a real alpha, I would have torn the doors off the SUVs myself. I would have fought anyone who tried to take the pack pups. Instead, I watched Finley salute Cade from the first SUV, get in, and pull away.

The SUVs were gone, and my scream was still in the back of my mouth, lingering in my throat.

"Come on." Cade walked up the stairs, his hand still around my wrist.

"Go on, lapdog," Tyson sneered. "What do you think you're going to do? Let the mages kick your ass?"

"Do you have something to say, Tyson?" I snapped, every bit of my pain and anger coming out at once. "Because as I remember, you got there *third*. I got there first."

"Prince Bartlett!" Sonja drew her chin up. "Contain your consort."

"Contain my consort?" Cade said, his voice strained. "Who are you to tell me what to do with my consort?"

"He is speaking out of turn, and he is insulting my own consort." Sonja glared. "I am well within my rights."

"How is that insulting?" I asked. "He *did* get there third. If he'd had his way, the wolves of House Bartlett would have murdered children. He would have happily coated everyone's hands in blood."

"And now he calls my consort a bloodthirsty murderer!" Sonja stood. "*Muzzle him.*"

"You do *not* tell me how to manage my consort, Sonja Harvey," Cade said, his hand tightening on my wrist like a manacle.

For a moment, Sonja's face was blank, and then her lips pulled back from her teeth, and she said, "Cade—"

"I challenge him," Tyson said.

Jay gasped, and the servants looked at each other in surprise. The sun was suddenly too bright, the grounds around us suddenly too quiet.

“I challenge Miles, consort to Prince Bartlett, to a duel.” Tyson smirked at me. He flexed, as though he wanted to start now. “Unless you’re too scared.”

Cade didn’t turn to look at me, his back as straight as an arrow. It gave me no hints of what I was supposed to do next, so I did the only thing I could think of.

“Fine. I accept.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-NINE

Cade raised his chin, expression blank. He tugged on my arm, and I came even closer.

“Half an hour. The challenge grounds.” He reached up, his fingers brushing the back of my neck, tracing along the edge of the collar. “Prepare your consort.”

Then he walked up the steps and into the house. I followed behind him, unsure of what had just happened.

“Cade—”

I cut myself off when he shot me a nasty look. In his room, he slammed the door behind me.

“What do you think you’re doing?” His voice boomed, turning ragged at the edge of it, sliced with dull scissors and still bleeding.

“He was antagonizing me! He challenged you!”

“He was *provoking* you.” Cade buried his hands in his hair. “Probably on Sonja’s orders.” He bit back a swear.

His fingers fisted in his hair, and shadows twirled from underneath the cuffs of his shirt, circling over the back of his hand and onto his fingers. He turned to me and opened his hand until I handed him the mouse. He placed it in its cage and then shut the terrarium.

With his back to me, he said, “This is just the excuse she needs.”

“So what? I’ll beat him. I can do it.”

Tyson might be dressing up as an alpha, relying on a mage's magic to give him the size and the power. But I actually *was* an alpha. It was in my blood. I could beat him.

“You—” He broke off again, frustrated, digging his hands in his hair again.

“What am I not getting? It's a little hand-to-hand combat. I can beat him.” I walked forward, wrapping one of my hands around Cade's wrist, where it still fisted in his hair. “I'll be fine.”

Cade pulled away, glaring at me. “That's not what a challenge is.”

Frowning, I said, “I've been in enough challenges to know that it's just a dominance game. Sure, a little more bloody than our moms would let us get away with as pups, but nothing more.”

“Not amongst mages. Not with *consorts*.” Cade let out a breath that turned into an unhappy chuckle. “This is how she does it. This is how she proves to them how close I am to the edge.”

“What are you talking about?” I stepped forward, but Cade shied backward. “How does this prove anything about you?”

“Because most consorts are bonded with their mages!” Cade ended on a shout. “It's not a challenge between you and him; it's a challenge between me and her. Her magic against mine. Whatever spells she can shovel on Tyson's wide chest against the magic she assumes I'm going to put on yours. And if you can't control it—if *I* can't control it—then they're going to know that I'm losing my grip. They're going to know...”

“That you're almost flooded. That your metaphorical mouse is almost drowned.” My eyes widened. Then I shook my head. “I can still beat him. I've been in more combat than our little wannabe alpha has played on Call of Duty.”

“Consorts die in duels. It's not just arm wrestling. It's not playing.” Cade's breath came short, but then he blew it out long, controlling himself by increments. “Mages don't like to kill each other in combat, so they kill each other's consorts.”

When you get in the ring with him, he's going to try and kill you."

"I know you might not believe this because of how we met, but I'm actually pretty hard to kill." I tried for a smile but felt it die on my lips. "All evidence aside, I'm a cockroach when it comes to assassination attempts."

Cade's lips twisted, and he approached me, reaching up to brush his fingers over my collar again. Then, he unlatched it, tugging it free, dragging it through his fingers before putting it in his pocket. He wrapped a hand around my throat, his eyes locking on mine.

They were as blue as arctic waters, but I knew I wasn't going to drown in them. He wouldn't let me.

"I'm not paying you to die. You understand?"

"Yes." My heart thudded in my chest, so hard that I knew he had to feel it under his fingertips.

"You aren't allowed to get killed." He tightened his hand for a moment.

"Or what, you're going to kill me yourself?" I murmured. His pink tongue flicked out, wetting his bottom lip.

"Yes. I'm the only one allowed to kill you," Cade said.

I swallowed, his hand still tight against my throat. "Good to know."

Cade stepped back, looking me over. "He's going to be covered in magic. You're going to have to be careful."

I lifted my hand to my neck. "No collars?"

"No." Cade shook his head. "It wouldn't allow people to show off."

"So what am I going to do about the—"

Cold snake skin slithered off Cade's wrist onto my neck.

I'll take care of you, Basil hissed. If you die, can I eat your body? I think it would be... most delicious.

“Sure, if I die, you’re welcome to pig out. Hopefully it means that Cade won’t bring me back just so he can kill me again.” I looked down at my clothes. “Do I wear these?”

Cade pursed his lips. “Yes. And let me just...”

He raised his palm to my chest, and I felt something tickle my skin. Shivering, I pulled my shirt off and stared. Magic clung to my chest.

“What—” I asked, gaping. I poked at one of the lines, but it didn’t move the way that Cade’s did.

“It’s not real,” Cade said quickly. “I can’t actually give you magic without a consort bond. You won’t be able to fight him magic to magic.”

“Don’t worry. I can beat some knockoff alpha.” I had been in worse situations and found my way out. This was nothing. This was playground stuff.

Even I didn’t buy that lie.

He dipped his head, nodding. “Are you ready?”

I took a long breath in. “Anything else I should know? Any unspoken rules or...”

“In the ring, anything goes. I won’t be able to step in and help you.” Cade stuck his hand in his pocket again, and I heard the jangle of the collar clasp.

“Okay.” I nodded. Then, because I couldn’t help myself, I asked, “Does it have to be to the death?”

Cade shook his head quickly. “No. If one of you yields, it’s over.”

“But if I yield, it makes you look weak.” I tried to understand the politics, but it seemed grotesque, a holdover from a time when wolves weren’t even people to mages.

“Yes.” Cade hesitated. “But if you have to yield in order to save your own life—don’t hesitate for that reason.”

“Okay.” I nodded. “I’m ready.”

Cade crossed the room in a few steps, grabbing my face between his hands and dragging my mouth down to his. He kissed me like it was the only thing he wanted to do, like he was the one who was drowning.

When he released me, I almost stumbled. “I’m the only one allowed to kill you, do you understand?”

“Yes,” I said immediately.

“Good.” Cade raised his hand and gestured it through the air, like he was spinning an imaginary ball. Around us, the world shifted and shattered, and suddenly, we were in a large open space.

Seating encircled the arena, and most of the seats were already filled. Apparently, news of the challenge had already gotten around, and everyone was showing up to see who was going to win. The fight was between me and Tyson, but it was clear everyone saw it as an answer to the conflict between Cade and Sonja.

Tyson stood on the other side of the ring, having a quiet conversation with Sonja. They both looked up at our entrance, and she stepped back, extending out a hand. He shrugged out of his shirt, handing it to her.

His chest crawled with tattoos, ones that traced up his neck and down to his navel. There wasn’t a square inch of him that was empty.

Cade turned to me, his eyes dropping to my neck. “Do well.”

“You sure know how to give a pep talk,” I muttered.

Cade shook his head and stepped to the side of the ring, sitting down in one of the seats. He crossed his legs and laid his arms along the armrests, his hands dangling off.

“Consorts, are you ready?” Leon asked. He stood in the center of the ring. Sonja walked past him, ignoring me entirely and sitting next to Cade.

If Cade was trying for insouciant, Sonja looked every bit royal, as though she should be wearing a crown on her head.

Her back was straight, legs crossed at the ankle, chin raised.

Tyson approached Leon, sneering at me. I came close as well. Leon extended out both hands, gesturing to me and Tyson. “Consorts of House Bartlett, you represent your masters. Fight well.”

He snapped his fingers, and his golden magic crawled up his skin and over his body. When he reappeared, he was sitting in the chair next to Cade.

Tyson didn’t wait. He lunged at me so fast that when I sidestepped, he still got claws into my shoulder.

I circled around him, landing a quick one-two combination on his torso. The second hit exploded, throwing me backward and leaving my skin charred and smoking. I shook my hand, blinking to clear my eyes.

Tyson was on me, grinning, his teeth extending long and both hands pinning me to the ground, one hand around my throat.

“Did that hurt?” he sneered.

“Barely even felt it.” I twisted under his hands, bringing my legs up so they crossed in front of his neck, pulling him backward, loosening his grip on my throat. Then I was on top of him, shifting into a wolf as fast as I was able to.

My wolf came instantly, almost painlessly, tearing my shirt and pants. Before I was even fully shifted, my claws and teeth raked into his torso.

He screamed and slammed an elbow into my chest, throwing me off. I felt a millipede of magic crawl across my skin under my fur, and for half a second, I thought it was Cade. It began burying itself into my flesh, eating away like acid. It burned my fur, the acrid scent almost as awful as the line of pure pain. When had he gotten the spell on me?

Physical contact, that elbow to my chest. That was how he transferred the spell to me.

Basil slithered from my neck down my side, and then my skin stopped burning. It wouldn’t heal—the wound was too

deep—but at least it wasn't eating through muscle anymore.

“Awwww. Should I go easy on you?” Tyson laughed, and he moved forward.

This time, I saw the red of Sonja's magic extending out from his palm before he made contact, and I dove away, sliding until I came up behind him. I bit at his knee, wrenching back so that he fell hard onto his stomach.

Before he could use any more of the spellwork tattooed on his body, I danced away. He rolled over, still in his human form, although I saw the beginnings of hair on his chest and arms. His eyes sharpened, gleaming wolfishly, and talons extended out of his fingers.

Snarling, he slashed at me, and I used his movement to bite into his exposed chest. He wrapped an arm around my head, bringing it close, and I could feel the magic crawling over my skin.

He slammed us both into the ground, and Sonja's magic draped over me, pinning me down, trapping me against the bare floor. Tyson kept his face close and hissed into mine.

“You're no alpha. You're weak. The only people you can claim as your own are those pups, and you let *them* get taken by the dryads.” He came even closer, his lips brushing my ear. “You're pathetic. A real alpha never would have let his pack get taken away. He never would have let his pups get enslaved to someone else.”

I roared, feeling my bones pop and my skin strain. He was *right*. That was the worst part. He was right. I had no excuse as an alpha. If my mother had seen me, she would have been ashamed.

The guilt ate through my stomach, twisting it into a tight ball. Bile rose in the back of my throat, and I smelled burning fur as the magic began eating through. This was my fault. I never should have promised those kids anything. I should have fought every member of House Bartlett to get the pups off the property.

I should have begged Cade, begged him to let us go, begged him to have mercy.

Anything to keep those kids safe.

Roaring, I wrenched myself up, the magic shredding like real ropes. I spun around and growled at Tyson. His eyes went wide, but he was too slow. I slammed into him, flying at his chest, tearing through some of the magic. One of the lines withered on his chest, and from the sidelines, Sonja screamed.

Tyson's head snapped to the side, his eyes searching for his mage.

Cade had said that when magic was destroyed or removed it was like cutting off your own hand. Tyson was covered in Sonja's magic. It crawled over his skin. I used that distraction to grab hold of one of the lines on his arm, scratching at it with my claws until it broke, disappearing into the ether.

Sonja cried out again, but it seemed to give Tyson strength. His arm shifted, and he threw me off, dragging his claws over my face, leaving me bleeding.

I limped backward, circling him. Why hadn't he fully shifted yet?

We were both stronger in wolf form. In human form, there were too many exposed body parts and not enough sharp claws and teeth. That had been why I had to attack JD before he had shifted. Human on wolf was always going to lose.

So why was he hesitating?

He can't use his magic when he's a wolf. Look at his arm. It took me a moment to parse Basil's words, but then I saw that his human arm brushed over one of the spells on his chest before Tyson threw it into the air.

I recognized the lines of magic. It was the same type of spell Cade had used to pin me to the wall when we first met. This time, I was ready.

I darted low, then threw myself to the ground, sliding underneath it so the magic flew harmlessly over my head.

If I help you, can I eat your arm? Basil's voice was in my ear.

I growled.

Basil sighed, clearly annoyed. *Fine. But I want lots of mice when this is done.*

I threw myself against Tyson.

Basil was there, and the explosion threw both of us across the arena. I shook my head, shifting back into human form and sprinting at him. Pulling my arm back, I brushed it across my neck, letting Basil crawl onto my hand.

Tyson leapt to his feet, bringing his own arm back, and I saw the tattoos, a thick blackberry bramble on his skin.

At the last second, I dropped to my knees, using momentum to slide me. I punched at his knee, the one I had injured earlier. Basil exploded against his skin, and I heard the snap of bone and tearing of flesh.

Tyson screamed, dropping onto his side and clutching at his leg.

"Yield," I panted.

He glared at me, his canines sharpening. As he shifted, the magic moved from his torso down to his leg, bracing it the way that Theo's leg had been braced the night before.

When he leapt at me, I was ready, grabbing Basil from where he coiled in my palm and stretching the snake between my hands through the air, the most dangerous garrote I'd ever held. I moved to the side, wrapping the line of tattoo around Tyson's throat, drawing it tight and bearing him down, my knees braced against his back.

It choked him out, and he screamed, yelping helplessly.

"Yield to your alpha," I snarled.

Tyson struggled but finally went limp. He pulled up his chin, revealing his throat. Immediately, I let go of Basil, pulling him off Tyson's neck.

I should have felt proud. I should have felt satisfied. In all my years with Declan's crew, I had never tried to claim a position as alpha. I had always been too scared of what it would mean.

My stomach churned. It didn't feel like a victory.

Turning away, I walked off into the darkness.

CHAPTER
FORTY

Cade found me, his footsteps quick as he caught up to me. He wrapped one hand around my wrist, and his magic squeezed us tight. When we appeared in his bedroom, I welcomed the pain, the agony of having my skin stripped off millimeter by millimeter.

“Here.” Cade reached out, grabbing a robe from the bed. He wrapped it around my shoulders. I stared down at the ground, my body aching, my muscles in pain. The scratch on my face was trying to heal, but it was too dirty, and sweat clung to my body.

“You won,” Cade said. He stared at me, his mouth working for a moment before he snapped it shut.

I screwed my eyes shut, grinding the palms of my hands into my eye sockets. I’d won—I should feel victory. Instead, Tyson’s submission hung over my heart, weighing me down. I had claimed another werewolf, one I had no interest or ability to protect.

The pups’ cries still rang in my ears. Tyson’s submission wrapped around my lungs, making it impossible for them to expand.

“Here.” Cade grabbed hold of my wrist, then slid his hand down to my palm so that our fingers were intertwined. He drew me into the bathroom, turning on the shower and waiting with one hand under the spray. When he was satisfied, he slid the robe from my shoulders and nudged me inside.

He stripped, and then he was in the shower with me. I couldn't even look at his skin, still remembering how Tyson had been covered, how every inch of him had been given to Sonja's magic.

Using one of the washcloths, Cade worked it to a lather, then began stroking it gently over my neck and chest. As he washed me, the fake tattoos he'd painted on me faded away. I closed my eyes, but I felt none of Cade's soft strokes over my body, the gentle way he worked sweat and dirt from my skin.

I heard him inhale once, as though struggling before saying something. But then he exhaled sharply, staying silent.

"Come here," he coaxed, pressing his thumbs to the back of my neck. I tilted my head back into the spray of water, letting it sluice over my face and dig into my hair.

With a sigh, I let the tears begin to fall. They were covered by the water cascading over my body. Cade worked his fingers through my hair, the shampoo a gentle, nearly floral scent.

As he rinsed my hair, the hiccuping sobs lessened, so when he turned me around, my eyes were clear.

Even though I wasn't crying, he traced his thumbs under my eyes, wiping away the last of the moisture. He frowned. "But you survived."

"It's not that." I swallowed.

Cade reached behind me. He turned off the water and stepped out the door. Grabbing one of the fluffy towels, he wrapped it around my shoulders.

Using one corner of the towel to dry my neck, Cade said, "Then what is it?"

"I'm not an alpha. I can't be." I swallowed the words that wanted to come out, that wanted to explain.

"I think it's pretty clear that you are. That was how you won without killing him." There was something hesitant in Cade's words. He was feeling in the dark, looking for a light switch.

I shook my head. It was too hard to explain—there were too many pieces that I couldn't. Finally, I settled on the one thing I could tell him.

“My mother never would have had to do that.” It was true, but it was nowhere near the whole truth.

“Your mother was an alpha?” Cade asked quietly.

I nodded.

“She was an alpha by blood, like me. My dad used to tell the story about how she became his alpha. He'd grown up in a fundamentalist pack—the ones with the strict hierarchy,” I explained when Cade frowned in confusion. “You don't question your parents, you don't question your alpha. The word of the alpha is the word of god.”

Cade watched me, still close. The droplets of water lingering on his skin were slowly drying, and his tattoos stayed still. It was easier to focus on the ink on his skin, the jagged lines of a sword, a knife, the thorns of a rose, the magic in him, than it was to focus on his eyes. If I looked into his eyes, I would remember who my parents were and who *his* parents were.

“My dad stopped believing when he was a teenager, but he couldn't leave until college. Then he told his parents he wasn't coming back. He met my mom when she was doing outreach for unaffiliated wolves.” I quirked my lips at his raised eyebrows. “That's the polite way to say no pack, no last name. Anyway, they started talking, and she *listened* to him. She already had a small pack then, just a couple of members—college students who felt naked without a pack, so she would be their alpha, and they could feel safe. He said he knew she would be a good alpha because she could have forced any number of the unaffiliated to be in her pack, to submit to her, but she didn't. She let them choose their own path.”

I couldn't help myself. I reached out with a fingertip and brushed it over the swirling rosebush vine on Cade's shoulder. When I followed it to the end, a single perfect rose bloomed under my fingertip.

Cade shivered, his breath hitching. “So you feel bad that you forced Tyson to submit?”

“I didn’t just force him to submit. I claimed him as an alpha. But it wasn’t just him. I claimed the pups in the forest. I’m becoming the sort of alpha that my dad ran away from. I’m becoming the sort of alpha that my mother would have challenged and won against.” I fisted my hands, then loosened them and pulled the towel from my shoulders.

Gently, I wrapped it around Cade, drying the last trace of moisture from his shoulder.

“So the alpha of your father’s childhood pack would have claimed several pups to protect them from being murdered? He would have claimed them even though it meant losing the glory of a successful hunt? He would have put his own freedom up for trade in order to save their lives?” Cade’s words were quiet, and he spoke to the edges of the towel as I dried under his chin.

“No, but—”

“He would have used his position as alpha to claim a rival rather than proving once and for all that he was the more powerful wolf by killing him in combat?” Cade wrapped his hand around mine, forcing me to look at him.

I was drowning, and he was throwing a rope into the water, giving me a single thing to grab hold of and save my life.

“It’s not like that. It’s a violation. I took away their ability to choose.” My breath hitched when Cade raised a hand to my cheek.

“You saved their lives. Tyson was counting on killing you. Which means the only way to stop him would be to kill him or to claim him.” Cade stared at me. “I understand why you’re conflicted, but you need to ask yourself what your choice was. Not paint yourself as the villain because it makes you feel better about the guilt.”

I stared at him. If he knew who my mother was, who my father was, he would know exactly who the villain was in this situation.

Cade's thumb brushed over my cheekbone, stroking across the skin. His fingertips dipped lower, pressing on my lips.

"You didn't die," he observed.

"So you don't have to bring me back so you can kill me." When I smiled, I felt it move his fingertips.

Then one of them dragged across my lower lip. I shivered. Even though that was the only place we were touching, my skin felt raw and desperate.

"No. I don't think I could ever kill you. And since I'm the only one allowed to..."

"Is that how you're going to get me to live forever?" I smiled again and this time let my lips fall open so his forefinger dipped inside. I suckled and watched him inhale sharply, his breath coming unevenly.

I pressed forward, and his finger slipped out of my mouth, and then both of his hands were in my hair, dragging me into a kiss. He moaned against my lips.

I lifted him up, wrapping his legs around my waist and stumbling the last few steps to the bed. The damp towel fell on the mattress first, and I threw him down. He tugged the towel loose, tossing it to the side.

He was spread out underneath me, pale flesh cut with dark black lines. For a long beat, I looked at him, the taut lines of muscle, the slender waist, and long, lean legs. His eyes were luminously blue, and his blond hair looked almost white against the sheets.

He gazed up at me with wide eyes, and he brought one hand up, tracing the line from my shoulder down to my hand where it rested on the mattress next to him. He wrapped his palm around my wrist, squeezing once.

I felt it in my cock, and my eyes snapped to him once again.

"Lie down. On your back," he said.

After a moment of hesitation, I obeyed, and he slid himself over me. The feel of his soft skin against mine made me

growl, and I brought both hands to his hips, thrusting up, our cocks sliding against each other.

He tsked, then took hold of my wrists and placed my hands on my pelvis, pressing them firmly against my hip bones. “Don’t move.”

As I inhaled, whatever I wanted to say died in my throat when he slid down, placing himself between my legs and swallowing my cock in his mouth. His head bobbed up and down, the slurping impossibly hot.

I whimpered, a whine that built in the back of my throat and choked me. He sucked, one hand gently cradling my balls, squeezing just slightly, the slightest bit of threat that made it that much hotter.

As he sucked on me, I realized how much I wanted to reach up and dig my fingers into his hair, how much I wanted to press my hand to the back of his skull and thrust up into the warm, wet heat. My palms were too hot on my hip bones, framing my cock. They burned, the skin searing, my breath short and desperate.

“Cade,” I whimpered, practically begging.

Sucking hard, he drew his mouth off my cock, releasing it with a pornographic pop. My cock was so hard that I had to look away, or I was going to come just from the sight of Cade’s plush lips pink and swollen, his eyes luminous, his smirk wrecking me.

“Don’t move,” he ordered.

I had no choice but to obey. I always had to be in charge, always the one giving orders, the one who made decisions.

I remembered how it was when Cade and I had gone into battle together. He had looked to me, trusting my experience more than he trusted anything else. There was something impossibly good about letting him take charge, letting him be the one to make all the decisions. The whine built in my throat again, and Cade climbed up onto his knees, pressing his forefinger to my lips. He shushed me gently, even as he began rolling his hips, our cocks sliding together, the only lubrication

his spit and the precome I could feel leaking from the tip of my cock.

Cade smirked. “Is there something you want?”

I didn’t even have words, so desperate to move that I could only growl. His smirk grew. With his position, every thrust brushed against the backs of my fingers, and when he bared his teeth, I fully expected to see fangs.

“Are you sure? There’s nothing you want?” Cade teased.

“More.” It was all I could manage because there was too much I wanted.

I wanted to reach up and grab hold of his hips, thrust inside him and make him keen, make him come apart. I wanted him to go back to sucking my cock. I wanted him to keep doing what he was doing, ride me to the edge forever, keep me there until I lost my mind.

“More.” He tilted his head, considering. “All right.”

His hips stilled, and I cried out, unable to keep myself from thrusting up. As my hips rose, he lifted himself off me, tsking softly.

“If you can’t follow directions, then I’m going to have to tie you up.” His eyes lit at that, and I couldn’t help the sigh that left my throat at the image.

If he tied me up, I would be at his mercy. He could do whatever he wanted to me.

Cade moved to the bedside table, rummaging inside it, and I saw the leather collar laid out on top. He emerged with lube, and I exhaled in relief. At least something was happening. As he flipped open the top, slicking his fingers up, my hips jerked and trembled.

Then he slid his fingers down his back, into his ass, arching so that he was entirely on display as he prepared himself.

The sound I made wasn’t human. It wasn’t even werewolf—it was made of pure desperation, and my hips thrust up, even with my hands trying to press them down.

Cade's eyes fluttered shut, and his lip curled. "Patience."

He reached down with his free hand and flicked at his nipple, rolling the nub between his fingers and grinning at me expectantly.

"The collar," I said. I wasn't sure where the word had come from, but it burst out of me, desperation making it something else. "Put it on me."

Cade stilled, his eyes going wide, his mouth falling open.

Then he scrambled for the leather, the first sign of clumsiness I had seen in him. His hands trembled, and I took a risk, pulling my hands from my pelvis and using my elbows to push me up so that my head could move far enough forward and he could wrap the collar around my neck.

His hands were gentle, stroking the skin before he slid the leather around my throat. When he latched it shut, he slid two fingers between my flesh and the collar, checking it wasn't too tight.

With the collar around my neck, I felt as though I'd plunged off a high wire and been caught by a safety net. I didn't have to be scared when he would catch me.

Cade had been the first one to see me in so long that I had forgotten what I looked like. He didn't see a threatening alpha, a werewolf who was nothing more than an extension of Declan Monroe's whims. He saw me as someone with potential, someone he could trust.

I wanted to be that trustworthy. I wanted to be the alpha he had seen before he'd ever met my wolf.

I relaxed back on the bed, looking up at Cade. He grabbed hold of my wrists again, placing my palms on his hips. I stared up at him, watching his lithe, smooth body. He held himself above my cock, spreading more lube on his fingers and then reaching back again, stretching himself open. With the arch of his back, every muscle was on display, every line of his body, and every artful stroke of tattoo.

His eyes closed, and he pulled his fingers free, then reached back and grabbed hold of my cock. He sank down

with no warning, and suddenly, I was enveloped in a warm, slick tightness that left me breathless.

“Is this what you want?” he asked.

My hands tightened on his hips.

“Yes,” I breathed.

“You want me to fuck you?” he asked.

I didn’t even need to answer, tightening my hands as he sank down fully. My entire cock was sheathed in him, and I wanted to thrust up so badly that I trembled.

Then Cade began to move, rising and falling, biting his lip and holding back moans. I panted, desperate for more, but he had told me not to move, so I didn’t. I let him ride me, let myself lose who I was in that slick heat, that endless motion of his body against mine.

He cracked his eyes open, smiling in pleasure.

“You’re being so good for me,” he said.

“Want to be good for you,” I said breathlessly, still helping him balance with my hands, holding my entire body tense.

“You’re not going to move,” he said in wonder.

“You told me not to.” My voice cracked on the last word, and I had to shut my eyes, screwing them closed so I wouldn’t be able to look at how hot he was, at how perfect his body looked riding my cock.

“You’re *safe*,” Cade said in wonder.

My eyes snapped open, and I searched his face. He hadn’t said it to reassure me but to reassure himself I was safe for *him*. I wasn’t going to hurt *him*.

I wanted to demand more information, demand to know who had hurt him, demand to know how long ago it had been and where they were so I could make sure they understood what they had done was unacceptable.

Cade looked away, pressing one palm to my chest while his other wrapped around his own cock. Then he began

moving faster, riding so hard that the bed shook and creaked. I had no room in my head for thoughts, nothing but the desperation I felt. I couldn't grab hold of him tighter; I couldn't force him to stay while I thrust into him. Instead, every muscle in my arms was tense, keeping myself from digging my fingers into the soft flesh of his ass.

I needed more, and he gave it to me, pushing me higher and higher until I fell over the edge, white pleasure rushing through me as I pulsed inside him.

Cade whined, crying out my name, and then I felt streaks of warm come on my stomach.

When I came to myself, he was laid out on top of me, his body relaxing, the come sticky between us. He shifted, and I slipped from his ass. He made an unhappy grunt.

"We should clean up," I said.

Cade huffed unhappily but pushed himself off me and went to the bathroom.

I moved to follow him, but he shot me a look over his shoulder, and I stayed on the bed until he returned with a damp washcloth that he used to clean my chest and groin. He was gentle with my cock, stroking it so carefully that it gave one last twitch of interest.

He smirked at me, then returned to the bathroom. I heard the water running again, and then he was back in bed next to me.

"Here," he said.

He grabbed pajamas from the foot of the bed and tossed them to me. Lazily, I slid them on.

"We should go to sleep," he said.

There was tension in his voice. That wasn't what he wanted to say.

"Are you okay?" I asked, suddenly remembering what I had realized. Someone had hurt him.

He waved me off, then looked down at his hands. There was a second identical pair of pajamas in them, dark gray pants, a black shirt. He pulled them on.

“I don’t actually remember my parents dying.” He adjusted the collar of his shirt, refusing to meet my eyes. “I remember the door bursting open. I’d been playing chess with my father, and all the pieces spilled on the floor. My mother shoved me in the closet. But I didn’t even see what came in. I didn’t even see the wolves.”

I stayed silent, biting down all my questions.

“I heard screaming, and I heard them... I heard them get killed. But the closet doors wouldn’t open. I pounded on them, but Mom had done something to them, used the last of her magic to keep them shut, to keep me safe... All I know was that it seemed like hours later when Leon opened the door, and my parents were dead, and the wolves were dead, and he was injured. He had wolf scratches on his chest and arms. He told me what happened. He saved me. I could see where the wolves had almost gotten through the closet door. They’d shredded the wood, nearly to me when Leon stopped them.” Cade swallowed, his story finished.

When he looked at me, his eyes were wet, and he wiped his nose with the back of his hand. “I felt so empty, but somehow, I just kept living. And having nightmares. My parents’ magic didn’t return to House Bartlett’s ley lines when they died; instead, it stayed here. In the house. It was in every shadow, every nightmare. Everyone else left because they knew it was toxic. It was going to kill them. I should have... I should have found a way to send it back. To send it back to the land, but instead, I held on to it, and then, somehow, it became mine. It was the last thing I had of them. I didn’t realize how much space the magic was taking up until it was too late. Until I was halfway to madness. Do you know what that’s like?”

I knew exactly what that was like. I knew what it felt like to lose who I was, to lose who I would ever be, and only come to consciousness when it was too late, when I was already Declan’s favored enforcer, when the only person I could be was someone I never would have wanted to meet.

“I feel like you’re the only person who’s even seen me in years,” Cade said. He reached out, cupping my cheek. I raised my hand and covered his hand with my own. We both smiled sadly.

“We should sleep,” he said. I nodded in agreement.

“Good night,” I murmured.

“If I hurt you in the night, wake me up,” Cade said. Then he turned his body to me, curving in a semicircle. He reached out, grabbing hold of my hand, and I had no choice but to curve into him, becoming the second half of the circle.

His eyes closed instantly, and I tried to follow him into sleep, but too many things swirled in my head. Before I could make sense of any of them, darkness took me.

When I came back to consciousness, Cade was dying.

CHAPTER
FORTY-ONE

Cade screamed, the magic on his body smoking. His tattoos shifted into weapons, every single one of them. He writhed, and when I reached out for him, some of his magic crawled onto my skin, twisting the flesh so tightly the bones in my hand popped and broke. They swirled up my arm, twisting around my forearm. I rolled backward, trying to claw them off, but the tattoos were in my skin, in my flesh.

Basil slithered down my arm, looping twice just below my elbow. His scales pulsed, creating a barrier between me and the attacking magic.

“Cade! Cade!” I yelled his name, but Cade’s eyes rolled back in his head, and his body jerked.

My stomach twisted. Was this what it was like? Was this how he went over the edge?

His body wrenched, arms twisting, neck cracking. His mouth opened, blood pouring over his lips and staining the white sheets.

Someone pounded on the door, but I could see the magic crackling around the doorframe, sealing us in. Thick, thorny vines of tattoo wrapped around the cracks in the door. The entire room was Cade’s nightmare, and his magic was eating him from the inside out. Soon, there would be nothing left of him.

“Cade!” I risked grabbing him again with the arm that Basil was protecting.

When I shook him, he went slack, and for a second, I thought he was dead. Then, one of his fingers twitched, and he brought it up, wrapping it around my wrist.

The magic leapt from my skin to his fingers.

“Get away.” The words were slurred, garbled by the blood pooling in his mouth.

The pounding on the door intensified, and I saw layers of other magic, gold, red, blue, around the edges of the door as whoever was on the other side tried to get in.

“No. Never.” I swallowed. “Give it to me. Feed me your magic, give your body a rest.”

Cade’s eyes rolled to me, one side of his lips quirked up. Then he closed his eyes, shaking his head.

“Cade, I can take it.” I wasn’t even sure what I was offering. But I couldn’t let him die like this, not when I needed his presence at my side.

“I couldn’t.” Cade gasped, reaching his arm toward the window. The thorny, black vines that were growing over it drew themselves back into him, and he coughed up more blood, the liquid spreading on the bedsheets obscenely. “Miles, get out. They’re going to blame you. Run for the dryads’ territory.”

I tightened my grip on him, “No. You didn’t pay me to run.”

The door burst open, shards of wood flying toward us. I threw my body on top of Cade’s, trying to protect him.

“Get that animal off him!”

Hands grabbed at me, but I resisted, trying to stay with Cade. Magic wrapped around my neck and arms. I screamed when it reached the broken wrist and hand.

The agony ripped through my brain, sending my vision spinning. As I collapsed down, magic yanked me off the bed and pinned me against the wall. The thorns from Cade’s vines dug into my back, drawing blood, binding me against the wall,

and I was forced to watch as Cade seized on the bed, his spine arching.

Leon, Petrona, and Sonja were in the room. Tyson hung back by the door, but Jesaiah was at his master's side. I didn't understand what the mages were saying, only catching snippets of it. The vines wove their way under my flesh, digging in. I felt Basil slither over my body, but he was no match for Cade's out-of-control magic.

"He's tearing down the house." Sonja gestured to the walls, then stalked across the room to me, her face furious. "How dare you. Poisoning your master?"

"Help him," I managed.

"We need to cut off the poisoned magic," Petrona said.

"That hasn't been done by force since before we were children," Leon said severely. He stood next to the bed, close but out of reach of Cade's black lines of magic.

Beside him, Jesaiah raised a hand, gripping Leon's shoulder. Leon looked over at him, his eyes relaxing. He nodded.

"We need to do it now." Petrona rolled up her sleeves, and I saw blue whorls on her flesh. They looked old, like tattoos faded from age. But when she touched them, they slithered off her skin quickly. "Will you help me, Leon?"

He nodded sharply, then glanced at Sonja. "Keep Miles over there. If it is the consort bond that's contaminating Cade's magic, cutting off the poisoned pieces might shatter their bond entirely."

"Tyson," Sonja said sharply.

The werewolf picked his way through the room, hesitant for the first time since I had met him. He looked at me, brows drawn together. I had claimed him as part of my pack, but now the woman he loved was telling him to hurt me.

"It's okay," I managed, gritting my teeth through the agony of magical, thorny vines stretching under my skin, slicing

through the flesh at my back. “Whatever you have to do to save him.”

Petrona stood on one side of the bed, Leon on the other. Cade arched in the middle, his entire body pulled taut by whatever magical agony he was going through.

Petrona raised her hands, a webbing of blue fully encasing Cade. Leon did the same on the other side, layering his golden magic on top of hers.

“Prince Bartlett, prepare yourself,” she said.

Then the webbing snapped shut, all gaps closing, leaving him wrapped in blue and gold light. It was as though someone had carved a statue made of pure light that looked exactly like Cade.

His mouth opened, a silent scream that was eaten by Petrona and Leon’s magic. His eyes searched for me, and I tried to yell out for him, but Sonja’s red magic tightened around my throat, digging into my mouth.

The black lines of magic around us disappeared, floating away like ash. Without the thorns of black tattoos digging into my skin, I felt every wound, blood sliding down my legs.

Sonja’s magic wasn’t enough to keep me upright, and I sagged down. Tyson stepped forward, reaching out. For a second, I thought he was going to strike me. Instead, he used his hand to pin me against the wall until I could get my own feet underneath me.

“Is it done?” Sonja asked. She didn’t even look at me.

“Yes.” Petrona reached out her hand, drawing her fingertips down Cade’s cheek, her blue magic returning to her.

Leon swirled one of his hands over the other, his gold magic coming back to him like wool becoming a skein of yarn. He shook his head sadly.

“Petrona, there is a reason we do not do this by force. That amount of magic removed from him, even if it was poisoned —”

“It is done,” Petrona said shortly. “Now we just need to wait to see if it broke his mind.”

“What should I do with him?” Sonja’s voice made it clear that she would prefer to kill me outright, a casualty no one would miss.

“Detain him,” Leon said firmly. “He tried to kill Prince Bartlett. We need to know who taught him how—we need to know exactly what he did. If Prince Bartlett wakes, he can manage his consort’s punishment.”

I didn’t bother protesting when Sonja twisted her magic around me even further, binding my legs and arms before dragging me through the house. An entire wall had fallen. Cracks decorated the ceiling, and furniture was shattered and tossed around haphazardly.

I could smell the trail of blood I was leaving behind as Sonja pulled me out the back door, hauling me across the lawn and through the forest. Sticks and stones scratched my skin, but it was nothing on the agony of my back where Cade’s magic had torn most of the skin.

When we reached the three small cells, she pulled a key from her pocket, unlocking the far one, the one where rats nested. Using her magic, she threw me inside.

For a split second, I saw Tyson framed in the doorway, something on his face broken. Then, Sonja slammed the door shut, leaving me in darkness.



I stared at the walls around me, unable to move because of the red magic that wrapped my body. I had enough experience fighting against Cade’s to know that struggling would only lead to pain and more broken bones.

Blood trickled down my back, moving more sluggishly now. The cuts burned, dirt and cool air irritating the wounds.

My face ached, and I sighed against the ground, my breath disturbing the dust. Part of me wanted to fall back asleep,

wake up from this nightmare, but the other part of my brain wouldn't stop turning over what had just happened.

The mages had accused me of magic poisoning. I ran through what I knew, pieces fitting together in a way I didn't like. Cade had slowly been revealing all the details of how consorts and mages interacted, and after my fight with Tyson, I had an even better idea.

He had been using Sonja's magic, but it had still been connected to her. If they assumed I was actually Cade's consort and he was giving the magic, then if I poisoned the magic I had, I could poison him.

The reality was I didn't have his magic, and I hadn't poisoned him. Not that anyone would believe me.

Still, I had no explanation for what had just happened. If it wasn't poisoning, then Cade's magic had overtaken him. He had finally lost it, the mouse in the maze finally drowning. I tried not to think what it would be like to have that much magic removed at any one time. He had claimed that removing any bit of magic was like cutting off a piece of your body.

What would it be like to wake up and have that much skin, that many limbs, removed? Would his mind even survive?

I barely noticed the magic Sonja had bound me with disappearing. One moment, I was wrapped up as tightly as a body in a carpet before it was dumped into the ocean; the next, my arms were free, and I rolled face-first onto the ground.

I groaned, getting a mouthful of stale dust for my trouble. In the corner of the room, a rat skittered, climbing invisible crevices in the concrete walls until it disappeared into its nest.

Carefully, I pushed myself up to sitting, wrapping my arms around my knees. The position stretched my back oddly, peeling the wounds open further. I should shift into my werewolf form, try to break free of the cell.

But I knew that was impossible. My mother's ring told me it was impossible. There was no way that she would have submitted, rolled over without fighting, without trying to free herself and my father.

Blindly, I found my way to the wall, tracing until I found the grooves carved by werewolf claws. I placed my own hand in the center, my fingers extended. The thought of her in this dark little room without light left me more defeated than anything else about the situation.

When they killed me, House Bartlett would finally kill the last of my mother's line. They didn't even know they were killing the last Castillo heir.

Rubbing my hands on my face, I could feel the grit I was smearing over my cheeks. No. My mother wouldn't have given up, so I couldn't either.

My stomach rolled in hunger, and I tried to think of the last time I had eaten. Before my fight with Tyson, before the formal dinner, before everything else.

Pushing myself up onto my knees, I managed to get myself to unsteady feet.

My eyes adjusted to the darkness, but I shifted them anyway, my wolf eyes seeing more keenly without light. I had already searched the cell once before, and I knew there was a weakness in this cell. Reaching up, I began pulling out handfuls of rat nest from the corner of the room where the ceiling met the walls. It smelled foul, and I scrunched my nose.

If I survived, I would worry about infection later. As it was, if they killed me, I wouldn't need to worry about where to find a super dose of penicillin.

My right arm was useless, the fingers and forearm still broken. Hopefully, it would heal with time, but more than likely, I would need a doctor.

You should have run, Basil said helpfully.

"Thanks, Basil." I kept digging, hearing the rats skitter away. A brave one nipped at my fingers, but when I grabbed for it, it fled with the rest.

Basil's words rolled around in my head. Why hadn't I run when Cade told me to? Why had I stayed when even Cade knew they were going to kill me as soon as they found me?

I slumped, resting my forehead against the cold wall, my chest rising and falling. I never would have stayed with Declan. If Declan had been dying, my own life on the line, I would have run.

Why was Cade any different?

I knew why. Because of the late nights, the darkness, the quiet words we spoke. It was because he saw me for who I was, and even though he had wanted to run when he saw my wolf, he hadn't.

I still remembered smelling his fingers, the gentle way he stroked my fur.

"I should have run," I said.

Basil hissed, but it sounded like a chuckle. I guess we both knew it was a lie.

I finally reached the edge of the nest, and my fingers felt the cool air outside. Now I just needed to work until the hole was big enough for me to get through. I reached for the edge, pushing and shoving, then tugging until I got a handful of loose concrete. It scratched and shredded my fingertips, but I kept going.

What would I do if Cade died? If he died, then I was alone again. When had he started taking up so much space in my heart that the thought of him dying actually hurt more than the wounds on my back?

The work was mindless, and I didn't care that I was destroying my only good arm. I kept going until the hole was large enough for me to fit my entire arm through. Because of the gap I was making, I heard them coming.

Three sharp pops, mages on their way to take my head.

With a growl, I turned, facing the door. I shifted both arms, the broken one screaming in agony. It didn't matter. I would only have a few seconds to rush them before their magic overwhelmed me. My only hope was to surprise them.

Swallowing, I stood just inside the door. It swung open, and I leapt, tackling Cade to the ground. He fell hard, and I

didn't have enough time to do anything more than move to the side before my entire weight landed on top of him.

“Cade?” I stared at him blankly. “You're alive.”

“I suppose I must be, although you seem to be doing a great job of trying to change that.” He rolled his eyes, then pushed himself up on his hands. When he stood, he reached down, offering over a hand to help me up. “Get up. We have to find whoever tried to kill me.”

CHAPTER
FORTY-TWO

I stared at him blankly. The last time I had seen him, he had been unconscious, and both Petrona and Leon thought he'd have brain damage. Now, with his hand extended, he looked fine.

In the early morning light, I could see a gray tinge to his skin, shadows under his eyes, but he wasn't catatonic. He wasn't dead.

My heart felt like it was going to burst out of my chest, suddenly going fast enough that I was afraid it would escape my rib cage altogether. Cade was alive. He was standing in front of me, extending his hand. Whatever else that happened, he still wanted me at his side.

I reached out my left hand and let him help me up. He hissed when he saw the state of my hand and arm, the scratches and destroyed skin. Then he noticed me cradling my right arm against my body.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Don't worry about it. I've had worse wrestling with a fitted sheet." I looked behind him, expecting to see Isaac and Jay, but they were nowhere to be found. Instead, it was Sonja and Finley, both staring hard at me.

Cade might have written me off as a suspect, but clearly, these two hadn't.

Reaching out, Cade took my right arm in his hands, gently turning it over. It was turning purple, the skin mottled. Frowning, Cade pressed his fingers in, and I bit off a scream.

Even I could feel the bones shifting under the skin. Cade's eyes went wide. "Who did this?"

I raised an eyebrow at the question. Cade's face turned even paler, and he said, "Miles and I have to talk to Rhys before we start anything. You two finish examining the grounds. Check with the wolves that just finished scouting the perimeter. One of them has to have seen something. Any sign that there was a second intrusion."

He said the last to Sonja and Finley, both of whom frowned.

"My prince, I have been explicitly instructed to stay with you until the matter is resolved." Finley glared at me, clearly understanding that mandate to mean *until Miles is dead*.

"Tyson checked in with all the wolves himself. There's no sign that anyone else has been on the property." Sonja crossed her arms. "Your consort is the only one who's been close enough to you to poison your magic."

"Check again," Cade snapped. "Have them run the same patrol again. Have every mage who has distance magic use their spells to follow along, checking for any magical evidence. Find me *something*."

He ended on nearly a shout, panting when he was done.

I reached out, putting my hand on his shoulder. "Cade, they should be suspicious of me. I'm the one who was closest to you."

"But you didn't do it," Cade said. The certainty in his voice was more than certainty about me. He knew I *couldn't* have done it.

"No, I didn't," I agreed, mostly for our audience. "But their job is to keep you safe, the same as mine."

Cade exhaled sharply, running a hand through his hair. Then, his face went cold, losing all the emotion that had made him shout. He drew his shoulders back, his chin up. "You have your orders. Go now."

Sonja and Finley exchanged a look, and it was clear we were ten seconds away from a coup. Then, grudgingly, Sonja bowed and disappeared with a pop. Finley did the same, and Cade and I were alone in the woods.

“You’re okay,” I breathed. I brought my hand up to his face, leaving streaks of blood from my fingers on his cheek. “What happened? Did your magic overwhelm you?”

Cade shook his head sharply. “Later. We really do need to get you looked at. Did they hurt you? After... I did?”

“No,” I said immediately. “Just my pride. You hired an enforcer who got his ass kicked pretty quickly. I wouldn’t expect five stars on this performance.”

“To be fair, not many people expect the person they share a bed with to try and murder them.” Cade looked down at my arm again, his face going dark.

“It wasn’t your fault,” I said. “And you aren’t the first person who I shared a bed with who tried to kill me. You can’t give yourself that much credit.”

“Really? It’s common for you to wake up in the middle of the night with your lover trying to murder you with magic?” Cade stepped close, his magic wrapping around us familiarly.

“Usually, it’s with claws. Although one time, it was really bad cooking.” I breathed in the scent of Cade, listening to his steady heartbeat. My own heart raced, the feeling of panic unrelenting, as though even with him in front of me, I couldn’t quite believe he was there.

He seemed to feel the same, wrapping both arms around me tightly, squeezing. I bit back a yelp when his fingers brushed the open wounds on my back. It was worth it to be touching him again, to press my nose into his hair and sniff.

His magic swirled around us, and we weren’t even in the world; we were in our own separate universe until we suddenly weren’t.

“Oh my god,” Rhys yelped.

Slowly, Cade and I detangled from each other.

“Sweetheart, what did you do?” Rhys had a hand to their chest, mouth open and gaping at me.

We were in a small shop, a pedestal in the center, surrounded by full-length mirrors. The shades were drawn over the large plate-glass windows, but subtle lighting illuminated a sophisticated interior. Everything was soft, dark colors.

The walls were lined with every kind of clothing you could imagine: jackets, shirts, slacks, skirts, and dresses. Nia slouched in a comfortable chair in the corner, briefly looking up from her phone to make a face at me.

Lip slightly pulled, eyebrow raised, nostrils flaring, she was unimpressed with my injuries and thought I could do better.

“There was an accident at the house,” Cade said.

“An *accident*?” Rhys circled me, then gestured for me to step onto the pedestal. “Because I heard every member of the council disappeared into a closed-door meeting a few hours ago. But I’m *sure* that has *nothing* to do with this.”

“Can you fix him up, or do we need to go to the doctor?” Cade asked sharply.

“Is that a threat? That butcher wouldn’t know what to do with an injured werewolf if it literally bit him in the ass.” Rhys approached and patted my shoulder. “Not that you would ever dream of doing such a thing. He’s bony as hell, and you seem like a boy who enjoys his meat fresh.”

In the mirror, Rhys winked and pointedly glanced at Cade.

Then they stepped back and assessed me again. “Nia, sweetheart, I’m going to need you.”

Immediately, she stood, sliding her phone into an impossibly small pocket in her skinny jeans. She stalked over to us and laid her arm across Rhys’s shoulders.

I watched in the mirror as Rhys considered me again.

“I don’t suppose he has time for a shower?” Rhys asked.

“No.” I didn’t even glance at Cade. Whoever was trying to kill him had made a move, a dangerous one. Now that they had tipped their hand, we were running on borrowed time until they tried again.

“Of course not. Well, just from looking at you, I can see that someone put you through the wringer.” They reached out, taking my injured arm. “Literally?”

“Something like that,” I said.

“Of course. So opaque! Why would I ever expect anything else?” Rhys rolled their eyes. “It’s no wonder the two of you wear black. What other color could you wear and maintain all of your aura of mystery?”

With some nudging, Rhys helped me out of the shreds of my shirt and pants. After I promised there were no injuries beneath my underwear, they let me keep them on.

“I’ll be honest. I can fix you up, heal most of this, but I don’t have enough power to also make you as glamorous as I know you are, Consort Bartlett.” Rhys grimaced. “And I’ll have to cancel the rest of my appointments, so I’ll expect some compensation?”

“You will be well compensated,” Cade said. “Get started.”

Rhys’s face tightened at the order, but they reached up in the air, throwing a hand upward. Petals rained down on me, a shower made entirely of magic.

In the mirror, I watched the cuts and bruises on my hands disappear, and the skin on my right hand went from purple to its normal sandstone beige. I turned my body so I could see my back in the mirror. The shredded skin was healing, the wounds closing up as though it had been days, then weeks, and then suddenly, the skin was smooth, not a single scar.

“Well,” Rhys panted breathlessly. “Good enough?”

Nia was holding them up, her muscles strong, even taking their weight. A rainbow color pulsed between the two of them.

I flexed my hands, moving my back and shoulders. I didn’t look as perfect as I had after their first appointment with me,

but I felt lifetimes better than I had only a few minutes prior.

“This is great.” Something occurred to me, and I looked at Cade. “Why couldn’t you heal me?”

“I don’t have the talent. Healing is a delicate art.” Cade gestured to Rhys and the clothes around them. “And Rhys has turned that art into something that belongs in a museum.”

Rhys mimed a quick curtsy. “What he lacks in talent, our prince makes up for in sheer, raw ability. Don’t let him sell himself short.”

Nia led Rhys to a chair and sat them down, giving them a severe look when they tried to stand. She disappeared behind a curtain and returned with a tea tray.

“All right, you can stop being so mysterious. Spill the tea.” Rhys gestured with their cup. “Not literally—I had this rug shipped directly from Turkey.”

For a long moment, I looked at them. We had spent so long treating Rhys like they were an obstacle, someone we had to keep from learning the full truth, that I wondered if we had missed something obvious. Cade was so quick to dismiss anyone in House Bartlett that was potentially a suspect, but Rhys had all the gossip. They had all the information we lacked.

“You know someone is trying to kill Cade,” I said. “They almost succeeded last night.”

“The car explosion, the mass murder at the club.” Rhys put their teacup down, the porcelain clinking against the plate underneath it. “The dead servant, you coming in looking like someone had tried to kill you.”

I nodded. Rhys’s eyes narrowed on some distant point. “Who could it possibly be?”

“Sonja?” I floated my favorite suspect. “And Tyson?”

Rhys scrunched their face. “She’s been making noise for years that Cade isn’t princely enough for her. But I don’t know that she wants the crown. The crown comes with a lot of eyes on her, and people don’t like that she has a male consort.

She'd have to get rid of Tyson if she wanted full consent from the council. And, tragically for both of them, they're far too in love to give each other up. Very Romeo and Juliet, if Juliet was incredibly wealthy and powerful, and Romeo ate steroids for breakfast."

"Is there anyone else in House Bartlett who has it in for Cade? Something you heard in whispers or glances. Something he might have missed?"

Cade straightened at that, and I shot him an amused look. I was sure there were a lot of subtleties that were glaringly obvious to Rhys and completely invisible to Cade.

"Not to speak ill of you, Prince Cade, but a *lot* of people have felt for many years that you aren't taking your position in the house seriously enough." Rhys picked up their tea again and took a long sip, considering. "The Jennings family. They were angry even before their daughter was killed in the car explosion. There are some whispers that maybe *she* wasn't supposed to die. That maybe she was supposed to survive."

Rhys let that hang in the air, not needing to say any more.

"Tragically, Prince Bartlett died in the explosion, but their favorite daughter, the most powerful of their children, managed to survive." I leaned back in my chair. "How heartbreaking, how cruel. But doesn't it prove how powerful she is?"

"People seem to have a very poor opinion of my survival abilities," Cade observed. "I did manage to survive all of these assassination attempts."

"But how would they have known that?" I asked. Several things fell into place. The disdain some of the other members of the house felt toward Cade. The surprise every time he used magic efficiently. "It's not like you've ever shown off your power."

Cade blinked, then pulled his lips to the side. "No. What was the point? I wasn't some other family's child, scrabbling for my position in the hierarchy. My position was guaranteed."

“Was it?” Rhys’s question was pulled taut, a trap that hadn’t been set off yet.

When my eyes snapped to them, they took a significant sip of tea.

“What happens if they think you’re incompetent?” I asked Cade.

“If I’m like any other heir, they give me the throne anyway and hope that by marrying me to someone more powerful, my children will inherit more than my abilities,” Cade said.

“With House Morrison breathing down their necks?” I challenged. “With every single person in the house looking for leadership? You spent the past eleven years acting like you didn’t care about the throne, acting like you didn’t have to worry. They’ve spent eleven years sharpening their knives.”

“I am not some pig to the slaughter. I am the prince of House Bartlett. The crown is in my blood.” Cade stood, pacing back and forth across the room.

Nia handed me a cup of tea, and I took a long sip. It was so oversteeped I was pretty sure a spoon would stand upright in it. When I raised my eyebrows, she smirked at me. Then she disappeared again, reappearing with a massive sandwich straight out of a cartoon with a housewife and a layabout husband.

I ate it as Cade paced back and forth. “That means any of them could be at the heart of it. If even the Jennings think they could have gotten their little brat on the throne, this whole house is a powder keg.”

“I have tried to help where I can,” Rhys said sympathetically. “But there’s only so much flame retardant you can throw around before people start calling you a brownnoser. And I enjoy my gossip far too much to give it up for you.” Rhys winced. “My prince.”

“We’ll start with the Jennings family,” Cade said decisively, striding for the door.

“I already tried talking to them,” I said. “They were pretty tight-lipped.”

“You were not their prince,” Cade said.

“It sounds like you weren’t either,” I said. “So try to go in with a little bit less sound and fury, okay?”

Cade glared at me but then nodded once. When we walked outside, he waved his hands in a familiar circular pattern, enveloping us in his magic. Only this wasn’t normal. This wasn’t the dark black I was used to but a pale gray, flickering in and out of existence before depositing us in front of a massive white house.

“Should we go shake some trees?” I asked.

“When you say that rotten fruit will drop, I hope you don’t mean literally. I haven’t had breakfast yet.” Cade opened the gate, but I nudged him aside.

I strode up the walk first, putting myself between him and the door. When I raised my hand, pounding on the solid door, it swung open. Inside, the house was empty.

Raising an eyebrow, I said, “Traps?”

Cade reached out with his hand, and I saw the thinnest tendril of magic extend. I wanted to yank off his shirt, see how many tattoos were left on his chest, but I let him move first. He walked into the house, following the tendril of magic.

Everything had been cleaned out. Nothing was left, no furniture, no clothing. They had planned their escape well.

Something crunched under my foot, and I bent to pick it up. It was a small rock, slightly larger than a pebble. When I looked for the planter it must have gone in, I couldn’t find it. Rubbing it between my fingers, I shoved it into my pocket and caught up with Cade.

As we reached the living room, Cade pulled up short, and I didn’t hesitate before throwing myself in front of him again. On the wall, in red, someone had written the word MURDERER.

Cade pushed me aside and huffed out a furious breath. “*They* were the ones behind this?”

“You don’t know that—”

Cade waved away my uncertainty. “No wonder Trish insisted on accompanying me. No wonder she was so desperate to speak to me alone. She needed to be there to activate the spellwork!”

He strode forward, throwing both hands at the wall. I shielded my face, expecting a massive explosion, and nothing happened.

After a moment, I looked past my hand and saw Cade panting, gasping for air. He leaned both hands on his knees, his face ashen. Nothing had happened to the wall.

When Cade had gotten upset, he’d shattered a window without thought, without intention. He’d clearly meant for the wall to take the brunt of his anger, and instead, he’d exposed himself.

“Cade?” I raised an eyebrow. “You’re low on magic.”

“Yes.” He pushed himself up, pressing a palm to his chest, and I could smell the terror radiating off him.

“When they cut the magic from you to save your life, it was a lot of magic?” I spoke slowly, trying to work out the details based on the subtle twitch of his cheek, the way his eyes cut to me. “They cut off most of your magic.”

“Yes.” He stopped himself from saying more, and I reached out to his shoulder, squeezing tightly. “I woke feeling like I was missing my own body. Every sense dampened, every ounce of power gone. Imagine waking and realizing that your arm was just... gone. Can you imagine?”

I nodded slowly, even though I wasn’t sure I could. Even when my wolf had been cut off from me, I had always known it was still there. Yes, out of reach, but it had never been fully gone.

“They said it might affect your mind, it might break you,” I said.

“Do I look broken?” Cade strode to the wall, pushing his hands against it. Tattoos slowly crawled over his palms and then up. They melted the word MURDERER until it was unrecognizable.

When he turned to look at me, I realized his question was honest. I skimmed my eyes over his face, letting myself linger on his gaze. “I think you let yourself believe you were broken for too long. I don’t think even this could break you.”

Cade inhaled sharply, then looked away. “You have too much faith in me.”

I chuckled. “That’s my line.”

“Maybe we just have faith in each other,” Cade said.

“Why did Leon and Petrona think I was killing you?” I didn’t want to let the moment end. “They said something about me poisoning your magic.”

“You know that a mage can pour their own power into their werewolf—their consort. And I imagine you’ve put together that they can take it back if they need it.” Cade leaned into my hand, looking down at the ground.

“Yeah. Rhys uses Nia like that a lot. Isaac too. And I don’t imagine that Sonja is letting Tyson run around with an armory on his chest all the time. There’s too much of a risk that he’s going to take someone cutting him off in traffic as a reason to make their car explode.”

Cade swallowed. “If you did something to the magic that was inside you, poisoned it somehow, then when I took it back, it would mix with my own power, effectively destroying my magic.”

“But we aren’t sharing magic. You didn’t take any magic back from me. So how did someone get that poison inside you? Or was it just...” I gestured at him. “Your magic overwhelming you?”

“I don’t know. I fought so long against my magic overwhelming me, but this felt different.” Cade frowned. “I don’t know how anyone would be able to poison my magic without long-term access to me, without working their way through my mental defenses.”

“Well, someone did.” I took one look at Cade’s face and made a decision. “There’s nothing here for us to find. Let’s go back to the main house, have breakfast or lunch, or whatever

meal you have when you haven't eaten in two days, and then decide on our next step.”

Cade nodded, and before I could turn for the door, he swept his hand up, wrapping his magic around us. It flickered, and for a moment, I was sure we were going to have to walk. Then we were back at the house, Cade pale and panting against my neck.

CHAPTER
FORTY-THREE

The house was a shell of itself, damage everywhere. Veins of dark burns cracked the pristine white walls and marble floors. The stairs were shattered, the flooring in shards.

“You did this?” I looked around, inhaling. “You had this much magic inside of you?”

Cade’s lips tightened, and his shoulders hunched.

“Okay,” I said gently. “Let’s go find food.”

The damage was throughout the entire house. I saw an imprint of one of Cade’s tattoos spread across the white wall of a reading nook. A sword surrounded by thorns charred the paint; the edge looked sharp enough to cut.

Even the servants’ corridors looked terrifying. The carpet had burned and melted, holes in the walls opened to reveal the exterior of the house. When we finally got to the kitchen, I wasn’t sure we would even find any food. But the refrigerator still had power, and the pantry door had been torn off, but the food inside was mostly untouched. Using what was on hand, I made us both another sandwich. The one that Nia had given me had been enough to stave off desperate hunger, but my stomach still gnawed at itself. We ate another two sandwiches before my appetite slowed enough to eat a few carrots and an apple.

“Where is everyone?” I asked.

“Leon sent them away for their safety.” He flicked an apple seed across the table. “The council is meeting now to

decide my fate.”

I watched him, the way he seemed to curl in on himself.

“Do you want to be king?”

He raised a shoulder in a shrug. “What choice do I have?” When he sat up, I could imagine a crown on his head, silver to match his complexion or gold to bring out the warmth in his skin. “I *am* king, whether or not they take it away from me.”

I reached out, clasping his shoulder. We stayed like that for a moment, and then Cade pulled away.

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s go examine the bedroom. There has to be something there.”

As we walked upstairs, I heard murmuring in the walls. I held up a hand, and Cade stilled, but whoever was talking stopped. I pressed my ear to the wall, but I didn’t even hear a heartbeat. Whatever it had been had disappeared, either a figment of my imagination or maybe just a bit of plaster falling away from the ceiling. The entire house looked like it was about to come down. I had no idea how it could even be fixed.

Shaking my head, I gestured for Cade to follow behind me as I led us back to his room. Just before we got to Cade’s bedroom, my foot crunched on something. When I bent down, I saw it was the same small rocks that we had found at the Jennings’ home. Cade raised an eyebrow, and I held up the pebble.

“A rock?” he asked, confused.

I pulled the ones I had found at the Jennings’ house out of my pocket and compared them. “The same ones as at the Jennings’.”

“Is it related to what’s going on?” Cade sounded doubtful, and I had to agree with him.

“I don’t know, but it’s odd, isn’t it?” I rolled the rocks around my palm with my fingertips before pocketing them.

Cade’s bedroom door lay in shards, one large piece hanging off the hinges, the rest in matchstick-sized pieces on

the floor. Cade inhaled sharply, looking around at the damage.

“You said if somebody was trying to hurt your magic, they would have to be close?” I asked.

“For a long time,” Cade agreed.

“Physically close, or could they leave an object nearby?” I asked.

I began searching the room, looking for any clues. The charred magic was worse here, enormous whorls on the walls, a dagger the size of the door splayed from the ceiling to halfway down the wall.

With the furniture destroyed and all of Cade’s possessions tossed throughout the room, it was difficult to tell what was supposed to be there and what wasn’t. I picked up a book with a dark cover and no writing inside.

When I held it out to Cade, he shook his head. “A birthday present from one of the councilors to help me with my spellwork.”

I bent, checking under the bed, and something gleamed in the darkness. Reaching out, I grabbed it and drew a pebble into the light. Quickly, I lifted the bed, tossing the mattress aside and shoving the bed frame.

Cade stared at me, his eyes wide. “What are you doing?”

“There.” I pointed. The floor under the bed was just as charred and destroyed as the rest of the room. Cade’s black magic had burned layer after layer of spellwork into the carpet.

But there were more of the rocks. With a frown, Cade bent and picked one up. He hissed, immediately dropping it.

“It hurts?” I demanded. Crossing the room quickly, I took his hand in my own, searching for any damage.

“There’s spellwork on this,” Cade said.

Then he looked up, his eyes tracing over the ceiling. “But it doesn’t originate here.”

I crouched, collecting the rocks. I didn’t follow his eyes because I knew what was above us.

“The king’s bedroom,” I said.

“Yes. I think our answers are going to be there.” Cade’s face paled, his hand opening and closing.

Reaching out, I wrapped my hand around his, turning his palm until I could fit mine against it. With a squeeze, I waited until he looked at me. “You don’t have to go. Call Isaac or anyone else that you trust.”

Cade’s head twitched. “No. I can do this.”

He swallowed, straightening his back and walking out of the room, tugging me behind him. I didn’t let go of his hand, the warm grip grounding both of us. Outside his room, he pressed his hand to a blank space of wall right next to the shards of the bedroom door. Just like when Basil’s cage came into view, the magic made the wall disappear, revealing a gilded staircase. It stretched larger than I thought there was space for, as wide as the staircase from the bottom floor to the second.

When I moved to mount it, Cade stayed still, frozen with his eyes locked on the door at the top of the stairs.

“Cade?” I asked.

“I can’t.” He shook his head sharply. “I can’t.”

Turning back, I stared at the door. It looked normal, made from the same wood as Cade’s. But that was the room where my parents had died. That was the room where my parents killed his.

I wasn’t sure I could either.

Swallowing, I straightened my shoulders and dropped his hand. “I’ll go.”

“You wouldn’t even know what to look for,” Cade said.

“Swirly magic, tattoo-like spells, a big note that says *Don’t touch this, it’s meant to destroy Cade?* I can look for things.” I raised my eyebrows at him.

“Well, if there is a monologuing villain up there, make sure you drag him down here before he finishes.” Cade tried for a

smile but trembled, taking a step back.

I didn't give myself time to hesitate. Walking up the stairs, I paused at the door, my hand lingering on the handle. I had to force the air into my lungs, everything inside me twisting nervously. Then I frowned, examining the door again.

In Cade's story, my parents had burst through the door, shattering it. But this door looked fine. House Bartlett must have replaced it before sealing up the stairway, but the explanation was weak and more evidence that the official story wasn't the real one.

When I opened the door, the room was dark, curtains drawn. I pushed through cobwebs and reached for the light switch. It didn't work, so I headed for the window, pulling open the curtains.

The windowpane was covered in dust but let in enough light for me to see that even if the door had been replaced, the room still looked like the aftermath of a fight.

All my years with Declan had taught me how to read the bloody story in front of me quickly.

The closet door was almost destroyed, just as Cade remembered. Outside, there was a pool of blood that had seeped into the carpet and browned with age. Another large pool of blood had dried near the foot of the bed.

One thing most people didn't understand was that blood spreads. A small wound could provide enough blood to make a bedsheet look like a murder. But this *was* a murder. The blood here dried thick on the carpet, matting it, stiffening the fibers.

Even eleven years later, you could tell someone had been mauled to death here. Magical imprints covered the walls. Silver swirls were emblazoned on one wall, like the afterimages of Cade's magic downstairs. On the other side, hunter-green leaves seemed to be burned into the paint.

I looked over the room again: one body in front of the bed, one body in front of the closet. Only two people had bled to death here. That didn't answer how my parents had died.

I walked toward the closet, peeking inside. Lines of black magic coated the back—Cade’s color, even if the shape of the spells was unfamiliar. None of the lines were weapons. They swirled like delicate plants, decorative leaves and flowers permanently imprinted on the closet wall.

Shaking my head, I began searching the room. Cobwebs hung in lacy lines from the bed frame, except...

Huh. There was one clean area of wood, almost as though someone had sat on the mattress, dusting it with their clothes accidentally. So, someone had come in... teleported in, most likely, and then sat down. I approached where they’d sat, and my foot crunched on something. Immediately, I bent low, feeling through the thick carpet until I found more of the pebbles.

I dug the ones I’d already acquired out of my pocket, holding them in my palm. I picked up the handful that had been spread on the carpet, and when I brought them all together, they turned orange and spun in a circle.

They spun through my fingers when I tried to grab hold of them, widening their circumference until one dragged across my face, slicing open my cheek.

Swearing, I backed away, moving to the doorway and calling down the stairs. “Cade, something is happening.”

Cade walked up the stairs, and the pebbles circled wider and wider. Something cracked the window, more of the rocks coming in from outside.

“What did you do?” Cade demanded.

“Nothing. I just brought the rocks together,” I said.

Cade’s eyes were so wide I could see the whites of them. His gray skin was even paler, and he gasped uneven breaths, just at the edge of a panic attack.

“I—” he panted again, then reached out, digging his fingers into my arm. His nails bit my skin.

Someone pounded up the stairs, and I turned to see Sonja with Tyson right behind her. She was glaring at me, the set of

her mouth telling me I was about to get hurt.

Then her eyes caught on the magic. The circle was tearing up the walls, spiraling even wider.

Cade walked forward, his grip on my arm dragging me with him, not that I could have left him. He was walking into a nightmare, and I couldn't let him do that alone.

The rocks froze as soon as he entered the room, going still. His breath was fast, and I reached out, gripping his shoulder with my free hand.

“You can do this.”

I followed his gaze to where he stared at the blood in front of the closet.

“That's where my mother died,” he murmured.

I stepped in front of him, dragging my other arm from his grip so that I could cup his face between two hands and tilt his eyes up to mine. “You are here with me. Can you feel my hands on your face?”

He nodded.

“Focus on me,” I directed.

Slowly, his breathing evened out.

“Good. Now, what do you need to do about the magic?” I glanced away from him, turning to the rocks.

They vibrated in place, glowing bright orange. The trembling made it seem like they were a moment away from exploding. The part of me that had always crossed the street to avoid a mage wanted to run.

But I couldn't move from Cade. I couldn't leave him in this room unprotected, even if it meant shielding him with my own body.

Cade exhaled unevenly. “Don't leave me.”

Leaning forward, I pressed my forehead to his. “Never. You're not paying me to abandon you.”

Cade held one of his hands between us, and the rocks swirled around us, creating a whirlwind as they came closer and closer until he was holding a spinning ball of pebbles in his palm.

He pressed his other hand on top of it, and a muffled explosion shook the room.

“Get me out of here,” Cade whispered.

I grabbed hold of his hand and tugged him out the door, past Sonja and Tyson, down the stairs, as far away from the scene of his nightmare as we could get. Sonja followed behind us, and I glared at her until she raised her hand to the wall, shutting whatever magical doorway Cade had used to open the stairs in the first place.

“What happened?” Sonja asked flatly.

“We tracked the spell that was used to corrupt my magic from my bedroom to the third floor.” Cade opened his hand, revealing a ball of black rock. The pebbles had melted together and sat heavy in his palm.

“That magic—” Sonja frowned, reaching out and taking it from Cade. Her eyes widened. She raised both eyebrows, blinking at Cade, her mouth dropping open slightly. “You’re sure this was the magic that poisoned yours?”

“Yes.” Cade met her gaze, his own expression shutting down until even I couldn’t read it.

“This magic belongs to Isaac.” Sonja offered back the rock, which glittered with veins of orange.

“Yes.” Cade raised his chin, turning to me, his face blank, nearing on frigid. “Find my cousin.”

“Where does he live?” I asked.

House Bartlett grounds were immense. Isaac’s home had to have clues about where he was and what his plans were.

Cade hesitated, a blink only I saw, but Sonja stepped in anyway. “I’ll take us.”

Her magic wrapped around us, coloring the world red, a shimmering, sheer piece of gauze that separated us from the room around us. When it cleared, we stood on a winding path that led to a small house in the middle of the forest.

This wasn't the house that Jay had gestured to when showing me around town.

I glanced at Tyson and jerked my head toward the house. "Follow."

He fell in behind me, the easy, familiar place of a beta in my pack. We moved together, me in front, crouching low and slinking off to the side so I could glance in a window in the front of the house. Inside, it was dark and still.

I gestured with my fingers for Tyson to check the other window, but when he looked in, he shook his head. Standing, I positioned myself in front of the door, raised my leg, and kicked it in.

In the doorway, I waited, bracing myself. Straining, I listened for any hint of noise or movement. Nothing. No hidden heartbeats, no movement. Isaac and Jay weren't home.

I glanced at Cade but hesitated. I had no idea how much magic he had left, but he had looked low last time we had traveled. Instead, I turned to Sonja.

"Can you check for traps?"

She nodded immediately and extended out her hand. A thread of red magic slithered off her palm, sweeping down the hallway quickly. When it returned to her, she said, "You're clear."

I headed inside, a significant glance at Tyson keeping him tight on my tail. The house was still full of their belongings, every room packed with signs of a life lived together.

On one side of the couch, a book had been left open; on the other side, the remote sat next to an empty glass that smelled like beer. In the kitchen, the stove was still on, a pot of water boiling.

It overflowed as we entered, hissing against the open flame. Tyson reached over and turned it off. My foot crunched on an open bag of pasta spilled on the floor. A chair at the table had been tipped over, a glass of water shattered on the ground, and a few drops of blood.

They had been here. One of them had been making lunch, and the other had been sitting at the table when they collapsed, knocking over the glass and the chair, startling their lover.

Then they ran. The keys were still on a hook near the back door, but there was an empty spot beneath them that didn't have the same amount of dust as the floor around it.

Standing at the back door, I could see the spread of forest. That was a lot of land for them to hide in. A lot of space that they knew better than we did.

"They're in the woods," I said. Jerking my chin at Tyson, I raised an eyebrow. "Ready for another hunt?"

He grinned.

I turned to Cade. "We're going to shift and see if we can track the two of them."

He nodded, but I could see the hesitation.

"Are you going to be okay?" I asked.

"Fine." He grimaced.

I pushed open the back door, striding out into the garden. Someone had put a lot of work into it, the rows of vegetables lined neatly with orange flowers. Work gloves were tucked into a small gardening bag. I bent to unlace my shoes and caught a whiff of Jesaiah on the gloves.

Shaking my head, I finished undressing, shifting as soon as I had fully stripped. Cade came close, his fingers burying themselves in the nape of my neck.

"Be careful," he said.

I bent my head, nuzzling against his thigh.

Then I was off, leaping over the small garden gate and heading into the woods. I caught their scent immediately. It

was fresh; they had torn through the forest, not caring at all what trace of themselves they left behind. Tyson was at my side, bending low to sniff the ground.

Jay was a familiar smell, and I tracked it into the forest, growling when we passed the small farm that Jesaiah ran. Then we headed west, going further and further until I recognized where we were. The wards were invisible, but now that I was familiar, I could smell them like electricity crackling during a storm.

I barked, and Tyson was at my side. I recognized where we were. This was where Jesaiah had pushed me through the wards. Bending, I sniffed again, following Jay and Isaac's scent trail until they disappeared. I shifted, becoming human, then I braced myself for pain. Carefully, I pushed through the hole until I was on the other side. Their scent disappeared just outside of House Bartlett's wards.

Turning, I headed back through the wards, singeing my hair.

Cade and Sonja were already there, their magic curled in their hands. The rough forest floor bit my feet, and I glanced at the wards.

"They ran and then teleported away once they were outside the wards," I said.

"We need to talk to the council." Cade turned to Sonja. "Take us to them."

CHAPTER
FORTY-FOUR

Thankfully, Sonja gave me and Tyson a minute to get dressed before she used her magic to take us into the council room. We appeared in the middle of an argument, the last heated words echoing.

“And that is why he cannot be trusted!” One of the council members slapped his hands on the table, the loud noise echoing.

“Who cannot be trusted?” Cade snapped. He strode to the head of the table, and it wasn’t my imagination that significant looks were exchanged, no one willing to speak. Cade took in the silence, his mouth tight. Pointedly, he sat in the seat at the head of the table.

Sonja moved to her usual place, Tyson lingering only a few inches behind her. The council member to her right, adorned in blue robes, leaned over and whispered into her ear. She glanced at Cade, then down the table at Leon.

When no one was willing to own up to whatever they had been talking about, Cade lifted his chin. “We have discovered the source of the poisoning.”

Everything in the sentence was flat, emotionless, and I wasn’t the only one who noticed. Petrona frowned, leaning forward. “Who poisoned you, Prince Bartlett?”

“Isaac.” Cade opened his hand, dropping the rock heavily on the table. The veins of orange still pulsed with magic. “He left a tracing spell in my room, one that allowed him to cast from my father’s room, but the effects were the same.”

“Isaac?” Leon’s eyes went wide, and he shook his head. “No. Your cousin and his entire line have loyally served the throne for generations. His father was even on the council for some time.”

“Sonja can attest to what we found.” Cade gestured with a flick of his fingers.

Further down the table, Sonja stood. “We found Prince Bartlett and his consort in the king’s bedroom. They were disabling a spell. It did appear to be Isaac’s magic. My own consort helped track Isaac and his consort through the woods. They disappeared through a hole in the wards.”

A gasp flitted around the table, and murmurs started up immediately.

“These are grave tidings,” Leon said. “Very grave indeed. That a Bartlett cousin would betray his house is impossible to consider. But if both of you saw the same thing, then it cannot be questioned.”

Leon gestured with his fingers, and gold magic wrapped around the rock, bringing it close to him.

“I believe the only reason my cousin even considered it was because we have been without a king for so long,” Cade said. “The Jennings have fled, which I take as admission of their culpability in the car explosion. That, combined with Isaac’s betrayal, indicates that they were either working together or hired an outside source in order to poison the nightclub. I demand that this council resolve the issue of leadership in our house. I must be named king and ascend the throne.”

“This does answer several questions,” Petrona said slowly. “Unfortunately, when you were incapacitated, several more were raised.”

“What other questions?” Cade asked.

“When we cut off your magic, we got a full view of your consort and the bond that you two do not share,” Petrona said.

“What do you mean?” Cade asked. He gestured to me, pointing at my neck. “He wears the mark of my magic.”

“He wears your pet, Basil, who we all know moves on his own, without your bidding directing him,” Petrona said. Her eyes wrinkled in the corners, mouth turned down. “Please correct us, Prince Bartlett. Show us where else on his body he bears your magic.”

The words were a plea. Petrona was his most stalwart defender. If she had been turned against him, then everyone else on his side would follow her.

“You cannot ask me to display that magic,” Cade said. “It goes against all protocol. That magic is private.”

“In most circumstances, yes.” Leon looked down at the table before raising his head to stare at Cade. “However, the house bylaws are very clear. No unattached werewolves may be on the property without the consent of you, me, and the council. Have you brought an unattached werewolf here? You of all people know the risks. To display such a disregard for the safety of your house...”

Leon shook his head.

“How dare you question my loyalty to this house?” Cade said.

“Your loyalty is not what is in question,” Petrona said. Then she turned to me, the same piercing eyes that had seen me in the small little reading room. “Miles. You claim to be Prince Bartlett’s consort. Are you?”

Cade turned to look at me, and I stared down at him. We could lie. I was sure there was some loophole, some way to get out of this.

I opened my mouth, ready to say that I was, but Petrona’s magic wrapped around my throat.

“You cannot cast on my consort!” Cade shouted. “It isn’t done!”

“It *can’t* be done if he is indeed your consort,” Petrona said sharply. “Are you Prince Bartlett’s consort, Miles?”

Her magic pulled the truth from inside me, yanking it loose. “No.”

I shut my mouth tightly, my teeth grinding together, my hand going to my neck. Basil was already there, wrapping around my throat three times, burning away the magic.

“No.” Petrona nodded, her chin brushing her chest. Then she stood, the expression on her face hard. “Cade Bartlett, you have lied to this council repeatedly. You have brought a danger not only to your house but to this room. What do you have to say in defense?”

“In defense?” Cade stood, shoving his chair backward. “Why should I have to defend myself? It became clear that no matter how many hoops I jumped through, no matter how old I got, you would never place the crown on my head. You even demanded I get a consort, even though it has *never* been required of past kings. Too many people in this room have benefited from my father’s death. You live in the past. All of you. What does it matter if Miles is my consort or employee or lover? All of you greedily suck the coffers of this house dry without realizing that they will need to be replenished.”

“Cade,” Sonja admonished. “Mind your words.”

“Why should I? They want to dethrone me on a technicality!” Cade looked around the table but was met with stony glares.

He inhaled, clearly ready for another volley, but I grabbed his shoulder tight. “Yes, Cade hired me. But he did so because he loves House Bartlett. He wants the house to thrive. Moreover, everyone in this room is losing sight of the fact that Isaac’s betrayal, the Jennings’ running away, all of it means that some other house is likely getting the inside information about House Bartlett from either Isaac or the Jennings. I’ve seen enough power plays to know you need to decide soon who’s going to lead the house. Vultures can see when something is dying, and this house is.”

“I agree, we will need to crown a king soon.” Petrona swallowed.

Sonja sat up, glancing significantly at Leon, two lines between her brows. Tyson’s shoulders went back. This wasn’t news to either of them.

“In light of what we have learned, I move to immediately install a new king. We must choose someone who has been loyal to this house and whose blood is as close to the royal line as Cade’s. Whose power is so expansive that they need and use their consort regularly. Who knows the ins and outs of every position, rank, and responsibility. I move that we crown Leon Lucas our king.” Petrona looked around the table. “All those in favor?”

Her magic flew around the table, the familiar voting squares. One by one, council members tapped the squares, and they flew up, hanging above the table like an enormous tapestry. Sonja glared, not touching the square in front of her, but Petrona shook her head and waved a hand, the tapestry shimmering, revealing a unanimous blue.

Sonja was glaring at Leon and raised her voice to be heard over the murmur of the council members.

“With all due respect to my elder, perhaps a *younger* hand is what our house needs,” she said sharply. “Someone who might lead us in a new direction. After all, Leon was passed over for the crown when the last King Bartlett was born.”

“I think it’s clear that everyone believes we’ve had as much new direction as we can take,” Leon said.

He straightened in his chair and wiped a fingertip across his brow. A golden crown took shape, gleaming with jewels.

“All hail the king!” someone to his left said. The cry rose up around the table.

Cade trembled under my hand. “You *cannot* be serious.”

Leon stood, his expression grave. His shoulders slumped forward. “Unfortunately, they are. The discussion has been going on since you were incapacitated. Cade, I truly regret what I must do next. As king, I must protect this house. My first act is to formally strip Cade Bartlett of his title, power, position, and any assets which belong to House Bartlett. Cade, for the act of treason, I sentence you and the werewolf Miles to death.”

I reacted before he finished speaking, throwing myself in between Cade and the rest of the table, using one hand to press him behind me, shielding him with my body. My teeth grew long, the growl coming out of my throat low and rumbly.

“He’s going to kill us!” someone screamed hysterically.

Shadows darted out from behind me, encircling us, and for half a second, I let myself feel sheer relief. Cade had this. We were going to be okay.

For half a second, the world flickered as Cade took us somewhere else. Then he screamed, collapsing forward against my back, twitching. I roared, searching for whoever had hurt him, but there was nothing around us.

“Cade?” I said.

“I don’t have enough magic,” he said. I smelled the salty tang of blood.

“Cade Bartlett,” Leon said, leaning on the table. “Do not do this. You were a prince of House Bartlett. Act with more restraint.”

Mages began circling the table, trying to get around us. I kept Cade tight against me, turning my body and growling, letting my wolf come to the front. If they were going to take Cade, they would have to go through me.

One of them ran forward, his magic like a shield, but I was ready. I shifted my hand, punching down at his exposed legs. He collapsed, his magic shivering away.

Another came forward, and I shouted, “Basil!”

The snake slithered over my hand, and this time, I punched directly at the magic, the explosion sending the mage flying into the darkness. I smelled smoke, and someone screamed. When I looked over to my left, Cade wielded a tattoo sword against a council member. The man stared at his charred arm, then looked up, gaping at Cade.

“Anyone else want to try and take us?” Cade demanded, his voice a shout.

“Cade,” Leon’s voice boomed from across the table. “Do not do this.”

“What? We should go easily like lambs to the slaughter?” Cade snarled.

“Do not let this be their last memory of you,” Leon pleaded.

“No,” I said, realizing in an instant what was going on. “You want their last memory of him to be small and pathetic. The boy who was never really a prince, never really royal to them anyway.”

“How dare you? He has *always* been my prince,” Leon said.

His golden magic lanced out from him, moving as quickly as a snake in the grass. I barely had time to raise my hand to slam Basil into the wall of magic coming at us. The explosion rebounded on me, cracking my ribs and sending me toppling into Cade.

I tried to roll off, to scramble up, but the magic bore me down, crushing both of us. I could barely breathe, and beneath me, Cade groaned.

Sonja stood, the sparkle of her red magic glowing around her. She turned away from us, staring straight at Leon.

“It appears you have this in hand,” she said. “With your permission, my king.”

She bowed her head, Tyson dropping to his knees on the floor behind her.

Leon’s face pinched, and he extended a hand. There was an unfamiliar ring on his finger, sparkling gold that matched the crown on his head. Sonja’s spine stiffened, but then she walked toward him, bowing low over his hand and kissing the ring.

Leon’s magic ground me down harder, and I shut my eyes, straining my body, pushing with every muscle I could still use so that I wasn’t crushing Cade. I strained, but it was like

straining against the ocean. No matter how much I pushed, there was always more magic.

When I opened my eyes, we were alone in the room, everyone else gone. Leon stood over Cade and me, a smirk playing at the corner of his lips. Jesaiah slunk out of the shadows.

“Now,” Leon said. “Let’s make sure this lasts.”

CHAPTER
FORTY-FIVE

Leon's magic wrapped around us, dragging us through reality until we landed in one of the cabins I was becoming intimately familiar with. Mage lights flickered in the corners of the room, and I tried to rise, but magic stretched me out on the ground, pinning my arms and legs.

Jesaiah bent down, rolling me over, and grabbed hold of Cade. He dragged him across the room to the iron chains in the center. Cade didn't move at all, his body limp.

When Jesaiah flipped him over to clamp manacles onto his wrists, I got a view of Cade's face. It was slack, mouth open, one eye open, the other shut.

His chest still rose and fell, but I began to struggle, trying to shove myself up. My shoulder popped, dislocating, and I screamed in rage.

"You coward. You couldn't take him on, so you did this." I bared my teeth, feeling my shift begin.

"I could take him on. The scared little boy, so close to the edge that he could taste the blood in his mouth? I could most definitely take him on." Leon shook his head. "But it never should have come to that. Foolish child. He made too many mistakes, wanted too much."

Leon drew a narrow silver case out of the air. He placed it in front of him, as though there was a table. It stayed flat, hanging on nothing. When he opened it, I saw him take out a syringe and a vial.

“I don’t know why I’m bothering. You’re both going to be dead by midnight.” Leon filled the syringe, flicking it twice and pressing the plunger to clear any air bubbles.

Jesaiah stooped, rattling the chains around Cade’s wrists to check how sturdy they were. Then he stood, arms crossed, watching me. I could barely see his face in the shadows, and I forced my shift. It pressed me tight against Leon’s magic, like I was shifting inside a concrete box.

“I have to admit, he did surprise me, bringing you home. He used to wet his pants if he even saw a werewolf.” Leon crouched down next to me, and the magic pinning me to the ground strained further, my claws erupting and digging into the concrete. I growled, pushing myself up. Leon’s magic crackled against me, giving.

Something pinched in my neck, the needle going in. Heat flooded my blood, and I felt the wolf melt, my body coming back to itself, clothes in tatters. Then, *pain*.

I screamed, my voice loud, going hoarse and desperate. The heat raced through my body, burning. My eyeballs felt so hot I was sure they were going to burst and melt.

Leon stood, looking down at me, the empty syringe hanging at his side. “This is an interesting side effect. Make a note of it—we have to see if there is a way to make the pain worse. Perhaps Mr. Monroe has some ideas.”

Leon’s magic disappeared, but I couldn’t push myself up to attack, every joint locked, every muscle tight. I seized, my heart beating so fast I thought it would burst.

“Lock up behind yourself. And get him chained. I don’t want to risk it wearing off before their execution. Monroe might appreciate the gift of this one’s head. We’ll have to figure out a way to get it to him.” Leon disappeared in a swirl of gold.

Jesaiah walked out, shutting the door behind him. I panted. This was painful. But I had been in worse pain.

When the pack that killed my siblings broke into our house, murdering them, I had to jump from the second story to

get free. I had walked miles on a broken leg, running for cover whenever I saw a wolf hunting. By the time I reached Los Santos, I had been starving, my stomach made of nothing but acid and hunger.

Focusing on breathing, I pushed myself up, dragging myself over to Cade and lifting a hand to nudge at his shoulder.

“Cade, wake up,” I said. “We need to get out of here.”

Nothing. Cade’s breath was shallow against my wrist.

“Cade. The only way we’re going to do this is together.” I broke off with a groan, another wave of searing heat flowing through my body, leaving emptiness in its wake.

I had to shift. I had to shift before Jesaiah came back. I would take him, then get Cade out of his shackles, then...

I wasn’t sure what the next step was. I was stuck on what Leon had said. Monroe might be able to help make it more painful. Which meant that Leon was working directly with Declan.

Closing my eyes, I pulled on my wolf. The last few days had been me getting used to it again, adapting, finding the places of myself that existed within the wolf and the places that the wolf *was* me.

But when I yanked, the wolf wouldn’t come, a dog slipping his collar and running off into the woods. I pulled harder, but there was nothing to pull on. The wolf was just... gone.

My eyes flew open. This was the same drug the Tweedles had given me. Leon had the same drug.

I ran back over what he had said. He had talked about changing the drug so that it was more painful. Leon didn’t *have* the drug. Leon *made* the drug.

Desperately, I yanked, but nothing came. I tried to remember how I had broken through before. Cade had looked at me and told me that my wolf was a protector.

Focusing on that, I told myself, “Cade needs our protection. We have to save him.”

Nothing. So much nothing that I felt like I was falling into an abyss, like I was going to drown inside myself.

The door squealed open, Jesaiah coming back, bearing heavy chains. He dropped them on the floor next to me, the clank of metal on concrete so loud it left my ears ringing.

Using my hands, I tried to press myself up, tried to reach for him. Casually, he kicked at my chest, sending me flat on my back.

“Hey. Watch the goods. I’m not a soccer ball. I’m a work of art,” I snapped. “I understand your master being a coward, not wanting to fight a heavy weight without metal filings in his gloves. But you? You’re an alpha.”

Ignoring my taunts, Jesaiah reached down and yanked at my arms, pulling them together. He snapped on a couple of manacles, then moved to my legs, putting my ankles close enough together to chain them to my hands.

“What, cat got your tongue? No, that’s just the mage you let own you.” I grunted as Jesaiah pulled the chains tight, locking everything together so that I could barely move.

“You should have run when I set you free.” Jesaiah shook his head, crouched over me.

The wrinkles on his face were deep, his skin hanging loose from his bones. When he grimaced, new lines appeared around his mouth and eyes.

“You mean when you tried to kill me?” I gaped. “*That* was you showing me the door? Wow. You must be a lot of fun when you’re trying to kick people out after a cocktail party.”

“You should have run. Now you’re going to last even less time than your mother.” Jesaiah pushed himself up to his feet, his bones popping. “We’ll see if Siobhan can make you two a last dinner. Even men on death row deserve not to die hungry.”

Jesaiah shut the door behind him, leaving us alone, the mage lights burning just brightly enough for me to see Cade’s

face. He was still breathing, his chest rising and falling.

I tried reaching for him, but with my wrists chained to my ankles, I could barely grab hold of his shirt.

The first thing I needed to do was get myself free of the chains. Jesaiah was more efficient at chaining me than the Tweedles had been. When I pulled, the bones of my wrist felt more likely to give than the chains. I heard an ominous crack in my wrist, and my shoulder still burned, dislocated, the arm impossible to move.

My blood cooled, no longer burning with each beat of my heart, and I lost track of time, just focusing on pulling, trying to find if any of the links in the chain would give. The lock linking my hands and feet together gave an ominous creak.

Focusing on that, I lost myself to the push-pull of trying to break the lock. Rocking back and forth, I told myself this wasn't the end. There was no way this was the end. I was going to make it. I was going to get out of here, the same way I'd gotten out of enough situations that Declan had named me deathproof.

Keys scraped in the door, and I stilled, rolling so that my body covered my work. The mage lights brightened when someone walked inside, bearing a tray full of food.

"You should have let me carry that," Jesaiah grumbled.

"If it's the last food I'm going to feed my prince, I want to make sure it's done well," Siobhan murmured. She looked around the room. "Now I'm glad I came. What were you expecting them to do, eat from the ground like dogs? Put that down. I'll get them ready."

Jesaiah looked at the picnic blanket in his hand, then shook his head, tossing it out on the ground so it flew wide. The plaid pattern looked out of place in what was essentially a prison cell. He took the tray from Siobhan, beginning to set up plates for me and Cade.

Siobhan approached me, the fear rolling off her in waves. Still, she helped me sit up, and I winced when she touched my

dislocated shoulder. She was close enough that I could smell a hint of perfume, a fruity scent that matched the red of her hair.

“He’ll need his hands to eat,” Siobhan said sharply.

Jesaiah grumbled, reaching into his pockets. He frowned, patting the other one, then reaching into his shirt pocket. He looked out through the dark door into the forest beyond. “I must’ve dropped it. I’ll be back.”

He didn’t say anything like, *can you take care of yourself?* Or *don’t do anything stupid*. Instead, he just walked out.

I blinked stupidly, sure that I had missed some interaction. Maybe I had hit my head harder than I thought.

“That won’t keep him long,” Siobhan said quickly. She pulled something out of her pocket, pressing it into my hand. I closed my hand around the metal object quickly. “Listen to me. I tried to tell your parents, but they didn’t listen. Leon is behind everything.”

I rattled the chains. “Yeah, that’s become clear.”

“No, you don’t understand. He’s behind *everything*.” She blinked rapidly. “I can see the future. So listen. When Cade finds out who you are, he’s going to kill you. Do you understand?”

“You can see the future,” I said. “You tried warning my parents that they were going to die?”

“They didn’t believe me. So you have to. When he finds out, he’s going to kill you.” She grabbed hold of my shoulders, jostling my dislocated arm.

I let out a soft yelp, and she shook her head again. “You’re not listening either.”

“I’m listening. But I don’t think Cade or I are going to live long enough for him to kill me,” I said.

“Use the resources you have.” Siobhan looked me over, frowning. She opened her mouth to say more, but Jesaiah came back in, a key ring clinking at his hand. He walked over to me, and Siobhan moved aside.

When he unlocked me, I realized that for all my struggling, for all the pain, I had barely made any progress on the lock. Siobhan was crouching next to Cade, brushing her fingers across his forehead and through his hair.

He blinked, and she helped him sit up. Jesaiah readjusted how the lock was attached, giving me just enough room that I could reach for a plate. Then he stepped back, ushering Siobhan out before him.

“You die in three hours,” he said.

The door slammed, but at least this time, we were left in light.

“I don’t know why they bothered to wake me up,” Cade grumbled. “I think I’d prefer to end my misery unconscious.”

“I tried that. Some mage rescued me out of the back of a bar,” I said.

“Oh, that’s right. And how is that going?” Cade reached for the food, the picnic basket filled with sandwiches and chips, fruit that we could eat with our fingers.

“Three out of five stars. And I’m rating on a curve because of how handsome my rescuer was.” I grabbed a sandwich myself, having to lean forward before the chains tugged too uncomfortably on my arm. As I ate, I felt like my brain was coming back online. “One star if we’re just rating the rescue.”

“I admit, my follow-through does leave something to be desired.” When Cade looked at me, I found myself checking to make sure his pupils were the same size, searching his face and neck for any sign of his magic.

“I just can’t believe it was Leon. Why save me when I was a child only to kill me now? And he’s always been so good to me. He helped sneak me in and covered for me whenever I made a mistake.” Cade picked at a slice of apple.

I slid a chip into my mouth, the salt exploding on my tongue. My thirst crept up on me until my throat felt so dry even my spit didn’t help. I searched through the picnic basket and came up with a small plastic container of juice.

I had to move my dislocated arm to get it open, and when I unclenched my hand, I saw what Siobhan had slipped me. It was my mother's gold signet ring.

For a moment, I hesitated. Her words echoed in my brain. When Cade knew who I was, he was going to kill me.

I slipped the ring onto my finger backward so the face was against my palm.

"Leon was never helping you," I said.

Cade frowned. "He was. He used to sneak me in through the servants' doors. He would make excuses for me at council sessions. When my magic failed, he gave me workarounds."

"He walked you right past the servants, who were on the payroll of other people in House Bartlett, so that they could run back and tell their employers all about whatever you were getting up to. He made obvious excuses for you in front of the council so they began to see you as unreliable." I searched again for any hint of his magic, but the sliding black tattoos were just... gone. "He gave you alternatives for your magic so that you never learned to control the full force of it, so that it was always just outside your control. So other people would notice that you didn't have the same power that he did."

I thought about every time Cade had used magic in the past few weeks, how whenever anyone had seen him, they had gaped, unaware of the immensity of his power or what he was capable of doing with it.

"No." Cade's voice was small. "He saved me when those monsters attacked."

"So that he could have eleven years to show everyone in House Bartlett exactly how incompetent you were. What would the political bloodbath have been like if you had died with your parents? Would he have come out on top? Or did he need eleven years to consolidate power, to make it clear who the council should crown king?" The image came to me clearly. It was what Declan would have done. A child was easier to control. A child who everyone assumed was going to inherit the crown would be the easiest pawn on the board.

“No. How did he know that the werewolves were going to attack, then?” Cade blinked, coming to the realization himself. “He arranged it. He led them right to my parents’ room. He probably even let them in.”

Cade frowned, the sandwich in his hand completely crushed.

“Or they never attacked at all. It wasn’t them. It was some other wolves.” I opened my palm, ready to show him the ring. The ring had been found here, and if it was here, that meant my mother had been held here against her will.

Cade ducked his head, his breathing going fast. “We need to get out of here.”

“I don’t think that Elena Castillo attacked your parents,” I said.

“We need to get out of here!” Cade shouted, hyperventilating, his eyes searching around the room, sweat beading his brow.

“Cade,” I said. “Cade, stay with me. Tell me one thing you smell.”

He inhaled unevenly. “Cured meat.”

“Something you can feel,” I said.

“The bread,” Cade said. He looked down, dropping the crushed sandwich. “The chains on my wrists.”

“And one thing you see,” I said, lowering my voice, bringing the temperature of the room down.

“You,” Cade said, his eyes finding me. “The only person who hasn’t betrayed me.”

“Okay.” I exhaled. Even looser, my chains weren’t going to be easy to break.

Something hissed in my ear, and my eyes widened. “Basil! Can you cause an explosion, break the chains?”

It depends, the snake drew out the s into a hiss. *How much do you like your hand?*

CHAPTER
FORTY-SIX

“A lot, Basil. I like my hand a lot. We need to figure out a way to get these chains off without me losing it.” I winced, the pressure from the snake sliding down my dislocated arm. He wound around my wrist, and I shut my eyes, readying myself for pain.

The explosion cracked the bone. The entire joint gave, but the cuff was still there, weakened but hanging on.

“We’re going to need to go again, Basil,” I said through gritted teeth. Basil didn’t reply, and I brought my arm up closer to my face and saw he was in fragments on my arm. His patterning shredded, fragments of the head and the tail on opposite sides.

“Basil?” Cade asked.

I shook my head, unable to explain.

“The iron. It’s why we bind mages in it,” Cade said. “If I try to use my magic, the same thing would happen to me.”

“Okay, what else do we have?” I asked.

No magic, no shifting, no Basil. The picnic basket was empty of convenient flatware or lockpicks. I looked around the room, squinting when I realized that the shape I had taken for an odd shadow in the corner was something else.

I couldn’t crawl, my hands tied too close to my feet, but I managed an odd wiggle across the room. Cade followed me with his eyes, tilting his head.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “It looks like a rock, but there wasn’t one in here last time.”

The rock moved, and I shoved myself backward. A gargoyle face came into view. With the mage lights, I could see its face cracked almost in half. It made a soft half-chirping sound.

Lifting my hands, I readied myself for its attack, but it listed to the side. Behind it, I saw the rest of the gargoyles, their pieces stacked on top of each other, a small pyramid made of what was left.

“Oh god,” I said.

The gargoyle rolled its head to look at me.

“I’m so sorry,” I said. “We didn’t really have a choice.”

The gargoyle arched an eyebrow, and I could read the expression clearly. It hadn’t had a choice either.

“Listen, if you help us get out, we’ll help you get free too.” I extended out my wrists. “What do you say?”

The gargoyle narrowed its eyes. Then it sat up, and I could see that except for a few missing toes, he was nearly complete. A heavy iron band kept him locked to the floor.

The gargoyle bent low and took hold of my chains between his beak. He crushed the metal, and I was able to pull my hands free. The cuffs had to stay on, but the chain was gone, lying limply on the floor.

“Hey! What are you doing in there?” Jesaiah asked, banging on the door.

The door rattled, and I grabbed the chain in my good hand, swinging it over my head and then down as soon as he opened the door. It cracked through Jesaiah’s skull, driving him into the ground. I didn’t think, leaping on top of him and using my good arm to draw the chain around his neck, pulling it as tight as I could.

He went limp but then began to shift, his form growing massive, every muscle bulging. I didn’t have any time.

I pulled the chain taut, my weight bearing down on his lower back, his spine arching. He choked, gasping for air, but I didn't let up, keeping the pressure on until I heard a crack.

He stilled. My uneven breath was as loud as a jet engine in the small room. My vision flashed, the pain in my arm increasing with each heartbeat.

"Miles." Cade's voice came from very far away, and his eyes were two luminous pools of blue in the darkness. "You saved us. You understand?"

"People need to stop asking me that," I said. "I'm beginning to think that everyone thinks I need a hearing aid."

"He has keys. You saw him put them away. Where are they?" Cade's voice was even, calm, and I threw myself into it, diving deep into Nordic waters.

This was the same as any job. I had done worse for Declan. This was nothing. It didn't matter that Jesaiah's collar meant he had just as little choice in the matter as we did.

I pushed myself off Jesaiah, letting the chain fall to the floor. My hand was steady as I searched his pockets. The keys were difficult to dig out, his body weight pressing them to the floor. I managed it, jostling my bad arm.

For a moment, the world went red, but I stumbled over to Cade, unlocking the chains. He pulled them off himself, throwing them to the ground. He managed a few unsteady steps until he reached me.

Then he pulled my face down to his, kissing me so fiercely that I forgot to breathe. When he let me up, he dragged my arm over his shoulders.

"Come on. We don't have long."

"Wait," I said. I led us back to the gargoyle, and we sifted through the keys until we found the right one to unlock him.

He managed to stand, and when he began to walk, I saw why they'd thought he was dead. His latter half wasn't working right, the back feet as stiff as a statue. He had to drag them to get them to move. Where his face was cleaved in half,

the rock crumbled away. Soon, there wouldn't be anything of him left.

The creature looked at me, stone eyes blinking quickly before he lowered his head, a screeching sound coming from his mouth.

He limped off into the night, and I heard the groan of wings, the heavy pumping as he got airborne, and then silence.

Cade and I stumbled out the door, making our way through the darkness. The first time he got caught on a bush, Cade swore.

"Can you shift? Lead us out of here?" he whispered. Every noise would give us away.

No, we wouldn't need noise to give us away. We were both injured, and the blood would lead the entire House Bartlett pack to us.

"I can't. Leon gave me something that inhibits my shift," I swallowed. "I think he must be planning something."

"That's immensely clear," Cade said dryly. "You think he's planning something bigger than taking over my throne? Than trying to kill me multiple times?"

"I don't know. He mentioned Declan, and I think he developed the drug that inhibits werewolves." Even when my eyes were adjusted to the dark, I had no idea where we were going. "We need to get to the boundary. The wards."

"They'll have the gap that Isaac and Jay used earlier guarded. You think we can find another?" Cade pulled us to a stop and readjusted my arm over his shoulder.

"We don't have time. We'll lead them away. Send them on a wild goose chase and then sneak out. Once we get outside, can you teleport us somewhere?" I had a plan. It wasn't a good one. It was more shapes and patterns than a plan. I needed to see the whole board before it became anything more than an idea.

"Yes." Cade swallowed. "Yes."

We tried to move quietly, but I knew that as soon as we got within a hundred yards of the wards, the guards would see us.

Pulling Cade to a stop, I panted, trying to get my breath. We were out of time and out of options.

“I’m going to lead them away. As soon as they’re gone, you need to sneak through,” I said.

When I looked at Cade, I didn’t see him. I saw my younger brother, his expression slack where his body was limp on the floor.

“No.” Cade’s hand tightened on my arm. I winced, but he only held tighter. “I’m not paying you to die. I’m paying you to save us. If you die, you aren’t saving us, so I won’t pay you.”

I gaped at him, my mouth working for a moment before I managed, “Cade, save *yourself*.”

“Okay,” Cade said fiercely. “I’ll draw them away. You get through. I’ll find you on the other side.”

I was already shaking my head. There was no way that Cade, injured and bleeding, missing most of his magic, would survive against two werewolves who could shift. They would tear him apart.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder, and I spun, placing my body between Cade’s and the person next to me, smashing my good hand into their face. Dodging, they grabbed my palm, using it to tug me to the side, off-balance. I stumbled forward, but they were faster, slamming me into a tree trunk. I felt the coil of Cade’s magic behind me, but now I recognized the scent, the firm hands on my neck and arm.

“Wait,” I whispered.

The hands let up, and Nia gave me a disgusted look.

“Yeah, well, I’m pumped full of drugs, concussed, and I’m pretty sure this arm is going to have to be removed.” I gestured to my left arm, the broken bones disfiguring the line of it.

She rolled her eyes, reaching into her pocket and handing me a rose. I took it, frowning. With a shake of her head, she

grabbed my good hand and pressed the rose against my shoulder, dragging it down my bad arm. I whimpered.

The skin began to heal, bones popping, reshaping themselves. When it was done, my arm wasn't fully healed, but it was significantly better.

I breathed in, feeling like I could fully expand my lungs for the first time in hours. Nia waited for me, then gestured with her hands, the question clear.

“It's just you?” I asked.

She nodded once.

“Okay. You can't expose yourself. Did you ever play hunting games as a kid?” She had been in a pack. By my estimation, she had been someone high ranked in a pack. She knew the Marco Polo-style game I was talking about.

She nodded once.

“One noise. You hear me? One. Then you head back home.” I held up my good hand, one finger extended.

She rolled her eyes, but I reached out, grabbing hold of her shoulder.

“I am telling you—” I stopped. I wasn't her alpha. After what I had done to Tyson and the pups, I wasn't sure I deserved to be anyone's alpha. I remembered my mom, her long, dark hair. I had been the only one of my siblings that had inherited the alpha that ran in her blood.

What would my mom do?

“I'm asking you. One. Unless you have a better idea?” I raised an eyebrow, waiting. My dad had followed my mom because she had listened to him. I was going to listen.

Nia raised both eyebrows, then brought them down. She tapped my chest, and I frowned at her for a second before realizing what she wanted. She wasn't tapping my chest—she was plucking at my shirt.

“Take off your shirt,” I whispered to Cade.

He gaped at me, then looked at Nia, but then frowned, understanding. He pulled off his shirt and helped me with mine, trying to be careful not to jostle the still-healing bones of my left arm.

She wiped off as much of our sweat and blood as she could with the shirts, then handed me two flowers. I didn't ask what to do this time, just rubbed one over myself and the other over Cade. Immediately, I could tell the difference.

Neither Cade nor I had any scent at all. No blood, no sweat, no eau-de-prison. Nia leaned forward, sniffing before nodding. She flashed me *five* with her fingers, then melted into the shadows, gone before I could thank her.

We didn't have any time to waste. I dragged Cade through the forest, aware of every cracking branch, every dried leaf we stepped on. He pulled us up short, pointing directly ahead. I peeked through the brush, seeing two people standing in front of empty air.

I didn't recognize either of them on sight, but even at a distance, watching them through the brush, I saw them both stiffen, their shifts into their wolf forms fluid and quick. They bounded away.

I grabbed hold of Cade's hand with my good one, and we sprinted through the brush, ignoring all noise now, ignoring the scratch of branches as we made our way directly for the hole. Ducking low, I pulled Cade behind me, the burn of the wards scraping against my skin ignored through desperation and adrenaline.

On the other side, Cade didn't wait. He wrapped both arms around me, his magic so thin it was gray. The next moment, we were on the side of a road. It was almost midnight, and no cars were driving.

Cade's arms were still wrapped around me, his breathing unsteady. When he let go, he stumbled, and I caught him, dragging him close against my side.

"We made it," he said.

“Yeah, when I plan escapes, they don’t end up in a mage prison cell.” I started stumbling down the road vaguely in the direction of the town I remembered seeing en route to House Bartlett. “I take five stars and up on the Yelp review.”

“As I recall, your escapes end up with you in the back of a cheap bar, drugged up and chained to the floor.” As we walked, Cade got steadier on his feet but didn’t pull away from me.

“Well, this is definitely an improvement on that. We probably have a good hour before they manage to track us. That’s more than enough time to find a ride,” I said.

“You mean steal a ride,” Cade said, but the corner of his lip pulled up.

“I sense a lot of judgment from a man who is half-naked, walking on the side of the road.” Up ahead, lights came into view. The town I remembered was closer than I expected. “Looking the way you do, it’s either the start or the end of a horror movie.”

“Not a cheap porno?” Cade asked.

“Not until a trucker pulls up and asks us where we’re headed,” I said.

The town was silent in the middle of the night, houses dark, no bars to keep people up past nine. We needed clothes first, then transportation, then money. A small thrift shop at the edge of town provided the clothes, and Cade did a semi-ironic slow clap when I broke into a repair shop, stealing the keys for one of the cars parked in the front.

“Won’t someone need that?” He eyed the classic Chevy truck, buffed and shined to perfection.

“This is someone’s hobby car. No one is driving this thing to work. We’ll dump it in front of a police station.” I raised both eyebrows. “Happy?”

“Now what?” Cade asked.

I looked west, the direction as ingrained in me as breathing. “Now we go to Los Santos. I think we both need to

have a chat with my ex-boss.”



Contested Crown: Empty Throne Trilogy Book 2 is available for preorder [here](#). Check out [my Patreon](#) for two chapters of Contested Crown a week, along with art, and other exclusive goodies.

To read a short story about how Cade met Basil, sign up for my newsletter [here](#).

Join my Facebook group, [The Kai Butler Brigade](#) to hang out, chat, and catch snippets of what I'm writing.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My patrons have given me so much support and help as I've developed this series!

Thank you to Amethyst, Ange, Tammara, Tami, Jen, Samuel, Melissa, Stephanie, Alyssa, Melodie, Dita, Gelyn, Karolyn, Alexa, Alexandra, Felix, Spencer, Cass, Bpog12, Raymond, Michelle, Cristina, Roger, Carrie, Tara, Danyell, Sarah, Janet, Susanne, Amanda, john, Ethan, Layla, Chloé B., ABABA, Em, Jennifer, Heather, Christy, Laura, Erika, Amanda, and Lauren.

ALSO BY KAI BUTLER

Empty Throng Trilogy

[Exiled Heir](#) (audio by [Greg Tremblay](#))

[Contested Crown](#)

[Ascendant King](#)

San Amaro Investigations

A Haunting at Midwinter

A Debt Unpaid

[Wormwood Summer](#) (audio by [Greg Tremblay](#))

[The Oak Wood Throne](#) (audio by [Greg Tremblay](#))

[A Gilded Iron Blade](#) (audio by [Greg Tremblay](#))

[A Shattered Silver Crown](#) (audio by [Greg Tremblay](#))

[The Heart's Blood Arrow](#) (audio by [Greg Tremblay](#))

[Saffron Wilds](#) (audio by [Greg Tremblay](#))

[Cypress Ashes](#) (audio by [Greg Tremblay](#))

Imperial Space Regency Novels

[The Earl and the Executive](#)

[The Barony Bet](#)

[The Inconvenient Count](#)