

ABBY Mc CARTHY

FATED
UNDER
THE
MOON



DESTINED BY THE FATES BOOK ONE

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This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

FATED UNDER THE MOON

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To Mindy: I made you a werewolf

**Fated By The Moon
Destined by the Fates
Book One
A Novel
By ABBY McARTHUR**

What was I thinking? It was *totally* normal to accept a job offer in a small town in random wherever-the-fuck, USA when you've never visited it, never heard of it, and can't even find it on a map, right? I mean, come on, if Mapquest can't take you there, was it even a place?

Sure, there were phone interviews. There was even a video interview. But when my itinerary came, and it included typed-out instructions for when I got off the freeway, I seriously questioned my judgment.

Okay, okay, maybe my judgment had been in question for a while now. There was Steven, and before him, Ryan. Both were good-looking, neither were all that awesome and by "not that awesome," I mean that Steven shaved and not just his nether regions; I mean, he shaved all of it—all the manscaping—not a good look.

And Ryan, bless his heart, he was sweet. Don't get me wrong, sweet can be good, but Ryan cried. When I say that, I'm saying he put my hormonal, I binged on too many episodes of Grey's Anatomy and have my arms wrapped around my rocking, sobbing ass to shame. There was my job as a hand model; no kidding, I have great hands, but I stayed for far too long, even though it was apparent to everyone, including me, that the director had a fetish for hands.

There was also my short-lived job as a police officer. I thought I could do it; I really did. I took the job seriously, or at least I *did*. I went to the academy and even took extra kickboxing and self-defense classes. I could be a badass when I needed to, except I couldn't write tickets to save my life. I'd pull someone over, and their story got me every time. I learned pretty early on that I couldn't write bullshit tickets for going forty-five in a thirty.

So, my resume wasn't stellar. I frilled it up with lots of words to compensate, exaggerating my qualities a fair amount, no more or less than most people probably did.

I had been living with a roommate that I found on Craigslist. Not the cleanest fellow, but his only real downside was that he left pizza boxes stacked around his desk that he gamed at in his tighty-whities. It was fine. I could deal with skinny white legs, plus he shared his pepperonis with me.

There wasn't all that much tying me to Seattle, so when I got a job offer in Ohio, I decided, what the heck, I could give it a go. Nothing was holding me back.

I turned my car down another long road surrounded by corn. It was hotter than I anticipated. Sunnier too. Seattle wasn't always rainy like most people

thought, but this was something. The thermometer on my dashboard read 102°. It was a heatwave.

My last stop was twenty minutes ago when I got off the highway at a gas station, thinking it would be good to fill up because who knew if there was even a gas station in town. I hadn't been paying attention to the temperature until I got out and was suddenly blasted with moist heat that wasn't like any heat I'd ever been exposed to.

I passed another row of corn and glanced back and forth between the empty road and the slightly crumpled paper that I had spilled a tiny bit of coffee on somewhere around mile number two-zillion and ten. It was telling me to go left at a blue barn. I kept second-guessing if I went too far and wondered if I should turn around. What if I already passed it? I was about to turn around at an upcoming intersection when I spotted it.

Making the left, I looked down to read the next direction, a right down a dirt road between two large trees, and felt the strangest sensation move through me. It was hard to describe, but I felt it from the tips of my toes all the way through my fingers. It warmed me, and I felt the slightest pinch in my shoulder blades. Maybe it was pins and needles?

I turned up my air to full blast then looked at my directions again.

I needed to stretch my legs and hoped I was there soon. Looking around and shaking off the odd sensation, I wondered, not for the first time, where the heck I was going. If I hadn't seen the Better Business Bureau report for this company, right about now, I would think that this was some scam to get women out into the middle of nowhere to do Lord knows what kind of nefarious things to them.

Cash was just about to bellow how *the flames went higher as it burns, burns, burns in a ring of fire* when my Sirius radio went out. I checked my phone and noticed I had practically zero bars just as I saw a set of trees ahead. I made the turn then followed along with my bizarre directions.

Out of nowhere, a small town emerged. The houses got closer and closer, and there was suddenly an abundance of life. An older black woman sat on her porch, rocking in a wicker chair, fanning herself. A group of kids ran through a sprinkler in a front yard. I glanced back down at my directions, then made a left at the following street and turned into the driveway of where I would now call home.

It was a large home that had been turned into four separate units. My company offered me a place to stay at the residence, but I declined. Knowing

my personality, I would want to separate from my job when the day was done. I had money left over from a small inheritance from my dad's passing, so even though the apartment on site was supposed to be a perk, I declined that part of the deal, opting to have my own space instead.

The driveway I turned into was gravel, and a fair amount of dust kicked up as I pulled in. I parked in a spot, and no sooner than I turned off my engine did I hear a motorcycle pull up right alongside me. I began to open my door but noticed that the bike was extremely close to my car. A quick knock on my window signaled that the driver wanted me to roll it down. Since I shut off my car already, I had to turn it back on before the automatic windows would roll down.

Rude much?

I impatiently hit the button to roll my window down at the same time I started my car.

Come on, window. Roll down.

What could this guy want? There was another impatient tap on my window, and finally, it began rolling down. I looked up at the offending knocker. He was a tall man with a thick wall of chest I had to look past to see his face. I first saw salt and pepper hair on his chin. I couldn't see his eyes because they were covered by shades, and his baseball hat covered his hair, but the smallest amount of dark hair peeked out from the sides.

"Can I help you?" I asked once my window was finally down enough.

"Yeah, you're in my spot. You could move."

I huffed, "Manners much?"

"Lady, everyone knows this is my spot. I like to be able to see my bike from my window. Not trying to give you a hard time, but I've parked here every day for six years."

"Well, I'm not everyone, and I didn't know," I snipped back.

He tilted his sunglasses down, and I watched as his eyes took in my back seat and all the stuff I had crammed back there. Then he looked at me, and I could see he was attractive, but that wasn't what made me quickly agree to back out of my spot. No, it was the dark, unrelenting stare that put me off. It wasn't just a glare; there was a coldness behind his eyes. I wasn't one to usually back down, but something about that stare made me decide to give in.

"Fine, but you're going to need to move so I can get out."

He gave me a chin lift and backed up his bike enough that I could pull out of the spot. I glanced and saw another space a few down. Seriously, he

couldn't have parked there?

This guy was a real dick.

I got out of my car, grateful to stand and stretch my legs. Apparently, Motorcycle Dick got off his bike because he stood there, watching me. No, that wasn't quite right. It was more like he was eyeing me from top to bottom, determining if he liked what he saw. Well, screw that. He might've been good-looking if you liked that rugged biker look, but he was a prick.

I turned away from him and reached back into my car to grab my purse. I was supposed to meet the property manager once I got here to get a set of keys. The property manager lived in unit one, and I was across the hall in unit two. I was happy to find a place on the first floor. It was also furnished to a degree. I ordered a new mattress, though, and hoped that those mattresses that came in a box and all you had to do was unroll them and give them time to expand were as comfortable as the ads on social media said they were. I was also hoping that the property manager had no problems putting it inside the apartment for me. The woman I booked the apartment with said it would be fine, so I just had to hope that she wasn't wrong. She also assured me everyone in the building was friendly, and well, so far, she wasn't batting one hundred.

I beeped the lock on my car and began to walk to the front of the building. The house, as a whole, was painted navy blue, and it appeared to have warped wood siding that needed to be replaced in many areas. At some point, the porch had been painted white, but was chipping, which made me think the picture that was up online was either doctored or really old. The railings had also seen better days, missing almost every other spindle. I wondered if it was even safe to walk on or if I would fall through it at any given moment.

I tried the door and was surprised by the craftsmanship of it. It was a beautiful, rich, reddish-brown wood with intricate details. It looked custom-made. The handle didn't turn, and it was then I noticed four separate doorbell buzzers. I was about to hit the first buzzer when the door swung open, and Motorcycle Dick was standing there. He must have gone in another entrance because he hadn't come the same way I had.

He sighed, "You're the new tenant, aren't you?"

"I am. And you are?" I asked curtly.

"Name's Ryker. Follow me."

"Motorcycle Dick has a name," I mumbled so low under my breath I thought there was no way he would hear it. He turned, and his eyes narrowed, making the tiniest lines appear at the crease.

I walked inside the building, glad it was much more up-to-date on the inside. There was a door to the left and one to the right, then a large staircase that I assumed led to the other two units.

"Let me grab your set of keys and your paperwork with the lease."

Ugh, he must be the property manager.

He opened the door to unit number one and immediately closed it, leaving me in the hallway. I waited for maybe a minute, then he returned, holding papers in one hand and keys in the next. "This key here will get you in the front door. There is no way to buzz anyone in, so if someone buzzes the front door, you'll have to come and get them. This key is for the apartment. The lease is for six months." He unlocked the door then handed me the keys as I followed in behind him.

There were quite a few boxes stacked in the middle of the room. "Thank you for putting my boxes in here."

He grunted in response, then pulled out the paperwork, "So, Mrs...."

"Miss," I corrected.

"Miss Katz," he said, reading my name off the lease.

"You can call me Elle, short for Ariel. I get sick of all the Disney princess puns, so how about you call me Elle and leave out the Miss," I babbled.

"Here's the lease... Elle," he said, trying my name out, "It's eight hundred a month. If something's not working, you can call. If I don't answer, leave a message. The number's written on the back page. You call, and I'll get to it when I get to it."

I stared at him, blinking a few times. This Ryker guy was back to being known as Motorcycle Dick in my head.

I grabbed the paperwork. "Do you have a pen?"

He shot me an annoyed look that said, 'do I look like I have a pen?'

"Right," I muttered and dug through my purse in search of a pen. Sweat from my brow dripped down into my eye as I searched. I swiped my hand across my forehead. "Please tell me there's air conditioning?"

Ryker lifted his head and, I swear to God, he was sniffing the air. "You smell funny."

"Gee, thanks. I just drove for hours on end. I'm sure I can use a shower and some air conditioning. Please tell me there's AC."

"Nope, and the hardware store's been out of fans since the heatwave started a week ago."

"You've got to be kidding me."

"Nope. I don't joke."

"Clearly," I muttered as evidence was showing that Ryker lacked warmth and also lacked personality.

"Ah hah!" I shouted as my hand finally came across a pen in the bottom of my purse.

I signed my name on the dotted line. "Here you go. One signed lease."

He turned to leave, and since he was the only person I had met so far, I didn't want him to go without answering a few more questions. "Wait!" I shouted an octave louder than I needed it to be. I hated when my voice did that.

He glared at me and annoyingly asked, "What is it?"

"I don't have cell service, so I can't Google anything. I need to know where the grocery store is, any restaurants, that kind of thing?"

"Town's small enough. Three blocks down, you'll run into Main. There's a hardware store, grocery store, diner, and bakery. The post office is a block down from that, and if you make a left by the post office, there are a few bars down that street. But don't go to the one at the end."

"Why's that?"

"Because it's mine."

Well, hold on a second, now that was just rude. "Seriously! I might've parked in the big, bad, scary biker dude's spot, but what the hell did I do that you're all Mr. Grumpy McBiker Dick. I'm new to town. The booking agent said..."

"The who?"

"The lady I booked this place with; she said people were nice."

"You mean Mins? She's my sister. Of course, she said that. She's been trying to get this place rented for a year. No one new moves here. Which begs the question: what are you doing in Southern Springs anyway?"

"I have a job that starts on Monday."

His eyes narrowed on me. "Where?"

"Not that it's any of your business since you obviously don't like me, but I'm working at the Valdere Estate."

He sucked in a breath when I said Valdere. I should've contemplated this; however, this guy was one moody dude, so I wasn't going to think twice if he

hated the Valderes. He probably hated most things.

"Why would they hire you?"

"Why would anyone hire you?"

"I'm my own boss, Sweetheart."

"Don't sweetheart me."

He shook his head as if coming out of something. "The Valderes aren't allowed on my property. Don't bring them here, and if I sense that you're anything like them or that they've made you like them, we'll have problems."

"I think we already do. And what the hell does that mean?" I harrumphed and continued, "You know they offered me an apartment on the estate, and I turned them down, but I think that maybe I should reconsider."

"You turned them down?" he asked, more curious than anything.

"Well, yeah. I didn't want that to be my entire life, you know? Anyway, you obviously have a huge problem with me. Should I just not unpack? Is there a motel to stay in or something? We can just tear up this lease, and your place can remain vacant."

"Hello!" A chipper voice could be heard from the hallway, then a woman with blonde hair to her shoulders and gigantic blue eyes popped her head into the doorway. "You must be Ariel!" She exclaimed, walking into the room completely.

"Mins, this isn't a great time." Ryker scolded.

"I think it's a perfect time." She narrowed her eyes on her brother, silently scolding him.

"Please don't mind him. I think it's his time of the month or something. He promised he'd behave, and I can tell by your 'I'm ready to bolt' look that he has not been all that awesome. I live upstairs, and I can promise he's not even here that often. You won't have to deal with him. You can call me, and I can talk to his moody butt. Do you need a hand with your bags? I have a couple of friends over, and they'd be happy to help unpack you," She chirpily added.

I blinked because she was such a one-eighty from her brother that I felt like I was hit by whiplash.

"Mindy," I said because I was hoping that was what Mins was short for. I didn't want to call her by her brother's nickname. It felt too personal. "It's so nice to meet you, but I don't think your brother wants to rent to me."

"I didn't say that," he retorted.

I squinted my eyes at him, "You basically said I wasn't welcome here."

"You did not, Ryker Alexander. She just drove across the entire country! I promised her that people were nice here, and you're the first person she meets, and you're rude."

"I wasn't..." he tried to defend himself, but the fiery blonde cut him off.

"No. I'm sure that's exactly what you were. This apartment has been vacant for a long time, Ariel."

"Call me Elle."

"Elle. I'm sorry for how he behaved. I promise he isn't always like this. His friend lived here, and they're not with us anymore."

Oh, no. Suddenly maybe his behavior made a little more sense. Still, not forgivable, but perhaps understandable.

"Ryker, why don't you just go do whatever it is you were doing before she got here? The boys and I will help her with her bags. You can go be moody elsewhere, and I'll help get her settled. Deal?"

He sucked in a breath. His eyes squinted then gentled, and the way they gentled on his sister made me think for the first time since meeting him that he could be attractive.

"I'm sorry, Mins."

She cleared her throat, indicating that I was owed an apology.

"I'm sorry, Ariel," he said through gritted teeth.

I was about to correct my name but changed my mind at the last second.

"She's right. I was a dick to you from the start, and I shouldn't have been."

Whoa, I didn't see that one coming. As Ryker's face softened even more and his body language relaxed, I thought that it wasn't that he could be attractive. He *was* attractive. He was extremely tall, at least six-three, maybe six-four. I was five-ten an above average height for a woman and was drawn to taller men than me. His shoulders were broad, and I had a feeling that without his shirt, he would have quite the body. Even in jeans, I saw thickly corded muscles. Still, first impressions are a bitch, and his would take a lot more than a forced apology for me to get over.

Mindy clapped. "There, that settles it. See you later, Bro. I got Elle from here."

He shook his head and left the apartment, and for the first time, I was able to take in the space. The couch was older than it looked in the picture, but it was leather. Although the brown leather cracked in a few places, I had a feeling it was expensive at some point, and it would still be comfortable. There was a coffee table that looked to be handmade with the same

craftsmanship as the front door. The wooden floors shined, so I could tell it was cared for, although this building was old. There was a breakfast bar and a small kitchen. I didn't need much, though, since cooking was the devil, only a fridge and a microwave.

"Do you mind if I take a look around?" I asked Mindy.

Her eyes got big, "He didn't even let you check it out before being a jerk? I'm very sorry he greeted you that way. It was hard for him to let this place go, but he needed to. It was time. Please, by all means, check out your new digs."

I walked down a small hallway and opened the first door. It was a bathroom with tiny black and white octagon tiles. A clawfoot tub with a black shower curtain that was open at the sides and a newer-looking showerhead. The sink was a freestanding pedestal sink, and the mirror over it was painted black. The edges were hand-carved with small flowers carved in the wood that looked so individually unique and beautiful. The walls were white, adding a nice contrast. It was pretty.

I opened the next door in the hallway and discovered a linen closet. The door after that was the bedroom. As I opened the bedroom, I was blasted with heat. There was a window, but the window was right where the porch was, and there were no blinds. The other thing this room needed was furniture. Hopefully, I could find a place to pick up what I needed.

"It's a volcano in here!" Mins said from behind me. I was so into taking in the space I hadn't paid attention to where she was. I watched as she walked over to the window, unlatched the top latch, and pulled the window up. Then, because there was no screen, she stuck her head out and yelled, "Reece! Come on in and meet Elle. We'll get her keys, and you boys can help unload her car."

A few seconds later, I heard a commotion in the living room. I left the bedroom and followed Mindy down the hall towards the noise and found three men standing in my living room.

"Hey! I'm Reece." Reece walked over to us with his hand extended. He looked like a younger version of Ryker, and, if I had to guess, all these men were either in their late teens or early twenties. His hair was dark like Ryker's, and he had the same jawline, but his face still held so much youth. I shook his hand.

"He's my brother. This one is Grey; he's my man," She said, throwing her arm around Grey's waist. Grey also looked to be in his early twenties;

however, he had one grey streak through his hair that was longer on top but clipped shorter around his ears.

A throat cleared, "I'm Micah, this one's brother," he said, making a fist and pointing his thumb towards Grey. I could tell that Micah was younger than Grey, but I wasn't quite sure by how much. Maybe a few years. "It's so nice to meet you. I swear there hasn't been a new face around here in Lord knows how long."

His casual demeanor immediately put me at ease.

"Nice to meet you, too."

"Don't mind, Elle. Ryker put her in a mood, but we're going to fix that, aren't we!" Mindy declared.

"We sure are, Babe." Grey squeezed Mindy's side.

"Can I have your keys?" Mindy asked, stretching out her hand.

"Sure." I fished them out of my purse and began to walk to the door.

Mindy grabbed my arm. "Just hand him the keys. They'll get it done for you." Not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, I handed him the keys.

Unpacking sucked.

Micah, Grey, and Reece left, and I started to haul my giant bed in a box to the bedroom. Mindy moved to the other side of the box. "I'll help you." She crouched low and grabbed a corner of the box, lifting it like it weighed nothing. I worked out, and my arms visibly showed the results, but regardless, the box was heavy, and there was no way I was lifting it that easily.

We moved it to the bedroom, and I sighed.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I guess my mattress will be on the floor until I get a bed frame to put it on or a box spring. I don't suppose there are mattress stores in town? Also, I need curtains or blinds for the windows."

"There's a second-hand store on Main, and my friend Rosa owns a cute little boutique by the post office that we might be able to find curtains at. I can take you there if you want, but you're right, there isn't a mattress store."

I nodded. When she said that this place was pre-furnished, I assumed there would be a little more to it than this. After setting the box down in the bedroom, I moved to the kitchen and opened the cupboards. There were a few plates and a couple of cups. There wasn't a coffee maker, so I knew I'd need to go to the store as soon as possible.

"Ryker said there's a hardware store in town. Will they have a coffee maker? Also, I can't help but notice all the custom woodwork. If I can't find a used platform bed at the resale shop, do you think whoever made all the beautiful woodwork would build one for me if I paid them?"

She bit her lip, "Maybe? But you'll have to ask."

"Why? Who is it?" I asked as dread filled my belly. I had a feeling I knew.

"I can see by your face that you've guessed correctly who the builder is."

"Fingers crossed there's something at the second-hand store then."

The guys began moving box after box into the apartment, and what seemed like it took hours to load only took a few minutes for them to completely empty.

"Wow, thanks," I said to them.

"Have you eaten? I'm starved. I think we should all go grab a pizza," Reece said.

"The way you eat, don't you mean five pizzas?" Micah replied.

"I could eat a pizza," Mindy said.

"Me too. Maybe we add a couple more on to that," Grey added.

"How do you like your pizza? We can go, or I can go upstairs and make a call."

"Can we go in instead of getting takeout? That way, I can stop at the store. Question though, it's not just me, right? You don't get cellphone service here either?" I asked Mindy as we all started to shuffle out of the apartment.

"Nope, service stinks here."

I moved to lock the door. "You don't need to do that. There's like zero crime here." Mindy said, then moved across the hall and banged on Ryker's door. "We're grabbing Ralphie's. Do you want anything?"

Ryker opened the door, "Pepperoni and mushrooms." He reached into his wallet. And Grey waved him off. "Don't worry about it. I got it. You got it last time."

"Reece, Dad wants you to stop by when you're done."

Reece nodded, and we left. "Should we take the truck?" Micah asked. "We can squeeze, or someone can ride in the back," he suggested. We moved to an old dark blue pickup truck that was rusted by the wheel wells.

"I think I'll drive. A little air conditioning will be good for me, and I want to stop at a few places when we're done."

"I'll ride with you," Mindy said, then she turned to her boyfriend, gave him a quick kiss, and muttered, "See you there."

"You could've gone with them." In reality, I just got here, and as nice as Mindy and the boys were, I wanted to go through things and take my time. I'd been traveling nonstop, and this was a lot. I wasn't used to so many people being so... people-y.

"I know, but as I said, we don't get a lot of new people here. Sorry if I'm coming on strong. It's nice to have another female. You'll see there are so many more guys here than women! I'm not even exaggerating."

I turned on the car and immediately blasted the air. "That's better," I said, aiming a vent towards me. "Your brother said the hardware store is sold out of fans. Any idea where I can get one? I'm not used to this humidity."

"I'll grab one from Grey's. He's been staying at my place a lot, so I'm sure he has an extra fan."

"Thanks."

I followed the truck down a few blocks then made a left onto Main. I saw the entirety of the small downtown area and noted Ryker was right. There wasn't much to it. We pulled into a parking spot next to the truck, and I took in the quaintness of the place. All of the shop fronts were similar, and I imagined it was done on purpose. Many businesses had red and white striped awnings that hung over the sidewalk to provide shade for passersby. It was clean, and with the style of everything, I had to pinch myself to make sure I didn't wake up in a nineteen-fifties time warp—that's what it reminded me of. Any second, Michael J Fox would come around the corner on a skateboard while being chased by his goons. I did one more perusal of the street, expecting to see the clock tower when Mindy nudged my arm.

"Are you going to get out of the car today?"

"Oh, sorry. I guess I was just taking it all in."

"It's a lot to take in," she said on an eye roll. "Come on. The boys are already inside."

"I'M GOING TO LOOK AROUND and run some errands," I told everyone while we walked outside of the restaurant. I was so full, I doubted I'd feel like I could move much in a few minutes. The carb attack was real, and I knew it would pull me under if I didn't start moving around.

Pizza was fun. I was older than everyone, and a few times when they talked about pop culture, I felt the difference, but other than that, I really enjoyed myself. Mindy was the sweetest, and I found myself thinking of her like a little sister.

The boys could eat! I learned that Micah was the youngest at eighteen. Grey and Reece were twenty-three. They scoffed and didn't want to believe me when I told them I was already twenty-eight.

Everything felt like it was going great except when Reece asked why I moved here, and I told them I'd been offered a position at the Valdere Estate. It was subtle, but I'd noticed all of them pull away from the table slightly and suck in a breath. This was the second time I'd had an odd reaction about the Valderes, and I was wondering if coming here had been the wrong decision. I really couldn't argue with the pay, though, and I was optimistically thinking of it as an adventure. However, I felt like there was some very bad blood between them that I needed to know about. As I was saying goodbye to Mindy, I decided to ask her about it without the others.

"Your brother had a bad reaction to the Valderes, and I noticed all of you did as well. I start in two days. What is it about them? Do I need to be concerned?"

She bit her lip, unsure what to say. She looked around as if checking to see if anyone could overhear her. "Our families don't get along. They never have, and they never will." She backed away a few steps. "I should get going. I'll see you later, okay?"

"Sure. See you later."

The exchange left me uneasy. I shook it off, though, and walked to the second-hand store, and did a quick search. There were no bed frames, but I was able to find some curtains. They were gaudy in the most fabulous way. There were giant peacocks with their heads toward the top and feathers of greens, blues, and purples flowing down the length of the curtains. I was also able to find a used coffee maker and a coffee mug that made me laugh. It read, "It's beginning to look a lot like fuck this." I found it hysterical.

There were no fans, and as much as I could enjoy shopping, the store was hotter than hell. I quickly hauled my purchases to the car then walked over to the hardware store. I found a curtain rod and a hammer and screws, so I could put the curtains up. By the time I was done shopping, I couldn't wait to sit in my car's air conditioning. Did no one believe in cold air here?

I happily remote started my car as I walked to it. There was just enough cold air blowing to help me out with my boob sweat by the time I opened the door. It was a problem. I moved closer to the vent and opened my shirt over the vent to let in the cold air. An older lady noticed me and scoffed as she passed by. Whatever.

I drove to my new apartment and unloaded my car. I was surprised to see that sitting inside my apartment was a fan! Yes!

I'd have to do something nice for Mindy. She really was very thoughtful.

I made quick work of hanging the curtain rod, wanting to change in my bedroom and sleep without feeling like anyone on the porch could see right in. After hanging the curtains, I opened my mattress in a box and laid it on the ground. You had to give these things time to rise. I then went through one of my large Rubbermaid containers and dug out the new sheet set I'd purchased. I'd bought a new comforter as well, but I was pretty sure there was no way I was going to use that anytime soon.

I began to unpack other boxes as well and hung clothes up in the closet. I put my linens in the bathroom. And finally, as I continued through my boxes, I paused when I reached the bottom of a container. I knew what I'd find there. Inside the container was a box with a picture of my dad and me. There was a letter that I'd yet to open. Besides that, there was an iron medallion that had been in my family forever, passed down from one generation to the next. Even upon his death, my dad had it with him, and I wasn't sure if I could carry it with me. The medallion was small enough that I could fit it in the palm of my hand. It was a cross with a ruby in its center, surrounded by a tree of life. I never knew its significance, just that it was perhaps my dad's most valued heirloom which made me always question how he could bring it everywhere with him. I would've been terrified that I'd lose it. Next in the box was the ring he wore. I held it in my hand before setting it back down. There was a small ruby in the center of a rose. On the sides of the ring, there were symbols almost like a frat ring, but different. The last thing in the box was a small dagger with another ruby in its center, right where the blade met the handle. The blade was just over four inches long. This, I'd never seen before until I went through his desk after he passed and found it.

A pang of longing moved through my chest. I took out the picture of the two of us from a month before I lost him. I hadn't seen him in some time. He'd traveled a lot for work, and we kept missing each other. But the distance between us weighed heavy on both of us, and at the last minute, he canceled a

trip and flew to Seattle to surprise me. We drove up to Vancouver and did a whale watching tour, spotting Orcas, and I was in heaven. At the end of the tour, the captain took a picture of us. My dad had his arm around my shoulder, and you could see how much we resembled each other. I had his deep green eyes and full lips. And although he had dark hair that had primarily turned grey and I had my mother's blonde, it was easy to see that he was my dad.

I hugged the picture to my chest then placed it on the windowsill. "I miss you, Daddy," I whispered and wondered if it would ever get easier. I gave myself only a minute more to think about him. The pain was intolerable if I did it too long, so I tried to limit my grief. Maybe that was dumb. Perhaps you couldn't control grief, but I had to at least try. He was my entire world.

It had always been the two of us. My mom, wherever she was in the world, left us when I was a baby. Dad had never made me feel like I was missing anything, though. I'd always felt like I won the dad lottery. In school, he was always the dad to clap the loudest or volunteer. He was a scientist and was the only dad who could go into the school and make science seem cool. There was never a science fair that I entered that I didn't take first place. God, how I missed him.

I yawned, feeling the exhaustion of the day, and knew I needed to push on. I needed to run. Some people ran because they enjoyed it. Fuck that; running was the devil. However, I learned that if I didn't run and exhaust myself beyond measure, I would dream, and dreaming sucked. I usually dreamed about my dad, but sometimes the dreams were different. So, I did everything in my power not to have *those* dreams.

I could tell there was only, maybe half an hour more of daylight and thought that if I was going to run, I needed to do it fast. I threw on a pair of running shorts, a sports bra, and a tight athletic tank that helped hold the girls in place because, even though my boobs weren't the biggest, having a handful bounce around still hurt. I quickly found my running shoes, grabbed my keys, locked the door, and was off. I passed by Ryker, who was sitting on the top stair of the porch, then I did a quick calf stretch, ignoring him, and took off running.

The sun was at the early stages of setting. How could it still be this hot! With humidity like this, I was praying that it would rain, and since I was well and truly over the rain from living in Seattle, praying for rain was like a fish begging for air.

I ran towards the downtown area since I'd been that way earlier. People were hanging out on porches and walking their dogs. It seemed like everyone had the same idea about coming out when the sun wasn't at its highest. I ran past the hardware store, the pizza shop, the second-hand store, and a few other shops then kept going down the street. I spotted a bar with a few cars in the parking lot, then continued my run and spotted another bar at the end of the road called The Wolf's Den. For some reason, the name didn't surprise me. It was kind of fitting that Ryker owned a place with a name like that. What did surprise me was how packed it was compared to the other bar. It was still light outside, and I noticed motorcycles lining the front parking lot and a slew of cars parked behind it.

Not wanting to stop and stare, I kept running. Eventually, it seemed like the town had just stopped. There was a vast cornfield, the likes of which I'd never seen. The corn was already about five feet tall, which in itself was slightly remarkable because driving here, most corn was only three feet or so high. What made it so different from the nine million other cornfields in Ohio was that it seemed to go on for miles. There were no trees that I could see, only what looked like miles and miles of corn.

The most astonishing thing began to happen, and I had to stop my run to stare. The sun started to set over the corn. Purples, pinks, oranges, and yellows covered the sky. I'd seen beautiful sunsets over the Puget Sound, but this had its own intense beauty. I stood mesmerized, and as the colors began to fade, the most strikingly beautiful show began to play out in front of me. Millions of fireflies lit the sky over the cornfield.

I wish I had brought my phone just to take a picture of it, but then again, I wasn't sure I could capture its beauty. I heard a thrum from the summer June bugs, and in the distance, listened to what I thought sounded like a coyote howl.

No one was around me, and I wasn't sure how something this spectacular didn't draw crowds. I stood for another minute, getting lost in the breathtaking beauty of it all, and decided I needed to head back. I didn't want to run in the pitch black in a town I'd never really explored before. I know Mindy said there wasn't crime here, but I wasn't naive enough to think that crime didn't exist everywhere.

I heard another howl in the distance, and this time I wasn't so sure that it was a coyote. But it had to be, right? What else could it be in the middle of flatlands-Ohio? I swore I heard a return howl that pitched differently than the

first, and this was my cue to get the hell out of there, so I ran as fast as I could, which was pretty darn fast. My record for a mile was four minutes and fifty-one seconds. I was damn proud of that time. I may have gotten a few hoots and hollers as I ran past the bars, but I didn't care. I knew when it was time to get out of Dodge.

The downtown area was pretty vacant. Tomorrow, I would try to figure out where the Valdere Estate was because I thought I would've seen it by now.

I made it back to my place in what felt like record time. Ryker wasn't on the porch any longer, which made me feel like I could take a minute to pant because, hot damn, that was fast! I caught my breath then stretched out my calves.

I went inside, unlocked the door, and knew I needed a shower. The sun might've been down, but who knew Ohio got this freaking hot! It wasn't even the Fourth of July yet!

I locked the door behind me because I didn't trust that easily. I turned on the water for the shower and didn't wait for it to warm up. Cold was fine with me. I quickly undressed and stood under the spray seeing tiny little stars in my vision as I did. Whoa! Where did those come from? The room began to feel like it was spinning, and suddenly everything went dark.

A battle played out before my eyes, and I got a distinct impression that I was dreaming. Who knew they were dreaming in a dream? Swords clashed as two behemoth men went at each other. One man resembled Ryker. He was tall and had a metal breastplate covering his chest. Dirt smeared across his face, and I could tell he'd been at this for a while. His sword clanged against another man's, who moved quicker than I would've thought possible. But the Ryker-look-alike was fast too. I watched as he dodged the sword, bent low, stuck out his foot, and swiped the man's legs out from under him. He knocked him to the ground, then impaled him with his sword. What in the heck was happening?

Suddenly, the man disappeared! Holy shitballs, this dream was crazy. He took his sword out, and it appeared that he was looking for someone. His gaze raked the battlefield, where there was more carnage than I could've ever possibly dreamed up.

There was blood everywhere. People on his side were bleeding and cut, but the other side was also injured. I saw deep gashes, and I swore I saw one person with a bone protruding.

Three things happened next that freaked me the hell out. First, as the Ryker-look-a-like scanned the field for whatever he was looking for, somehow, his eyes seemed to settle on me. Surprise flashed across his face as he recognized me. The next odd thing was that as I began to breathe in and out, it felt like each breath was filled with tiny icicles. As I exhaled, it was like you could see shards of sparkling crystals form and fall to the ground in front of me. But as the crystals hit the ground, they began to spread and travel through the battlefield dividing the sides, and nearly every person battling it out stopped what they were doing in shock and awe.

The clangs of the swords came to an end, and besides the wails of a few injured soldiers, it became eerily quiet.

The last thing that happened was that it appeared whoever the man had been looking for seemed to find him as well. He was on a horse. At least it looked like a horse, but it had shiny black armor that covered it, and I swore it had red eyes.

This was the only horse I saw out there, and this man looked like he had one thing in mind: to kill the Ryker-look-alike. I could tell this man, even from his steed, was powerful. He was tall and muscular, not as muscular as his adversary, but he was still powerful-looking. He also wore armor, but it seemed to cover all of his body and matched the horse. He had a helmet on

that reminded me of some type of modern knight apparel. It was sleek black metal covering his head and the bridge of his nose, but the underside of his jaw was visible. His eyes, holy-shitoli, appeared red like his horse. It was then I noticed that there was blood dripping from the corner of his mouth.

I was worried that the Ryker-looking guy was still too focused on me, so I screamed, "Watch out!" He turned to see why I was screaming, and as I yelled, more frost came from my mouth. It hurt, and I felt nothing but pain and terror.

"Ariel! Are you okay? Ariel?"

I blinked; the bright light made me wince. I was so cold. Where was I? What was happening? It felt like icy shards were hitting my skin, and my teeth began to chatter. I blinked, and it looked like I was in a shower?

"Ariel, hang on. You're freezing." I was being lifted, then suddenly it wasn't as bright.

"So... cold," I chattered out.

"I got you."

"Ryker?" I mumbled, confused.

He laid me down on my bed. I was completely out of it. A sheet was thrown over me, then I heard him rustle around my room. I heard a zip of plastic, then felt the warmth of a heavy blanket over me.

My teeth still chattered violently, but after a few minutes, I started to become more coherent. "Did you take something? Are you on anything? What's happening?" Ryker asked question after question. Did I take anything? What the heck?

"How are you here? Wha... what happened?" I chattered out, confused.

"I got a call from Lara May, the other tenant upstairs, that there was no water pressure. It's happened a few times before when too much water was being used for too long. It depletes the water pressure. I left work, came here, knocked, heard a muffled scream, so I came in to find you passed out in the shower."

"You... you saw me naked?" I questioned, feeling embarrassed

"It wasn't really a priority to check you out. You were ice cold. You're still shivering. So, I have to ask, are you high? Did you take something?"

"No," I got out but still felt my teeth chatter.

Even though my room was dark, I could see his eyes squint on me, like he didn't believe me.

"I'm going to call Doc. It's late, but I'm sure he'll come down."

"Late?" I questioned. "I... I got in the show...er after my run, just after the suns...et." I stuttered out.

"It's almost two," he bit out.

"Two?" I began to try to sit up but felt dizzy as I did. Still, the jarring movements made my boob plop free from the covers. "Fuck," I hissed, trying to cover myself.

I looked at Ryker, who looked away then quickly moved into my closet. He came back with a long-sleeved shirt and hurriedly pulled it over my head. I moved my arms into the holes, and admittedly, it was a struggle.

Once I had the shirt on, he said, "I'm going to make that call."

I clung to the blankets, still cold and beyond tired. I was trying to go over what happened and struggled to make sense of it. I vaguely had images of an odd dream where I blew out icicles for breath, and maybe that made sense since I was freezing in the real world.

This was by far one of the strangest things that had ever happened to me, and I felt myself fighting sleep while I waited on Ryker to return. My eyes grew heavier and heavier, and once they finally closed, fear like I'd never felt rushed through me. The man from my dream with the helmet and glowing, red eyes was there waiting for me. This time we weren't on a battlefield.

This time it was just the two of us. It felt like we were in a void. Nothing but blackness surrounded us. "There you are." A thick, accented voice said.

He apprised me, walking around me as if taking every inch of me in. I didn't like the way he made me feel. It was unnerving, and all I wanted to do was wake up. "I've been waiting for you, Ariel," he said, and I kid you not; he suddenly had fangs coming straight for me.

I came to screaming.

"Shh. You're okay." Someone swept my hair off of my forehead in a comforting way. I had no idea what was going on.

"Jesus. Have you ever seen anything like this?"

"Not as a doctor. It has traces of magic all over it."

Magic! What in the actual what was happening?

I thrashed, and I felt Ryker's warm hands against my arms, holding me still.

"Hey, now. This is Doc. Remember, I said I was calling him."

I blinked my eyes in confusion. "Ryker?" I questioned, seeing the bulking man tower over me. He stood next to an older man who was at least a foot shorter than him, rounded at the waist, and his receding hairline went to the middle of his head, and beyond the baldness was long white hair that hit his shoulders. It was sort of like God's version of a natural mullet.

"Yes, It's me."

I began to try and sit up. My head felt fuzzy. "Wha... what happened?"

Ryker sighed, "I got a call from a tenant that there was no water, and I came back to find you frozen and passed out in the shower. I brought you to your bed, covered you up, then went to call Doc, and when we came back, you were screaming."

I tried to see if I could remember any of that. Flashes went through my mind. "A battle?" Shit, did I say that out loud? They'll think I'm crazy.

"What did you say?" Ryker asked.

"Sorry?" I asked, trying to play off my awkwardness.

"Do you know your name?" Doc asked.

"Elle."

"The month?"

"June," I answered.

"Can you follow the light with your eyes?" he asked, shining a penlight in my eyes.

I followed it the way he directed.

"Pupils look good. It doesn't look like she's on anything."

"I'm not on anything!"

"Relax, Dear, I just need to be sure. You were passed out for hours under the spray."

"I was?"

"Yes, now, let me get a good listen to your heart and lungs. Bend forward, please."

I did as he said while he listened to my heart and lungs.

"Do you have a history of epilepsy? Has anything like this ever happened to you before? Have you had any recent brain injuries?"

"Nothing like that."

"How about your mental health? Have you ever been institutionalized? Are you on any medication?"

"I'm not crazy."

"No, of course not. What about food? Have you eaten? How are you sleeping?"

Apprehension rolled through me. I didn't want to talk about my shitty sleeping habits with Ryker here. I didn't want to go over how I tried to exhaust myself at night to avoid dreaming about my dad. Tonight's dreams were just bizarre. It felt so real. Suddenly, I felt like Dorothy Gale. I wanted to say, "But it wasn't a dream. It was a place. And you and you and you... and you were there", but that certainly wasn't Oz, and that version of Ryker seemed different than the real version of him.

Ryker placed his arm on my shoulder, "I can leave if you need to talk with the doctor about anything in private."

I shook my head. I just moved in. I didn't want him to think that I was a druggie or anything. "I got pizza earlier with his sister. Sleep has been a bit weird for me. I guess I don't sleep that great in new places, and since I just traveled across the country, my sleep hasn't been awesome."

"I can prescribe you a sleeping pill if you think that will help?"

"No," I was adamant. I didn't want to get stuck in my dreams. I didn't want to dream. Period.

I saw concern flash over Ryker's face.

"Well, everything else seems good. Your pulse is good, heart and lungs sound good. My guess is you are exhausted and need sleep. I would like you to follow up with me, but it seems like this was most likely a one-time thing. Try and get some rest. Here's my card. Call me tomorrow to follow up."

"Okay," I agreed, still very confused by everything that happened. I tried to remember Ryker finding me in the shower. He'd seen me naked and dressed me! I had to put that out of my mind because it was all too much.

Ryker said goodbye to the doctor, and I laid in bed, wishing I had my dad nearby. He would move heaven and hell to get to me if I needed him. I had

the sudden urge to feel closer to my dad. Without thinking of the fact that Ryker was still here, I reached for the box and rummaged through it until I found his ring, then clasped it in my hand.

Peace blazed through me as I held the ring. It was a one-eighty from how I felt just seconds before. I smiled, thinking about my dad and how he always wore this ring although he never wore a watch or any other jewelry. It was too big for my hand, but the way it made me feel so incredibly calm made me instantly decide that I would put it on a necklace. Maybe it was all just exhaustion like the doctor suggested? Maybe I need to see a shrink? Perhaps I was missing him, and the move had caused everything that just happened to happen.

I was lost in my thoughts about what occurred that I barely registered that Ryker was still standing in my bedroom watching me curiously.

"What do you have there?" he asked, sniffing the *air*. What the heck was with the smelling the air thing—again?

"What's with the go-go-gadget nose?"

"The what?"

"You know... do-da-do-da-dodo."

"Are you sure you didn't hit your head?" he asked.

"All right, not a fan of a little Inspector Gadget, aye?"

Aye? Why was I suddenly saying, Aye? Kill me now. I slapped my hand to my forehead.

"Who is Inspector Gadget?"

"Kids TV show. Then Matthew Broderick. Nothing. Whatever, it doesn't matter."

"What's in your hand?" he asked again.

I squeezed my hand around the ring, not wanting to show him. I didn't want to share about my dad, and the ring was private. He was being nice. I knew I should let my guard down, but I was still so raw from losing him.

"Just something that makes me feel a little grounded."

"What is it?" he asked, getting closer and trying to peer into my box.

"Just some personal items," I replied, closing the lid.

He raised an eyebrow as if he was both curious and thought that my inability to share was childish.

"So...um," I was trying to find words but failing.

"So, um?"

"Thanks all for getting the doc."

"It's just Doc," he cut me off. "His name—we call him Doc, not the Doc. I don't even know that anyone knows what his real name is. Look at his card."

I shifted then grabbed his card. Yep, it said Doc Jones. It was on the tip of my tongue to say something about Back to the Future, but the concern on his face made me ask a more serious question. "What time is it anyway?"

He walked to the window, pulled back the curtains, looked up at the sky, then said, "It's probably a little after three."

"That's how you tell time around here? Let me guess, you got a sundial in your back pocket?"

"No, smart ass. But seeing as you already know, the cell service is shit here; I left the bar in a hurry. I was doing dishes and took off my watch and left it at the bar to come and check on you."

He was right. I was throwing sass and had no idea why either. Yes, he was a little stand-offish at first, okay, maybe more than a little, but he did just take care of me, and he did just see me naked.

"About that."

"About?" he prompted.

"You saw me naked."

"I barely looked. Promise."

It wasn't that I was really freaked out about nudity. It was that I wondered if Ryker would bring it up. Surely, he would've questioned me on it already. Could he have missed it? Anyone who'd ever seen it was shocked.

I shook off those thoughts. If Ryker wasn't going to ask, I wasn't going to hand that information over. I clasped Dad's ring tighter and squeezed my eyes shut.

"Hey, I mean it." He touched my arm to comfort me, and I was shocked by the sensation it brought. It felt like an electric current. Not like those, ooh, butterflies and electricity first love-kind of currents. This was literally like a small zap of electricity, followed by a mental image of him on the battlefield staring at me.

What the hell!

"Sorry. It must've been static electricity."

"That felt like a little more than static."

"What can I say. I'm six-four. I got a big conductor."

My eyes grew wide. Did he just say that?

"Relax. I'm teasing you. Are you good? If I leave here and go to bed, are you going to wake me up in twenty minutes screaming your head off?"

My face fell. "I have no idea why that happened. I had the strangest dreams too." I was about to tell him about it when the dream became fleeting, and I couldn't quite grasp the images to explain what happened.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

I squinted my eyes at him. I could've sworn he was in my dream, but I was keeping that one to myself. No need for him to get a bigger head.

Finally, I answered, "No. I don't remember it. I remember being cold, and I remember being afraid. Maybe it was some type of night terror? I'm not sure."

"Have you had night terrors?"

I thought about it, "I sort of remember my dad saying something about it when I was little." What I didn't add to that was he said it happened after the accident. And if I was honest, one of the reasons I ran was because my dreams had become increasingly more frequent. I'd never passed out before, though, and I'd never had terror like this.

"Can you call him tomorrow and ask him about it?" That was a simple enough question and one he would have no idea would affect me so significantly, but at the mention of my dad, pain lanced through me. I looked over to the picture of the two of us, then squeezed my eyes shut, wanting to hold on to that memory and nothing else. I didn't want to think about losing him.

He walked around my room, and even with my eyes closed, I knew he had picked up the picture of us. "Is this him? How long has he been gone?" I took a deep breath and just wished that Ryker would leave. I wasn't prepared to talk about him. I suppose that since he passed, I hadn't really told anyone anything, and I knew that wasn't right. My dad should be talked about. He was a great dad. Maybe even sharing the smallest amount of information would lessen the pain in my chest that thinking about him caused.

Peeking open an eye and seeing him still here, I answered, "It's been a little less than a year."

His eyes were warm, and he tilted his head to the side. "This is a good picture. I can tell how much he loved you."

Now that made my throat burn, and I knew I was close to crying. Swallowing back any tears, I quickly agreed, "He did." I pulled the blanket around me, "Listen. I think I'm good. Thank you for coming tonight and for taking care of me."

"Are you sure you're good?"

I nodded. Ryker put down the picture and walked towards the door. "Mins makes her own blends of herbal tea. I'll go get you a cup. It will help you relax, then I'll leave you to it."

"Thanks," I said, holding his eyes right before he left the apartment.

With Ryker gone, I got out of bed, used the bathroom, and put on some pants. I took a look at myself in the bathroom mirror and gasped. My eyes were bloodshot, which somehow always made my eyes look greener. I also had some serious bags going on. That was all kinds of sucky, but what was worse was my hair. Jesus! It was still a little wet, but half of it began to dry. Only where it dried, it was pretty much sticking straight up. I looked like I got attacked by an eighties curling iron and a bottle of Aquanet, then slept on it.

I left the bathroom searching for the brush in my purse and found it on the coffee table, then grabbed a brush from it. I worked the brush through the top of my hair, but it got stuck in the mess of knots. Just great! Seriously, how did it get so tangled? I was still holding Dad's ring, so I set it down to work the brush through my hair. I was fighting the plastic brush in a war with my blonde mess when there was a tiny knock on the door, and Ryker poked his head in carrying a mug that had steam billowing from the top.

He set it down on the table in front of me, and the calming aroma immediately filled the room. I saw his eyes move to my ring, and for the briefest of seconds, I swore they changed from dark to a light shade of honey. It happened so fast, in a blink, it was gone. Maybe I was seeing things? Tonight hadn't really been a stellar night for me.

I reached for the cup, "Thanks for everything."

I was hoping he would go, and finally, he said, "Take care of yourself. I'm across the hall, and Mins is upstairs if you need anything. Wear your ring."

"What...?" I began to ask, but he was gone before I had the opportunity to ask him why he would say that.

"Knock, knock!" Mindy called from the outside of my door. I looked around, a little confused, then last night hit me. After Ryker left, I sat on the couch and drank tea. When I was finished, for some strange reason, I put on Dad's ring. It only fit on my thumb, but it fit! It had never fit before. I wondered if the humidity was making my fingers swell. Oh well!

Once the ring was on, I fell asleep. Now, I was blinking my eyes open from the couch.

I sat up when I heard, "Are you in there?"

Right, Mindy was here.

Upon opening the door, she gasped. "Morning or almost afternoon. I didn't wake you, did I?" She wasn't looking at me, and I studied her closely to see why. Instead, I kept getting a side-eye with a little smirk. You know, when you're in college, and some kid gets too drunk, so some other kid draws on his head, that's how I was feeling like I was the schmuck who was about to freak out when they saw themselves in the mirror.

"What time is it?"

"Eleven-thirty. Ryker thought I should wait, but I was getting anxious, and I wanted to make sure you're okay."

I took half a second to assess myself. "I feel fine," I told Mindy.

"Great, why don't you go use the bathroom and take care of yourself." She eyed me up and down as if I was in serious need of an intervention. I couldn't be that bad, could I? I looked at her, confused for a second. She raised her eyebrow and gave me a look that said, 'don't believe me, see for yourself.'

I shook my head and moved to the bathroom. When I saw myself, I gasped in horror.

Last night my hair was bad, today... well, today there were no words to describe how bad it was! On a good day, I battled with my hair, but with my shower last night and how warm it was already, my hair was literally sticking straight up and out!

"Good news, no one drew a penis on my forehead while I was sleeping," I called out.

Mindy chuckled.

"Are you going to stick around for a few? I need to wash my hair," I hollered.

"Yeah, I'll stick around."

I closed myself in the bathroom and started the shower, then undressed. I thought about Ryker seeing me naked and how surprising it was that he didn't mention my scars. I was in an accident when I was young. I don't even remember it, but it left me with two large, jagged scars, starting around the tip of my shoulder blade and going down most of my back. I've had a few boyfriends who would tell me how gross they were. Needless to say, Cryin' Ryan wasn't one of them. The rest, though, once they saw them, if they talked any shit about them, a light switch flipped, and I was no longer interested in them.

I quickly showered and thankfully remained conscious the entire time. I walked out in a towel and was surprised to see all of the guys with Mindy. They lounged around on the couch like they hung out there all the time.

"Uh, hey guys."

"Damn!" Reece called, checking me out.

Grey smacked him on the back of his head.

"What, she's hot!" Reece defended.

I walked into my room and closed myself in, thinking how strange it was that they were all here hanging out. I'd roll with it. I never had a large group of friends before, and their familiarity and playfulness with one another was endearing.

I dropped my towel to change, then immediately noticed that my curtain was pulled open. I saw Ryker's back on the porch. "Fuck!" I yelled and grabbed my towel off the floor to cover myself, but as I stood to wrap it around myself, my screaming made Ryker turn to look at me. At first, he had a look of concern, then his eyes flashed with surprise. There was a quick second where I was frozen, then I quickly shook that off.

"Fuckity-fuck!" I yelled, scrambling to cover myself.

Ryker grinned and moved away from the window. I made a dash for the curtain, and I wasn't sure how much of me he saw, but I'd been in Ohio a day, not even a full twenty-four hours, and I'd been caught naked, twice.

Whatever.

I pulled on some clean undies, a bra, jean shorts, and a blue tank, then walked back to the bathroom and smelled food, making my stomach rumble. I found a brush and started to tame my mane, then walked out to the living area. I paused because Mindy had lit sage and walked around the living room waving the herbs in the air. "What are you doing?" I asked.

Grey answered for Mindy. "She's clearing out your bad mojo from last night. Just go with it."

I shrugged because I had my fair share of hippies and friends who believed in this type of thing in Seattle. It wasn't my cup of tea but to each their own.

Micah was in the kitchen. "I got Prestie's" I knew from being in town, Prestie's was the bakery.

"It smells good."

"Their fritters are fresh. Wait till you try them." He began opening a bunch of bags that contained the most delicious-smelling baked goods. Damn. But they could eat.

My door to the apartment opened, and I heard, "Is that Prestie's I smell?" Ryker walked in with a massive grin on his face causing me to narrow my eyes. He'd been outside. How could he smell Prestie's?

Mindy started to mumble something under her breath as she moved around the room with the burning sage, and Reece and Ryker moved to the kitchen.

Micah smacked Reece's grabby hand. "Let the lady have first grabs."

"You heard him, Elle, ladies first. So, get a move on. I'm starved," Reece said.

"When we're done eating, I need you boys to help me grab some furniture from the barn," Ryker said.

"No problem," Reece answered, and Micah lifted his chin, indicating he was game.

I moved to the baked goods, ignoring Mindy, who seemed to be humming and talking in tongues. She was getting louder by the second, and I found this entire thing extremely odd, albeit almost comical. I grabbed a fritter and a napkin that Micah set out, then took a bite.

"Oh, my God," I said with my mouth full. It didn't matter that there was a room full of people. "This is so good," I continued and closed my eyes, savoring the delicious apple fritter, then opened them and watched with mild fascination as Ryker grabbed one, then also slowly closed his eyes as he took a bite. And damn, he looked good while he chewed; the way his mouth moved.

Jesus, Elle, get a grip.

Somehow after last night, he didn't seem as broody as before. I watched all of the guys grab some food, including Grey, who stood back and watched

Mindy move around the room. Occasionally, he would glance my way as if trying to assess whether or not I was judging Mindy. When he was sure that I wasn't, he looked back at Mindy with a goofy grin on his face.

"So, what do you need help with?" Reece asked his brother between bites. It wasn't lost on me how much they resembled one another. Only Reece had yet to fill out his frame the same way Ryker had. He was also an inch or two shorter, but their eyes were similar, and so was their jawline. Ryker had a small beard with salt and pepper flaked through it, and Reece was clean-shaven. Still, the resemblance was uncanny.

"You'll see," Ryker replied.

Mindy stopped chanting and exclaimed, "There, that should do it!" Then set down the sage and was about to grab the last fritter at the same time Micah went in for it. Grey saw this, and, I kid you not, a slight growl came from the back of his throat. It was subtle. I don't think anyone really paid much mind to it, or if it was odd, they didn't act like it. Micah grabbed a donut instead, then sheepishly said, "Dude, I was going to get it for her."

"Sure you were," Reece replied.

"What was all of that?" I asked Mindy.

Ryker responded for her. "Our family has traditions that go back for centuries. What Mindy was doing was a sort of cleansing. It will purify your space from any negative spirits or impurities."

"Wow, you believe in that kind of stuff?" I asked.

"We do," Mindy cut in between bites.

"You'll also notice that there are various tiny stones and crystals that are placed in different corners of the room." She moved and walked around the room to the furthest corner by the door, "Here is hematite. There is also jasper and tiger eye. Jasper is known to protect, but the three stones together will also discourage an evil or ill-intentioned being from entering, and that includes your dreams. In a second, I'll put aquamarine in your bathroom. It will also protect you from anything happening like it did yesterday. You should keep the window cracked. That way, any bad spirits can leave."

"Whoa, this is a lot. So, I take it Ryker filled you all in on what happened with me last night. So much for HIPAA."

"It's our way," Mindy said. "I know to some it may seem different at first."

I cut her off, "Please, I'm from Seattle. Not much new-age hippy shit scares me. You want to put pretty gems all over the place, have at it. I won't

lose much sleep over it."

"Good. I was worried you were going to get all judge-y."

I waved her off, "Not sure how much stock I put into all of that, but if it's something you're into, I'm cool with it. Just as long as you're not trying to get me to make any sacrifices to the wolves," I joked.

Mindy gulped and looked at Ryker as I said that.

Seriously, that was odd. Maybe they didn't get my sense of humor.

"Don't worry, we only sacrifice virgins around here," Reece said and was met with a smack upside the back of his head by Ryker. "What, I was just joking."

I laughed at Ryker and Reece, then thought about why I said the wolves joke. "Come to think of it, I did hear howling on my run last night. I chalked it up to being coyotes. Are there wolves in these parts that I need to know about? The way you two looked at each other kind of gave me the heebie-jeebies."

Mindy laughed uncomfortably. "There has been a pack around here for a long time. But don't worry, they never attack humans."

"The crystals and sage I can deal with, but a pack of rabid wolves?" I asked incredulously.

"I never said they were rabid," she shot back irritably.

I blew out a big breath, then mumbled, "I need coffee."

Micah grabbed a mug and poured it. "You haven't gone to the grocery store yet. Do you take it black?"

"Shit," I cursed, really wanting a cup of coffee but drinking black coffee was like drinking hot bean water. Who wants to drink that?

"Mins has creamer. I'll go grab some."

"Thanks, Grey. That would be amazing."

"He's the best!" Mindy said, smiling. "So, what are your plans today?"

"I have to go through the rest of my stuff and take inventory of anything I need, then hit the grocery store."

"I'm watching my cousin later. I think I might take him to the swimming hole. Do you want help, then maybe you can hit the swimming hole with us?"

I sort of wanted a little bit of downtime, but Mindy looked so hopeful. There was really no way that I would be able to crush her eagerness.

"Sure," I sighed, "But I'm not sure that I have a swimsuit."

"What size are you? A six?"

I scoffed. "I'm five foot ten, so I'm a size ten on a good day."

"I'll check later to see what I have. If not, maybe we can find something at the second-hand store."

"Okay, sounds good."

Grey walked back in and handed me the coffee creamer. "Thank you!" I said and walked behind the guys standing in the kitchen to grab myself a cup. I slowly drank my coffee and, while doing so, observed everyone in the room. Ryker was clearly the oldest, and he was the serious one. I could tell how much he cared for his friends and family, though. Grey had been back in the room for only a few minutes, and Mindy had already curled into his side. They were that cute, young couple that you couldn't decide if they were so cute you wanted to barf or if they were exactly what you wished you had. Reece and Micah were goofballs. They didn't seem to take life very seriously, and I appreciated that.

"So, you have a cousin here, and you mentioned your dad yesterday. Do you have a ton of family here?" I asked Ryker.

"Huge family. Most of us are pretty close too."

"And the Valderes, is that some type of family feud?"

At the mention of the Valderes, the entire vibe in the room changed. It was like it went from a carefree atmosphere where everyone was getting along to so quiet and tense you could hear a pin drop. Mindy, who I could tell was often the peacemaker, broke the silence. "We don't like to say their name around here. But yes, in a sense, there is a long family feud, only it's the type that's ended in bloodshed. What exactly are you going to be doing for them? How did you find them? Or should I ask, how did they find you? What are your ties to them?" Her eyes squinted on me, and I didn't like the accusations she seemed to be silently asking.

"I'm basically just a secretary. They head-hunted me off a job site online. There's nothing nefarious. And what do you mean bloodshed? Are they violent? Are they like the mob or something?"

"Something like that," Ryker grumbled. "Why don't we give Ariel some time to adjust this morning?"

"Elle," I corrected, feeling a little bit like I was hit with a heady dose of whiplash.

Mindy started to protest, "But I...."

Ryker gave her a sharp look with his eyes, and she immediately stopped saying what she was about to say, changing course. "I'll stop by in a bit."

Grey moved his head to the side, "Come on," he said, giving a slight tug on Mindy's side for her to follow. I watched everyone pile out of my apartment, feeling more than a little strange. One minute it was full steam ahead for bringing me into the fold, and at the mention of the Valderes, they all backed off. What did they mean by bloodshed? Surely it's not like they go around killing each other?

I bit into my fritter and decided to shrug it off. I continued to unpack my boxes, then made a list of what I'd like to buy from the store, coffee creamer making the top of the list. My mind couldn't help but wander to Ryker and how he seemed to be silently in charge of everyone. If he said jump, well, it wasn't hard to imagine all of them asking how high.

Still, he was kind to me last night. If he had a major issue with my employer, I wish he would leave the problem with them and not let it affect how he treated me.

Grabbing my purse and keys, I locked up and drove to the second-hand store to look for a bathing suit. There was nothing there that would remotely fit me, and the longer I was out, the more I didn't feel up to going to the swimming hole.

I left and drove to the grocery store. It was the smallest grocery store I'd ever been in. There was plenty of produce, though, and they had a butcher on staff. I just wished that I wasn't such a shitty cook. I sighed as I walked past the meat counter, knowing I'd only do it a disservice trying to cook it.

I bought my groceries and piled everything in my car. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end, and I got the strangest sensation that I was being watched. I looked around and didn't see anyone, so I quickly got into the car and examined my surroundings. There was nothing out of sorts, so I shrugged it off and drove back home.

Once there, I hauled my groceries inside, holding way too many plastic bags on my arms at one time. I couldn't even believe they were still allowed to use plastic bags. I mean, didn't they know that those were horrible for the planet? There weren't even cloth bags I could buy either, so I prioritized purchasing some through Amazon if I ever got online again.

Somehow I managed to open the front door while balancing the bags and put the key into my door when I heard voices on the other side.

I was momentarily frozen. After feeling like someone was watching me, to hearing people in my apartment, I was freaked.

I put my ear to the door to see what I could hear. Mindy walked down the stairs while my ear was to the door. "What are you doing?" she giggled.

"Shh. Someone's in there."

"It's just the guys!" she said laughing, then walked past me and into my apartment, opening it while I was still crouched with my ear to the wood. I quickly stood and cautiously entered my apartment.

With the door open, I heard them more clearly. "Right there," Ryker's gravelly voice ordered.

"You guys scared the crap out of Elle," Mindy said, walking toward my room. I followed her and my jaw completely went slack as I saw what was happening. Micah and Reece were putting a dresser against a wall, and Ryker and Grey tightened ends to a bed frame.

"What's this?" I asked, confused.

"What's it look like, silly?" Mindy said, bumping me with her shoulder.

"I had a set in the barn. It's just been sitting there, and I thought you could use it," Ryker explained.

"Wow, I don't know what to say. It's beautiful." I ran my hand over the hand-carved wood. It was easily one of the prettiest bed frames I'd ever seen. There was a moon and stars carved into the backboard. When I looked closer, I saw a tree with a lone wolf howling up at the moon.

"I noticed you don't have a box spring, so I'm going to modify it and make a platform for your mattress to rest on," Ryker said.

I scrutinized him, "Did you make this? The coffee table? The door?" I asked, my gut telling me that Ryker was the carpenter. Heck, Mindy had pretty much already confirmed that. Still, it was so remarkable. It was art.

"Yeah, I'm all right at it," he said and continued putting it together like it was no big deal. I couldn't believe I thought he was a jerk yesterday!

"All right at it? Ha!" Mindy said, "Everyone knows he's the best at it. Do you know how much his pieces sell for?"

Ryker shot her a look that said to zip it, and she did.

"Get anything good at the grocery store? I'm starved," Micah asked.

"Shit. I better put my groceries away. I have some stuff for sandwiches."

"You don't need to feed him. He'll eat you out of house and home. We'll get food on the way to the swimming hole."

I sighed, "I couldn't find a swimsuit at the second-hand store."

"Let's get your groceries put away, then you can come and search my closet to see if anything works for you."

She gave me a gentle tug on my wrist to go with her, but I couldn't leave just yet. "Thank you. This is beyond beautiful and thoughtful." I felt the burn in the back of my throat, and I suddenly wanted to cry. No one had been this nice to me since my dad was alive. I swallowed back tears and left the room before anyone saw me.

"I'm just going to use the bathroom. I'll be right there."

Mindy studied me and saw the emotion on my face, then let me go and moved toward the kitchen. I quickly got a hold of myself in the bathroom, trying not to cry because that was so incredibly nice.

I got myself together and walked back out to find Mindy putting away my groceries.

"You don't have to do that. I can do it."

She waved me off. "I'm sure you can, but it will go much quicker with me helping."

Even though it was hard for me to accept all of this kindness, I smiled, then helped her put away my groceries.

I COULDN'T FIND ANYTHING upstairs, and if I was honest with myself, I didn't really want to go any longer. My nerves and emotions felt all over the place, and I couldn't really pinpoint why.

"Your place is cute," I said to Mindy as she rifled through her closet, pulling piece after piece out that I was sure would never cover even half an ass cheek.

Her walls were all painted different shades that complimented each other. There were fabrics with interesting details hanging on the walls. If I were in any other college kid's room, I would've thought that it looked young, but Mindy had this eclectic style that really worked for her. She had a beautiful platform bed that I was certain Ryker made. Under that was a sizeable colorful plush rug that looked comfortable enough to sleep on. Large purple, orange, and turquoise pillows were positioned near the window, and I pictured Mindy meditating on them. There were candles everywhere as well as various gems strewn about. I kind of loved it for her.

Mindy shrugged, "Thanks, I've been at it for a while."

"I can tell. You have an eye for color."

She flung a top at me, "How about this one?"

I held up the small yellow fabric. "I don't think it's going to work."

"That's all I have," she looked a little defeated.

"It's all right."

We walked back downstairs, and the guys were just finishing up.

I caught Ryker's eyes as he made it to the kitchen area carrying a small toolbox. "You're good to go."

"Really? Thank you."

"The other guys just left to get ready. Do you want to check it out?"

I followed Ryker down the hall and was surprised at how put together my room was. They even made my bed. The furniture fit in here like it was made for this room.

My heart warmed, and I looked to Ryker, thinking he seemed like an entirely different man than the man I met yesterday.

I yawned, and it caught me off guard. "Sorry about that. I guess looking at that beautiful bed is making me realize I'm more tired than I realized."

"Don't feel like you have to come today. We go all the time."

"Are you sure? I think Mindy has her heart set on me going, but if I'm honest, I'm kind of tired, and I want to feel settled."

"She means well. I think she is just excited for another girl to be around."

"I don't want to disappoint her."

"Hey, Mins," Ryker called. "Ariel is going to take a rain check on swimming today. After last night she's whooped, and I think it's probably a good idea that she takes it easy."

"Oh, okay," she called, walking toward the room.

She smiled when she saw it all fixed up. "Looks good, bro." Then she bopped me with her hip, only I was much taller than her, so it hit my thigh. "You should've said something."

"I wanted to go, I did, but this bed made me realize how tired I was."

"Well, I better get going then. I need to catch Grey before he heads out."

"Thank you for everything." She smiled and shrugged it off, then hurried after Grey.

"I think I'm going to skip the swimming hole too, so I'll be around if you need anything." He brushed the hair off my shoulder, and it was intimate in a way that I felt myself blush. I met his eyes for a brief second then he was walking away. "Bye, Ariel."

It was on the tip of my tongue to correct him, but he was gone.

I WOKE UP AND NOTICED the sun was starting to set outside. I couldn't believe I slept that long. I moseyed about the apartment and into the kitchen, grabbing a frozen burrito to stick in the microwave. It dinged. I ate a few bites, and it was like gnawing on cardboard.

Yuck. Tossing it in the trash, I opened the fridge again to try something else.

There was a knock on the door, so I slammed the fridge shut and answered it. I probably should've had a drink after that nasty food. As I answered the door, I was about to say hey, but I stopped because I swear I had a glob of refried beans stuck in my teeth.

Ryker stood there, laughing at me. "What are you doing?"

My tongue tried to clean my teeth, and I put my hand over my mouth, "Stop laughing at me. I just ate the worst frozen burrito of my life." I kept the door open and walked to the kitchen, sticking my head under the sink to wash the disgusting taste from my mouth.

"Good thing I'm here then," Ryker said, holding up a brown paper bag.

"Whatcha got there?" I asked.

"Thought you'd be hungry. I was grabbing myself a steak and cheese from Erma's and thought I'd grab you one too."

"What's Erma's?" I had to learn the food spots, and pronto!

"It's the bar next to mine."

"Well, thanks, I'd say you didn't have to do that, but I think I would've withered away and died from this garbage," I said, grabbing the bag of frozen burritos and tossing them in the trash.

We sat on the couch and ate. "This is way better than the food I bought."

"That didn't even smell like food."

"Thank you again. For the furniture. The food. All of it. You didn't need to do any of the things you've done for me, but I really appreciate it."

"It's no problem. I couldn't in good conscience let you starve any more than I could let you sleep on the floor."

I laughed, "I had a mattress, and I wouldn't have starved."

Ryker raised his eyebrow at me, and I thought what a contrast his behavior was from the man I met only yesterday.

"Did you not have a lot of things before you moved here?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you barely brought anything. Surely you had a life you left behind."

"My..." I gulped, finding it hard to talk about him. "My dad had a houseful of stuff. I have it in storage. I had stuff, but none of it was all that valuable. I had a roommate, and I kind of sprung it on him at the last minute that I was moving."

"Him?" I swore I heard a low growl as he asked.

"Yeah, his name was Jeffrey. Geeky kid, but he wasn't half bad. I was already moving out on him, I didn't want to take the sofa or anything, so it worked out that this place was pre-furnished."

"That was nice of you."

"What can I say? I'm nice like that. Was Mindy upset that I didn't go with her?" I asked, changing the subject.

"No, it was fine, but I think she'll be upset if you don't go eventually."

I nodded my head. That was the impression I got too. "She's sweet."

"That she is, but don't let her fool you. She can be hell on wheels if she gets a wild hair."

"Somehow, I don't doubt that."

We had a few moments of silence while we continued eating, then Ryker asked, "Did you sleep okay? Did anything else happen?"

So maybe him bringing me dinner was out of concern. "I slept well."

"That's good."

"Were you worried about me?" I teased.

"I was."

He just put it out there, all simple-like.

I took another bite of my steak and cheese, unsure of what to say or do next. I didn't have to think about it for long because Ryker stood and started sorting through my small DVD collection. "Got any comedies? I could use some laughs."

"Mallrats or Chasing Amy are a few of my favorites."

"Never heard of them."

"Come on! You never heard of Jay and Silent Bob? Clerks?"

He looked at me like I had two heads.

"Kevin Smith is one of the best filmmakers. I think he is highly underrated. Prepare for an experience." I grabbed Mallrats and held it up.

"This is comedy gold."

He grabbed it from my hands, "You feel that strongly about it, huh? Guess we'll give this one a shot." He moved to put it in the DVD player.

Whoa, I thought he wanted to borrow something, not that we were going to sit here and binge my favorite comedies on my TV.

"What are you doing?"

"Putting in the DVD. What's it look like I'm doing?"

"Here?" I gulped, somehow suddenly feeling like the two of us watching a movie was creating an intimacy.

"Do you think I own a DVD player?" he responded.

"You don't?"

He shot me a look that said, 'Do you think I'd own a TV?' then put the movie on and settled back on the couch next to me.

I couldn't help the grin that was plastered on my face as Jason Lee made his debut. Ryker nudged me with his thigh. "You really love this, don't you?" Suddenly, I was all too aware of Ryker's proximity.

I gulped, then nodded to the screen while something hilarious happened. Occasionally I'd glance at Ryker to see if he thought it was funny. I'd get a couple of head shakes, but I could tell he was amused. Mallrats ended, then Ryker stood and put in Chasing Amy.

I had no idea that when he knocked at my door that we'd be sitting and having a movie marathon. When the next movie began, I saw his lips quirk more than a few times, and I was delighted when I heard him chuckle. Eventually, I felt my eyes start to get heavy, and I blinked them, trying to stay awake, but it was no use.

I opened my eyes and felt hard muscles beneath me. The last thing I remembered was Banky in Chasing Amy screaming, "Your mother's a tracer!" The credits were rolling on the screen. "Sorry," I said. My head was on Ryker's thigh. I sat up and realized I grabbed his thigh to push myself up. Wow, those were some muscular thighs. The feel of his thigh beneath my palm made my nipples immediately harden. I quickly moved my hand off his leg and muttered another, "Sorry."

"You fell asleep, no worries. The movies were pretty funny. Thanks. I needed some laughs."

I yawned. "Good, you liked it."

"You're tired. I better go." He brushed my hair out of my face and stood, "Night, Ariel."

"Elle," I mumbled, then laid there for a moment thinking about those thighs and imagining what the rest of his muscled body might feel like and eventually fell back to sleep.

The Sunday morning church bells rang out and seemingly bounced off the homes. It was a stark reminder that I wasn't in my tiny apartment in Seattle. I was sitting on the sofa drinking coffee with the windows in the living room open, hoping for any type of breeze to flow through. I slept last night without any dreams, and I wondered if the cleansing Mindy did actually held merit. What was I even thinking? I didn't believe in that.

I thought about the last two days and how there was so much more to this place than I imagined. The entire thing with the Valderes was disconcerting, but I knew in my core that there were always two sides to every story. Ryker and his friends were a little too hush-hush about theirs.

The sound of a power tool caught my attention. I looked out my window to see what the noise was and saw Ryker with a large floor sander walking back and forth on the porch.

Jeez, did he look good doing physical labor!

Saliva pooled in my mouth, and I couldn't help but ogle this fine specimen of a man. He wore dark jeans and a black tank top. Shit. He was turning. I'd be busted in about point-two seconds if I didn't move quickly. I flew from the window and dashed back to the sofa.

Luckily, he didn't turn off his machine; he just kept walking past. I felt heat rush through my body with thoughts of Ryker.

He was a jerk, remember! I tried to remind myself, but it was no use. He stopped being a jerk about ten minutes after we met. I thought about his thigh and last night and how damn hot it was when he pretty much did anything. He wasn't my type. He was older than me. He had to be in his late thirties, maybe early forties. I usually dated hipsters who were my age or sometimes younger. I never dated over thirty-five. I wasn't sure why exactly, but I knew I wanted to be a mom one day, and if the man was over thirty-five, he either already had been married and had kids, or he wasn't going to want them. Still, looking at Ryker as he passed by the window, my younger-than-thirty-five rule went entirely out the window. There was something incredibly enticing about that man.

I had to get a grip. My body was reacting in a way I wasn't used to, and before I knew it, I was at the window again for another look. He turned and spotted me. I had to think fast, so I stuck my head out the window. "Hey," I called out.

He hit a switch on the sander and approached me at the window. His nose flared as he got closer, and I swear it seemed like he was smelling the air.

"Sorry, that didn't wake you, did it?"

"No, I've been up. I had a much better sleep, thanks."

"Good, that means Mindy's stones worked."

I wasn't so sure about that, but hey, who was I to argue? "What are you working on out there?" I asked a self-explanatory question.

"Sanding the porch and replacing a few boards. This should've been done ages ago. I just ended up having so many things on my plate, I guess I got side-tracked. I wanted this done before you got here, but...."

"I get it," I waved my hand, "Life."

He nodded. "It might be loud and dusty. I'd recommend closing your window, so it doesn't make a mess in there. Also, that door at the end of the hall leads to a back stairwell. You can exit out of there when I stain it."

"Thanks." There were a few seconds where we just stared at each other, and my nips hardened under his gaze. Not good.

Abort. Abort.

"Right, well, if you need anything, let me know."

His eyes dropped to my chest, and even though I had a bra on, I thought for sure he knew what my girls were doing under my shirt. His tongue darted out and licked his lips, and I struggled to hold myself back.

"All right, see you," I squeaked out, then closed the window. I took a minute to collect myself then decided a shower was what I needed. My only problem was, once I was naked and under the spray, instead of cooling me off, my mind immediately drifted to Ryker, and I had no choice but to take care of the burning ache he caused.

Once that was done, and out of the way, I felt marginally better. I decided some distance between Ryker and I would take the edge off the rest. I dug through my printed directions and found the directions to the Valdere Estate. Maybe getting the lay of the land before my big day would be good.

I left out the back entrance, hoping to avoid Ryker. I knew he wasn't staining or painting yet; however, space between us was exactly what I felt like I needed. I almost made it to my car when he rounded the building, and Good Lord, he was shirtless. He was using the back of his shirt to wipe sweat from the back of his neck. My breath hitched. His chest was absolute perfection. There was a faint scar running down the front, between his broad shoulders. He had defined pecs with a dusting of hair over his chest. And those abs, were they even legal? Each muscle had so many lickable ridges.

"Ariel, going somewhere?" he asked with a smirk taking me out of my Ryker-induced haze. He totally knew I was checking him out.

"Um, yeah?" I chirped and rushed to my car. Once I was safely inside and away from Ryker, I looked in my rear-view mirror and watched as he ran a hand through his dark hair. I'd never in all my life felt so attracted to a man. I turned on my car and sat there watching him until he was out of sight, then I backed out of my spot, feeling all kinds of jumbled up inside.

I drove around the small town, noting the elementary school and its proximity to the small high school. My high school was probably ten times as big, and it was another reminder of what a small town I was in.

The church parking lot was filled with cars overflowing onto the street. I continued past it, and it was only a few more minutes until I seemed to reach the outskirts of town. Turning around, I circled back to follow my instructions to the Valdere's. I made turn after turn and found that the estate was also outside of the town. A vast brick wall surrounded the place, giving me the distinct impression that it was heavily surveyed. The landscaping around the brick wall was meticulous, and I could tell they must have a groundskeeper, if not several, with how immaculate everything looked.

I continued driving around the estate when suddenly the iron gates began to open, and a large black SUV began to slowly make its way out. I wanted to get out of there and not seem like some weird stalker. I began to drive away, and as I did, I noticed the window on the SUV rolled down. I couldn't see who was in there, but I got the unsettling feeling that they were watching me. It left me feeling unbalanced.

I quickly drove away. The further I got, the more I wondered if I felt that way because of everything I'd already heard about the Valderes. It was like a seed was planted, so I looked to see if something was actually wrong. I drove back through town, spotting the library and a few other places that might be important. Then with nothing else to do, I went home. Ryker was still shirtless, but this time he was bent over a few sawhorses where he was cutting a piece of wood with an electric saw.

There goes my libido again. I'd just have to get used to it.

I tinkered around the apartment for the rest of the day, and I did my best to ignore the shirtless, tanned-skin Ryker. It was pretty much impossible. Mindy stopped by and brought me food, telling me that she made some for Ryker and thought I might be hungry too. I thanked her, and she told me she and Grey had plans but that she'd catch up with me soon.

I ate some delicious pasta with meatballs, and, again, I was reminded that I should really do something nice for Mindy. She was beyond thoughtful.

As the evening drew near and Ryker seemed to stop working, I opened the window again to let the breeze flow through. My eyes widened; Ryker had gotten so much done! The porch practically looked brand-new! I could tell he wasn't entirely done, but it was a considerable improvement.

Ryker walked up from behind the building and noticed me in my window, gawking at his work. He had changed and was dressed, so I felt like I could form a coherent sentence. "It looks amazing."

"Thanks, I'll finish up tomorrow. Give it another day before you walk on it."

"Where are you headed off to?"

"Bar's not gonna run itself."

"I suppose not."

He looked like he was going to say something else but stopped himself. "Well, have a good night, Ariel."

"Are you ever going to call me Elle?"

"Now, why would I do that?" he smirked. Then he was gone, and I kind of wished he would invite me to his bar. Then I remembered him saying I could go to the other bars, but not his. Maybe he had a woman there, and that was why he didn't want me anywhere near there. Of course, someone like him would have a woman. Jealousy instantly burned through me. I didn't understand why I felt jealous. He was just my hot, sometimes moody, sometimes not, landlord, and I needed to remember that.

I felt apprehensive as I drove up to the iron gates for my first workday at the Valdere Estate. It also didn't help that this morning, as I was getting into my car, I saw Ryker give me a displeased look. I knew he was aware of where I was going and that he didn't like it.

I wore a high-waisted skirt, a light blue blouse, and slingback heels. Ryker ground his jaw when he saw me and ignored my good morning, replying with an all too unpleasant grunt.

It left me annoyed. I was going to work for the enemy. I understood why he was upset, but he didn't need to be rude about it. It's not like I knew anything about the Valderes or him before coming here. I didn't think it was fair that he was rude to me because of it.

Pulling up to the intercom in front of the gate was intimidating. I pressed the button and waited for a voice. No one spoke. Instead, I waited several moments until the gate slowly peeled back.

Driving up the long drive eventually led to a sprawling brick mansion, complete with a turnaround drive and a large fountain. Only instead of the white cherub, I was used to seeing, this had a black gargoyle.

I parked right in front, unsure if that's where I was supposed to park. I was sure someone would tell me where I needed to move my car.

I walked up the marble stairs and stopped in front of a large black door. There was no doorbell to ring, only an old-fashioned knocker which I used.

Moments later, the door pulled slowly open. I expected to be greeted by someone, but no one was there.

Odd.

"Hello," I called out. "Is anyone there?" I felt like Belle walking into Beast's castle for the first time. I jumped in shock when I heard, "Miss Katz, I assume." Turning, I found a man much shorter than myself. He had to be maybe a foot shorter than me. He wore a black tailored suit, with a black dress shirt like he was dressed for a funeral. If I had to guess, he was in his late sixties-early seventies and of Asian descent, but his accent held an English lilt.

"That's me," I said with a smile.

"I'm Alfonzo. It is a pleasure to meet you." He bowed forward slightly, causing me to blink in astonishment. I'd never seen anyone do any such thing except maybe Jeffrey the Butler on Fresh Prince.

"Nice to meet you."

"Master Valdere is in a meeting this morning. He asked that I show you around and give you the lay of the land. First things first, let me show you where you should park."

I followed him back outside and slowly followed in my car as he walked behind the estate. Here I could see several other vehicles, as well as what appeared to be an airplane hanger. My jaw was on the floor for sure with that one.

Once I was parked, we walked in through the staff entrance, which felt far less intimidating. Alfonzo showed me where the kitchen was and introduced me to Bethany, their head chef, who explained that whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted, she would make it for me. Wow, talk about a perk!

He gave me a long tour. I passed too many bathrooms and more sitting rooms than any one person should have. "Upstairs is the living quarters for the residents and guests. There are two separate buildings on the estate for employees."

"Who lives here besides Mister Valdere?"

"The Missus, of course. You'll meet her soon enough, I'm sure. Then there is their son, but he isn't here often. Occasionally, various guests stay as well."

I nodded as we continued to stroll. "How many bedrooms are there?" I asked curiously. The place was enormous. It was also the grandest home I'd ever been in, decorated with an old-world charm that at times felt like I'd stepped into a time-warp.

"Upstairs, there are thirteen, not including the master's quarters."

"Wow," I said, running my hand over the banister.

"This is the cellar. You will never need to go down there, so I will leave it off the tour. Here is Master Valdere's office." He pointed to a set of closed doors. We continued walking, and down the hall, there was another set of double doors. Alfonzo opened the doors, and I followed him into an office. "And this, Miss Katz, is your office."

There were mahogany bookshelves built into the wall. A simple desk sat in front of the bookshelves facing the door. On the desk, there was a laptop and a phone. It was as beautifully decorated as the rest of the home, but something about this space felt newer. Maybe it was technology? Since moving to Ohio, I hadn't really seen much of it.

"There's Internet, I assume?" I asked.

"Of course."

Maybe I made the decision not to live here in haste. It seemed pretty impressive. Then again, I wouldn't have met Ryker or Mindy. Gosh, was I really happy about meeting Ryker after he ignored me this morning? With my thoughts on Ryker, I didn't notice Alfonzo cleared his throat. He did it again, but this time he said, "Miss Katz, may I present to you Master Bronson Valdere."

There was something oddly familiar about Mr. Valdere. He had dark features and a chiseled jaw. His hair was trimmed to perfection. He was dressed impeccably in the most expensive-looking black suit that I had ever seen. He didn't appear to be much older than me; however, when he spoke, his voice held an age to it that was hard to describe. I held out my hand, "Hi, Mr...."

"Bronson, you may call me Bronson." He grabbed my hand and placed a small kiss on my knuckles. That was a stretch for an employer and mildly inappropriate. Then again, he also had a slight accent, so maybe it was customary wherever he was from.

"Bronson," I said, trying it out on my tongue, "Nice to meet you."

"Pleasure's all mine." He appraised me from top to toe, and I couldn't tell if he was checking me out or just cataloging details. I didn't like it.

"So, this is it? Where I'll be spending my days?"

"I hope it's to your liking."

"It's great."

"My office is through these doors." He nodded to a set of doors that were now open that connected his office to my own. "I have a meeting in five minutes that I'd like you to transcribe. I like to keep detailed records of my phone conversations. In business, I've found it incredibly useful, wouldn't you agree?"

"Sure," I concurred.

"Alfonzo, grab her laptop and set her up next to me."

Alfonzo grabbed the laptop. I set my purse down and followed Bronson into his much more elaborate office.

He sat behind his imposing desk and motioned for me to sit in a chair across from him. Alfonzo handed me the laptop, open and ready to go, then briefly showed me what a dictation from another call looked like. I had only seconds to get my bearings before the phone was ringing, and Bronson shot Alfonzo a menacing look that made him cower and scurry out of the room.

Bronson held a finger up to his mouth, telling me to be quiet.

"Speak," Bronson answered the phone with a curt order.

I spent the next fifteen minutes taking detailed notes on the conversation. One thing I knew right away was that Bronson was no pushover when it came to business. People cowed to him, and I wondered if they were *actually* dangerous.

When the call was over, Bronson wanted to look at my notes, then nodded his head in approval when he saw I noted people's behavior. If someone sighed, I wrote it down.

"These are good. Keep the door open between us. There's a fax machine and a copy machine through these doors." He motioned to a set of doors I hadn't noticed. "Get settled at your desk, and I'll give you further instructions."

The rest of the day went how you would think any secretarial job with a moody and rich boss would go.

I'd certainly had worse jobs.

When I got home, I was surprised to see how beautiful the porch looked. Ferns hung from the roof in between posts. A pair of white rockers were positioned on the porch with a small white table between them. Now, this was the kind of fairytale porch a girl could get used to!

I was staring, and my eyes were wide as I took in everything.

"It came out amazing, didn't it?" Mindy asked from beside me, startling me.

"You came out of nowhere!" I laughed. "It looks so amazing. Did you help him with this?"

"Nope! It was all Ryker."

"Wow, well, he outdid himself."

"You look all fancy today," Mindy noted. "How was the first day with those people?"

"It was fine, busy. I'm hardly fancy, just a skirt and heels."

"Did anything happen?"

I shook my head but wanted to ask what she really thought could've happened.

"Is the paint dry? I want to go put on comfy clothes."

"Yeah, he tested it before he left."

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask Ryker's whereabouts, but that wasn't my business. Although it felt odd, he'd been so attentive and helpful over the weekend, and now, it felt like he was giving me the cold shoulder. Except, a

strange part of me wondered if he somehow made this porch beautiful for me. Instead of asking, I smiled and started for the door.

"Did you have dinner yet? Want to grab something?" Mindy sounded unsure as she asked me.

"Give me ten," I replied.

She gave me a huge smile and told me to meet her upstairs when I was ready. A little while later, I changed and freshened up, then knocked on her door. We had pizza, and our conversation was easygoing. I didn't see Ryker again that night and was disappointed.

The following morning, I left the same time as the day before, hoping I would run into Ryker and that we would have a better exchange than yesterday, but his bike wasn't there. Maybe he didn't come home last night. What if he stayed with a woman? Longing and jealousy coursed through me. I had no right to be jealous. No right to feel disappointed, but it didn't change the fact that I did.

Work started off a lot like it did the previous day. There was a slew of emails when I got to my desk from Bronson, and he had a list of things he needed me to do. Fill out this form, file this one, fax this one. It was easy enough but tedious, so I could see why he needed someone to do it for him. After an hour into my shift, my stomach growled, and I decided to take Bethany up on her offer about making me anything I wanted. I chatted with her for a few minutes and asked if she could make me an omelet. She told me she'd bring it to me in my office, and I thanked her.

I was walking back to my office when I overheard a strange conversation. A woman's voice rang through the hall. "She's here? She's truly here?"

"I promised you she'd be here, and she is." I recognized that voice as Bronson's.

"I want to meet her."

"Don't go in too excited."

"Of course I'm excited. I've waited years to meet her."

"She's here," Bronson hissed, and I wanted to walk faster to my office, but Bethany called my name. "Miss Katz, here's that omelet you asked for. Please let me know if there is anything else I can get for you."

"Bethany, as I said before, please call me Elle."

"I'm not sure the master would appreciate that much."

"Why do you all refer to him as the master? Seems a bit archaic if you ask me."

"It's our way," she replied, handing me the plate.

Our brief interaction made me momentarily forget the strange conversation I overheard.

I brought my plate to my desk and tasted, arguably, the best omelet I'd ever eaten. My eyes were closed, and I was savoring the flavors when I heard a knock at my open door.

In the doorway stood a blonde woman who looked younger than me. She had ivory skin. Her hair was pulled back in a tight bun at the nape of her neck, and her red lipstick showed off the fullness of her lips. She wore a black blouse and skirt as well as heels, and I wondered if dressing like you were going to a funeral was a prerequisite around here. I had a vague sense of familiarity. However, I was sure I would have remembered this woman if I'd met her before. She was stunning.

"You must be Ariel. I'm..." she paused as if trying to determine what she should call herself. "I'm Lillian." She stared at me as if waiting to see what I'd do next.

"Um, hi. You can call me Elle. Nice to meet you."

"Elle, Darling. Look at you. Aren't you just divine? Bronson, she's simply divine," she called out.

Darling? Divine? What an odd choice of words.

"Well, let me take a look at you. Stand up." She clapped as if to say I wasn't moving fast enough for her.

"I'm not doing that."

She frowned, then sighed. "I just want to take a look at you."

"Lillian, leave the girl alone," Bronson called out.

"But..." she reached out and touched my hair, not finishing her thought process. "Her hair is a lovely shade, don't you think?"

"Yes, Dear. It's lovely."

Alrighty, so by his term of endearment, I was guessing that Bronson and Lillian were together. She was a tad on the young side for him, but who was I to judge? What was more worrisome was her interest in me. I wouldn't be a part of any sex thing that these two were interested in, and the way she wanted me to turn around made me wonder if that was their kink. Bronson was more than professional with me. However, this weirded me out.

"It's curly, though. It's not straight like mine."

"It's the humidity," I said, brushing her hand away from me.

She took a few steps back as if I'd struck her by brushing her hand away. Bronson placed his hand on her shoulder and whispered something in her ear that I couldn't hear. Lillian straightened her back and squared her shoulders. "Right, Elle, tell me about yourself. How do you like it here? Are you finding the work agreeable?"

"Sure, it's fine. It has its perks," I held up the fork signaling how I enjoyed the omelet and hoping that she would take the hint and let me eat before my food got cold.

"Bethany is a marvelous cook, isn't she? She's here for your every need. I'll let you enjoy your meal. I do hope we can become close friends."

I gave her a tight-lipped smile. "Do you work here or..." I had to ask. I needed confirmation on who she was, but Bronson cut me off.

"She's the lady of the house."

Well, that answered that. They were definitely together. God, I hoped I wasn't working for some kinky sex weirdo.

Lillian lingered for a second, seemingly hoping I would jump at the idea of friends. When I didn't, she sighed and left the room, shaking her hips as she did.

After that, the rest of the day went a lot like the day before. Bronson kept me busy. There were no comments about Lillian or anything else that made me think he was anything less than professional.

Bethany made me lunch then sent me home with a to-go box for dinner. This time, however, getting food from Bethany felt weird. I thought of Lillian's comments, making me feel like Bethany was there specifically for me. I shook off those thoughts, eventually deciding that it made no sense at all that she would be there for me. There were a lot of people here who also needed food. She'd have to be here for them as well. Still, the way Lillian spoke...

Reece and Micah walked out the front door as I walked back up to the new beautiful porch. "There she is!" Reece said.

"Hey, guys! How are you?" I was excited to see them.

"Can't complain," Micah responded.

"Look at you all dressed up!" Reece eyed me playfully.

"Has Ryker seen you all gussied up?" Micah asked.

I shrugged at the mention of Ryker, then changed the subject. "I was going to ask you if you want to grab dinner with us, but it looks like you already have dinner," Reece said.

I held up my takeout box. "The chef made me chicken enchiladas to take home. Raincheck?"

"Sure," Reece grumbled.

"It's probably poison," Micah muttered to Reece, then added, "Smell it."

"You're not smelling my food." I shook my head, walking past them toward my apartment. "I'll catch up with you later. I'm dying to get out of these clothes."

"I know someone who can help you with that!" Reece called.

I shook my head as I walked into my apartment. My food was indeed delicious! After eating just enough that I wouldn't get a cramp from running, I changed out of my work clothes and into my running gear. I tinkered around the apartment, killing time until I knew I could successfully run without getting sick. Finally, I went outside and stretched, preparing for a run. A part of me was nervous since the last time I ran, I had that episode. I still hadn't followed up with Doc. I made a mental note to do that. I was doing a deep lunge stretch when Ryker pulled into the parking lot on his bike.

Damn, that man looked good on a motorcycle.

I'd never dated anyone with a bike before. I wondered how it would be to sit behind him. How it would feel to have that big body... Jesus, I needed to get a grip.

"What are you staring at?" Ryker snapped me out of my thoughts. I must've been so caught up in my thoughts about him on a bike that I didn't notice him approach.

"Nothing. Just daydreaming. Sometimes I do that," I lied, then remembered how rude Ryker was to me yesterday morning. "Now you're speaking to me?"

"When did I stop speaking to you?"

"Um, yesterday, in the morning." I put my hand up and looked at him like you know exactly what I'm talking about.

"I wasn't ignoring you. I was just caught off guard by how you looked in a skirt."

Damn, Ryker knew how to make my skin flush.

Ignoring his comment, I changed the subject. "Do you work tonight?"

"I'm sure I'll stop in, but my staff has it covered."

Unsure of what else I could say to prolong the conversation, I looked at the empty sidewalk then tilted my head. "I better run. I need to burn off all of those calories I just ingested."

I could've sworn I heard him mumble, "I've got ways you can burn calories." He gave me a chin lift, then sat on the porch and watched me run away.

I didn't mean to eavesdrop. I really didn't. I had just arrived at work after luckily having a good night's rest. Either Mindy's charms worked, or the other night's dream was some random fluke. Last night when I returned home after my run, Ryker was no longer sitting out front, but I spotted his bike and knew he wasn't far. I wondered if he was worried I'd have another incident.

I was walking down the hall on my way to my office with a fresh muffin and my topped-off coffee from the kitchen when I heard Bronson talking with someone.

"You need to take it slow," Bronson spoke authoritatively.

"I know this. It's just..." That was Lillian. I couldn't help but crinkle my eyes. She really wasn't an easy one to read.

"It's just you've waited a long time, I know," he finished for her.

"It's not how I expected our first meeting to go."

"If you'd listened to me and let me introduce you, maybe it wouldn't have been so off."

Alfonzo started down the hall, carrying a serving tray. I began to walk, hoping I wasn't too noticeable.

"There she is," Bronson cooed. I wasn't sure if he was speaking to Lillian or me.

"Morning," I replied, hoping I could set my things down before I needed to engage.

"Hi, Elle," Lillian said. "How are you this morning?"

"Great. I'll be even better when I get a little more of this in me," I replied, raising my coffee mug.

Alfonzo followed into the room. "Your breakfast, Master." Alfonzo set two white plastic to-go mugs down, then looked at me. "You've been in to see Bethany already?"

"Yep," I held up my coffee and muffin. Hint...hint. (I want to eat.)

Lillian took a sip from her cup, and a tiny droplet of red pooled on her lips. Was she *really* drinking wine this early? Yikes.

"Busy day today, Bronson?" I asked, hoping he would give me some direction.

"Quite. I'll be in soon to go over our morning."

"Thanks," I said, turning to leave.

"Elle, Dear. Would you like to have lunch with me this afternoon?" Lillian asked, catching me off guard.

"Oh, I um, I guess. Sure." I didn't really want to, but she put me on the spot.

Lillian beamed. "That will be splendid! Alfonzo set the table for two in the grand-dining hall."

What twenty-year-old spoke like that? And the grand-dining hall? That sounded fancy. I wasn't fancy.

"Oh, I can't wait! Alfonzo, have Bethany begin working on the menu," she ordered, and I couldn't tell what her schtick was because the way she behaved was entirely over the top.

"Great," I mumbled. "See you then."

I left Bronson's office and prayed that Lillian would somehow forget or get too caught up in whatever it was she liked to do and wouldn't show for lunch. Maybe I was being too judge-y? I didn't know, but something about her was off-putting.

I HAD NO SUCH LUCK.

Bronson kept me busy throughout the morning, and, at twelve sharp, Alfonzo knocked on my door to tell me lunch was ready.

I followed Alfonzo to the dining hall and immediately understood why it was called the grand dining hall. The ceilings were at least twenty feet high with enormous, bronzed chandeliers that had dozens upon dozens of candles lit. It seemed like a waste to me. Just open a dang window.

Large Oriental rugs covered the rich wooden floors. There was a table big enough for thirty people, and Lillian was sitting at one end waiting for me. She had a glass of red wine at her lips, and she slowly sipped it while watching me enter. Her eyes never left mine. I felt like she was a cat, and I was the prey ready to be pounced on.

The other place setting was at the other end of the table, and I thought it was complete overkill to have the two of us in here. It put a sour taste in my mouth. I felt like we'd have to shout at one another to talk. Alfonzo pulled out my chair as I took a seat. My eyes pleaded with him to save me, but it was pointless.

"Your first course this afternoon will be a bouillabaisse. It's made with imported seafood from none other than the French Riviera itself."

I returned a tight-lipped smile, having no idea what that was.

A few seconds later, two men appeared from different sides of the dining hall, one closer to me and the other closer to Lillian. They set a bowl down in front of each of us. Apparently, bouillabaisse was some type of soup.

I took a small sip and immediately tasted a strong fishiness. It wasn't unpleasant, but I didn't really want to slurp fish broth. I watched Lillian from across the table, who took slow, deliberate bites. She didn't even look at her soup; that's how hyper-focused she seemed to be. I didn't want to be rude, but the soup wasn't for me. Slowly, I took a few additional bites but then I was done. I'd just have to see if Bethany could make me something normal later.

I found it weird that Lillian invited me to lunch, but she hadn't said anything to me yet.

"So," I said loudly, "Have you lived here long?"

"Why are you shouting?" She tilted her head curiously at me, the way a dog would if he heard a noise he couldn't decipher.

"I just thought since you're all the way down there, you couldn't hear me."

"I hear you just fine. To answer your question, I have indeed lived here a long time."

I looked down at my bowl. Eating the soup would be more enjoyable than this conversation.

A small fish head popped up in the bowl. Gross.

"You don't fancy the soup?"

I returned her question with a reticent smile.

"Use your words, child," she berated.

See that B.S.! That right there was why I knew we wouldn't be best friends.

I glared at her, wondering if she could see the daggers I was shooting her from across the room. "Not particularly, no. I'm not a fan."

She clapped twice then ordered, "Alfonzo, remove the soup immediately and let Bethany know she does not find it suitable."

Alfonzo appeared out of nowhere. He came in so fast I had to blink to see if I imagined it. He took Lillian's bowl first, then gathered mine.

"Next, we will be serving basil risotto with escargot."

My eyes bugged out. They had to be punking me. All right, if this is what Lillian thought was edible, I'd try it.

The servers came in as before, setting small plates in front of us. I decided immediately that I wasn't going to attempt to eat the snails. I tasted the risotto. It was good, a little salty, but edible. I moved it around on my

plate as much as possible and could not wait for this lunch to be over. I drank a glass of water, then as I emptied it, a server would reappear to fill my glass.

Lillian barely ate but asked me simple questions she could've gotten from my resume.

"Elle, what have you done for work?"

"Elle, can you tell me about your education? Have you been properly taught?"

"Elle, did you find Seattle to be a good life?" That question threw me. She could've phrased it differently, and most people would've. Like how did you like Seattle growing up? The odd way she communicated made me respond with very few words.

I thought it might be good to change tactics. "Seattle was nice. How about you? Do you like Ohio?"

She smiled at me, engaging her as if I'd finally done something to please her. "I'm well-traveled and have been all over the world. However, something is exhilarating about this place, isn't it? You may have felt it when you drove in. Tell me, did you feel anything strange as you crossed into town?"

What a whack-a-do question. I took a sip of water, then thought about it. I suppose I did feel something, but I'm pretty sure it was a change in humidity. I gave a quick shake of my head, then watched as she squinted, then commanded, "Words, Ariel."

All right, if she berated me one more time! I glared and was saved by the waiter as they came over to refill my glass. "You can take my plate, please," I requested, not wanting it to be Lillian who ordered them around on my behalf.

I wiped my mouth with my napkin and began to stand. I really couldn't stand a second more of this. "Thank you for the lunch invitation, Lillian. It's been loads of fun," I supplied, somewhat sarcastically.

"Where are you going? We haven't gotten to the main dish yet."

"I have work to do. Thanks so much, though. We should totally do this again sometime." *Not!*

I wanted to hurry out of there, but Alfonzo appeared.

"Miss Katz, you must stay. Bethany has prepared the most fabulous meal for you. I think it would hurt her feelings if you didn't at least try it."

"I really should be getting back to work," I tried.

"I've spoken with the master, and he already informed me that you should take as long as you need."

"There, it's settled. Please have a seat, Elle."

"We will be serving Moroccan steak with roasted beetroot puree."

Fine, I thought, sitting. I could eat steak. I wasn't the biggest fan of beets, but I'd try it.

The dishes were laid in front of us, and it did look appetizing. I ate several bites of the meat, not realizing that it would be as spicy as it was. I drank more water then soon realized that if I used the beet puree, it cut the spiciness of the meat.

Lillian didn't engage me any longer. I wasn't sure if I put her off by wanting to leave, but I got the sense that she was waiting to see what I would do. If I ever overheard her again, I'd run in the other direction. I didn't want to sit through this again.

A few minutes passed, and my stomach began to feel strange. Gurgling in a way that I wasn't sure if I'd make it to the bathroom. I abruptly stood and darted out of the dining hall. I could hear Lillian calling after me, but I didn't care. Something in this food did not sit well at all. I rushed to the bathroom and immediately lost everything in my stomach. I felt faint, and I began to sweat. My vision turned spotty, and before I knew it, everything went black.

THE ROOM WAS DARK AS I opened my eyes. Where was I? I recalled getting sick and that God-awful lunch, then I didn't remember anything after that. Did I pass out in the bathroom?

I sat up, feeling slightly dizzy. I was in a bedroom, and I noticed it was dark outside after a few glances out the window. I had no idea how late it was, but I wanted to get out of here. I wondered if I should call Doc.

I looked down at my ring that I'd put on a chain. It was black. I didn't imagine it like I'd previously thought. I needed to get the heck out of here. Something about this felt very, very off.

I stood on shaky legs. Why did I feel so weak? Could food poisoning make you weak? Unless something else was in my food... I remembered how Ryker and everyone spoke of the Valderes, and a sense of unease settled over me.

I tiptoed to the door, and when I didn't hear anything, I cracked it open. There wasn't any sound, so I slowly moved to the hall in hopes that I could leave without anyone noticing.

I walked down the hallway that I was fairly certain was attached to the main hallway with the staircase. As I turned, I noticed a light and heard semi-raised voices. One of the voices was new, and he sounded angry. He was arguing with Lillian and Bronson. I wasn't going to stick around and find out why. The voices raised over one another, and I thought it was the perfect time to leave. I hurried down the stairs, grateful that they were too caught up in whatever drama they were dealing with to notice me.

I hurried to my office, grabbed my purse, and was almost out the back door when Alfonzo appeared. "Miss Katz, wait. I must get the master. I was supposed to notify them the minute you awoke."

"No worries. I'm going home. Feeling much better," I semi-lied and hurried past Alfonzo to my car door. He tried to catch up to me, and I heard him ask me again to wait, but once inside my car, I started it and sped off, leaving him and the Valdere Estate in my rear-view mirror.

"Ariel, what's wrong? Open your door." I was in my car, shaking. I wasn't even sure why, but I felt beyond spooked. Ryker was currently knocking on my window while I freaked out.

"Ariel, I'm not kidding. Open up."

I came out of freak-out mode, realizing I practically drove home on autopilot and opened my door, climbing out.

Ryker grabbed both of my arms and looked me up and down. "Are you okay? What happened to you? You're as white as a ghost."

"I'm... I'm fine," I stuttered.

"You're not fine. Come on." He ushered me inside and sat me on the couch, then filled a glass of water and handed it to me. "Drink."

I drank and finished the glass.

He took it, then refilled it and handed me another glass. "Drink."

I drank the water, set the glass down on the table, then sat back, brought my knees up to my chest, and tried to figure out why I was so shaken up.

Ryker sat next to me, put his muscular arm around me, and pulled me into him. "Tell me what happened, Ariel."

For once, it wasn't on the tip of my tongue to correct him. "I was eating lunch with this awful girl, and then I got sick. I... I think I passed out. Then when I woke up, I was in a bedroom, and I just wanted to get out of there. I don't even know why I was so spooked. I just felt like I had to go."

"I'm calling Doc."

"No, it's late. Don't call him."

He studied me. "Fine, but I'm staying here, on the couch, and tomorrow, you don't go into work, and we call him. Deal?"

"You don't have to sleep here. Your apartment's just across the hall. If I need something, I'll call."

"That's the deal, Ariel. Or I pick up the phone and drag Doc out of bed."

"Fine, okay. But you take my bed. This couch is too small for you."

"I'll be fine. I've slept on this couch before."

He swept my hair off my neck, and it looked like he was looking for something. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing just wanted to make sure you were okay."

I shrugged that comment off, then yawned and curled into Ryker's side, somehow feeling safer next to him.

"Hey, I think you're going to fall back to sleep, but I'm guessing you'll be more comfortable if you change first."

"Yes, you're right." I reluctantly got up from the couch and sleepily went to my room to change. I took off my shirt and noticed my ruby was back to its bright red self. Was I imagining it being black?

I doubted myself, threw on some loose shorts and a tank, then, for some unknown reason, I went back to the couch and cuddled in next to Ryker. I must not have been thinking clearly, but it felt natural, and it wasn't long until my eyes grew heavy.

"HEY, DOC. THANKS FOR coming. She's been sleeping like the dead."

I had? Looking at my alarm clock, I saw it was one fifteen, and the sun was bright in the sky. I must've slept most of the day away.

"Not a problem at all. Let's see if we can wake sleeping beauty," I heard Doc reply.

A second later, both Ryker and Doc were standing in my bedroom. I briefly wondered how I'd gotten here because the last thing I remembered was snuggling up to Ryker on the couch.

"There she is," Doc said.

"Morning," Ryker greeted, "How're you feeling?"

I sat up, then stretched. I noticed Ryker's eyes on my chest as I did so. Damn, now why did him looking make my nips perk up?

I pulled the sheet higher to hide my titty hard-on, then answered, "I feel good. I can't believe I slept so long."

"Can you tell me about what happened last night?" Doc asked while examining me.

I went over my lunch and how I ate all this weird stuff, then ran to the toilet and got sick, then passed out.

"Hmm. I'd say it sounds like an allergic reaction or food poisoning. However, since you passed out the other night, I want you to take it easy. I don't think you should go to work for the next few days."

I nodded my head in understanding. I probably should have already called into the estate today to let them know I wasn't coming in. However, since they found me passed out, I'm sure they knew why I wasn't there.

"I don't think she should be alone," Ryker said.

"I'd have to say that I agree with you. Given the fact that you've lost consciousness twice this week, I really would insist that you take it easy and that you're not alone."

"I feel fine, though."

"It's either that, or I insist that we admit you to the closest hospital for testing. It's over an hour's drive from here, so I'd rather not."

I definitely didn't want to go to a hospital, that was for sure. "I understand," I agreed with Doc. It would be much better to not go to a hospital.

"Good. I'm going to stop back tomorrow to check on you."

I wanted to protest, but Ryker was shaking Doc's hand and shuffling him out the door. I heard the front door shut and decided to use the bathroom. When I finished, Ryker was leaning with his back against the counter in the kitchen with one foot bent at the knee. Damn, he was something nice to look at. Then, I noticed his eyes traveling over my body, and before I could give my body a chance to react, I darted into my bedroom to change into something less revealing.

The problem was it was hot. Pretty much most clothes on a ninety-degree day would be revealing, and I had to admit to myself that I liked the way it felt having his attention.

Grrr! He was making me crazy. One minute he was flirty, and the next, he was prickly.

Oh-so-fuck-it. I dressed in a flowy sundress that came to just above my knees. It was hot, and although I was still showing some skin, it wasn't form-fitting. I came out a minute later then went back into the bathroom to tame my hair and brush my teeth.

Ryker was still in the same spot and was staring at me in a new and still fascinated way.

"So," I started.

"So," he parroted.

I glared. "A few things. First, thank you for taking care of me again. Also, do you mind if I use your phone to call into work to tell them I'm not coming in?"

He looked unhappy at the mention of work. "First, you don't have to thank me for taking care of you. I don't mind."

The way he said he didn't mind was all kinds of sexy. That deep raspy timbre of his could make any woman's knees go weak.

"Second, before you call them, how about you tell me why if it was just a bad reaction to some food, you looked like you'd seen a ghost last night. Did they do something to you? Did something happen?"

It was then I noticed the way his hand gripped the counter. His whole body was tense.

"Honestly, Lillian kind of weirds me out. For a quick second, when I first met her, I thought she seemed familiar, but then the way she speaks to me kind of freaks me out."

"How does she speak to you?"

"It's hard to describe."

"Try."

"It's like she talks to me like she's older than I am and sort of scolded me when I didn't want to eat. Then I got sick. I guess I sort of wondered if she was the reason I got sick. It doesn't even make sense. She wasn't threatening or anything. I woke up in a strange place, and... this is going to sound so crazy. You're going to think I'm nuts." I was apprehensive about talking about the ring, but maybe if I told him, he would understand.

"Go on," he prodded.

"My ring turned black. At least I thought it did. That doesn't make sense, though."

"It makes perfect sense. I told you those Valderes are no good. Your ring knows it. Your intuition knows it. You've just refused to trust that we know a little something about this."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I turned my back on him and poured myself a cup of coffee, which I only then realized was still warm. He must've made this recently for me.

I moved to the fridge and got some creamer, then with my back to him, asked, "After I call into work, do you want to get something to eat?"

I heard him sigh. He was letting the Valdere thing go. "Yeah, but first, I need to change."

I looked at him more closely. "Is that what you had on last night?"

"I only left you for a few seconds to call Doc. I didn't want to leave you."

My insides felt all gooey.

We left my apartment and walked across the hall to his.

I stood in the living room while he went to freshen up. Spotting the phone, I quickly dialed the Valdere estate, Alfonzo answered. "Miss Katz, dear, are you well? We've been quite worried about you."

"Sorry about not calling sooner. I'm okay, but the doctor wants me to take it easy for the next few days. So, I know I just started and all, but could you let Bronson know that I won't be in tomorrow either?"

"But tomorrow is Friday. That means you won't be back until Monday."

"I know. I'm really sorry. I'm not sure, but perhaps the fish or something else I ate was bad?" I wasn't sure if it was the food or not, and I hated to possibly throw Bethany under the bus when she'd been so kind to me. However, I wasn't entirely sure that my missing work on my first week signaled good things.

"I can send a car for you. You can stay at the estate. We can nurse you back to health here. What do you say?"

He asked me a question. I know he did, but I found myself unable to respond because Ryker walked out of the bathroom shirtless. And holy-shitoli, his body was utter perfection. All that muscle and those rippled abs.

"Tell him you have people to look after you," Ryker said.

I immediately picked up my jaw. I was totally busted checking him out that it didn't occur to me to ask how he knew what Alfonzo had asked. Ryker nodded his head towards the phone, indicating that I should respond since I was still on it.

"Oh, right. Thanks for the offer, Alfonzo, but I have people." I hung up before he could try and convince me, and I watched Ryker as he continued into his room. Damn, his ass looked good in those jeans. Seriously, I needed to get a grip.

Even though Doc told me to take it easy, we went to Erma's for lunch. It was good. I got another steak and cheese while Ryker got a burger. He told me his were better, and I wondered why he didn't bring me to his bar. We sat in a booth, and he insisted I put my feet up.

After we ate, I made a few stops with him around town. He insisted I stay inside the car while he ran in, worried that it would be too much for me. Even though it was hotter than hell, I rolled down the window and watched how everyone interacted with him. I realized that practically everyone stopped to say hello to him. It was weird, like he was famous or something. I get that it was a small town and all, but surely that had to get old quick. I mean, how did you accomplish anything having to stop and chat every few minutes? Maybe it was a small-town thing. I'd get used to it, I was sure.

Once we were back home, Mindy came and hung out with me. We watched a few movies, and I figured Ryker just went to work. Sometime around the part where Baby says the famous "I carried a watermelon" line, I dozed off. I sleepily woke up to murmured voices between Ryker and Mindy. Then, Ryker lifted me in his arms and carried me off to bed. We'd had such a

lovely night that it was on the tip of my tongue to ask him to stay. Truthfully, I found it harder to ignore that I was becoming more and more attracted to him.

He laid me down in my bed. My room was coated in darkness except for the moonlight shining in through the parted curtains.

He started to leave. I grabbed hold of his arm, wanting him to stay. I hoped my eyes said it all. I licked my lips, hoping he'd take the bait and kiss me. I even pushed out my boobs a little. There'd been enough sexual tension between us that I thought for sure he would go for it.

Ryker pulled back. "Christ, I can't. Not with you."

Then, he left, and I stayed up far later wondering what the hell that meant. *Not with you.* I felt like he'd struck me. Apparently, I'd either misread him, or he liked playing this back and forth game with no real intention of taking us there. I was ticked and decided that Ryker was back to being Motorcycle Dick.

Mindy was moseying around my apartment when I made my way out of bed. I was glad Ryker wasn't there. The sting of rejection was too fresh.

"Reece is dropping off Prestie's. He's going to hang out with you while I do some running around."

"I feel like I'm being babysat."

She laughed sheepishly, "You kind of are. He's got us on a schedule."

I groaned, then reached for the coffee pot. One good thing was my babysitters always had a fresh pot ready.

There was a light tap on the door, and it slowly opened, revealing Reece holding a Prestie's bag.

Mindy walked over and grabbed the bag from him. "This smells delicious."

"Morning to you too, Sis. 'Sup Elle."

"Morning," I mumbled in between coffee sips. "Looks like you're on 'Operation make sure Elle is okay' today."

"That I am. So, what should we do today?"

Mindy fished an apple fritter out of the bag, held it up, smelled it, closed her eyes like she was in heaven, and said, "Thanks for breakfast. Gotta run." Then she was gone.

I took a fritter and sat down with a small plate.

"Well?" Reece prompted.

"Well, what?"

"Pretty sure Doc is going to stop by."

As if on cue, a knock sounded at my door.

"Wow, that's impressive," Reece said, answering the door.

Doc came in with his old-fashioned, black doctor bag, "Good Morning, Elle. I hope it's not too early for you."

"Just waking up."

"How did you sleep?"

"Come to think of it, I slept like the dead."

Reece and Doc shared a look that I hadn't had enough coffee to process.

"Mind if I listen to your lungs and heart?"

"Have at it."

Doc listened and asked me questions about my diet.

"You appear healthy. I'd like to do some blood work to make sure there isn't anything I'm missing. Would you be okay with that?"

I stuck out my arm. Giving blood never bothered me much. He put the rubber tourniquet on my arm and was about to stick the needle in my arm when Ryker opened the door with such force, I wondered if it put a hole in the drywall behind it.

"Stop," he ordered.

Doc looked up at him curiously, "This won't hurt her. It's standard."

He gave a curt shake of his head.

What the fuck was his problem?

I didn't get a chance to ask because no sooner did he storm in to bark an order was he right back out the door.

"Seriously, what was that? If you think we should run labs, run 'em."

Doc undid the tunicate and sighed. "We'll just continue to monitor you. Take it easy today, and if you feel fine tomorrow, you're welcome to resume normal activity."

"Thanks for coming by. It's nice of you to make house calls."

"It's my pleasure, dear. Please don't be afraid to reach out if anything else happens."

Doc left, and I looked to Reece for answers. "What the heck is up with your brother?"

"Ryker means well. Don't take it personally. He's got a lot of people he looks after, and it looks like you've found your way onto his list."

"I'm not sure I want to be on his list. He gets so damn moody."

Reece chuckled, "That he does."

I wanted to tell him about last night and what he said to me, but maybe I'd wait and ask Mindy. I was just frustrated with his back and forth, then blatant rejection. And what in the what was that about my blood?

Reece hung out in my apartment for a while. We watched another DVD. I don't remember the last time I watched so many movies. After a while, Micah came to hang out. Grey brought us food and watched one of Micah's movies with us. I wasn't a Will Ferrell gal. The company was nice and all, but I started to just wish for some alone time.

I was not used to being around people twenty-four-seven.

Mindy came back and chilled on my couch. She brought a few books with her that she quietly sat and read. Maybe she needed some quiet too.

I decided to make it an early night tonight. "I'm going to go to bed early tonight."

"Why? Is everything okay? Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm fine. Just wouldn't mind a bit of alone time. No offense."

"Have at it. Oh, Elle, I wanted to ask you, since you couldn't make it to the swimming hole last week, do you want to come tomorrow? I'm babysitting, so I need to grab Ashton, but it's so much fun. And I'd bet that sitting in this hot apartment all day with a bunch of smelly guys isn't your idea of a good time."

"Sure, that sounds like fun." I wanted to ask her if Ryker was going to be there tomorrow. I hated how it felt like he was avoiding me again. But I didn't ask. He'd either be there, or he wouldn't.

"Awesome. Get some shut-eye. I'll see you in the morning."

"WHERE EXACTLY ARE WE going?"

"We're going to my cousin's to pick up her son, Ashton. She is hella pregnant, and Doc just put her on bed rest. Then after that, we're going to the swimming hole. It should be pretty crowded today. I bet you'll get to know so many people."

"How many people are we talking?"

She didn't answer but smiled at me mischievously. I cocked an eyebrow back then continued driving, following Mindy's step-by-step directions. I was surprised when we drove out of the small town. The houses grew further and further apart, then she had me make a left down a dirt road. It felt like we drove for nearly a mile. I was sure I'd need a car wash after today!

Modest farmhouses appeared and several large barns. I quickly counted, and there were five houses on each side of the road. There were another two small streets off of this one that also had a few farmhouses. Those houses weren't as big as the houses on the main road. Trees lined the roads, and at a quick glance, I saw that there were fields upon fields of different crops.

"You're farmers?"

"We self-sustain. Grey lives here with Reece and Micah. Ryker has a house but only stays in it when he's needed. I lived here but moved into town. I like being near my brother, plus we're sort of like the watchers."

That wasn't weird at all!

I began asking her what she meant by that when she signaled for me to park. I pulled next to a moderately new RV. I was surprised when the screen door on a house opened, and a little boy barreled past a pregnant woman.

"Ashton. Get back here. You need a towel." His mom admonished.

I turned off my car, and Mindy and I got out.

"Hey, Caroline! This is Elle. She's new around here." Caroline was tall, nearly as tall as me. Her dark hair was in a messy bun, and besides being pregnant, she was also quite curvy.

Caroline sized me up, and she didn't hide it. "Has Ryk seen her yet? She screams Ryk's type." *I did?*

My cheeks tinged pink in embarrassment.

"She's our new tenant, and Ryker is coming swimming with us today!" That was news to me.

"He is?" Her eyes got big.

"Yep!" she said, popping her P.

"I wish I could come. This sounds like it's going to be fun!"

"By the way, aren't you supposed to be lying down?" Mindy asked.

"It's hard laying down all day. Especially when Andy's been so busy, and to top that off, one of our mares is about to deliver."

She moved into the house, and we followed. Her home was cozy at a quick glance. As soon as we walked in, there was a mudroom with various shoes, coats, and clothes on hooks. It was a little cluttered, but such is life with kids, right? Once we walked through the mudroom, there was a stairway on our left and a living room. I could tell that was where Caroline had been laying down, based on the pillows on the sofa and fan that was pointed directly towards it.

"All right, you. Lay down. We'll check on the mare before we go."

"You will?" she asked.

"Sure."

"Ashton will have to wait a little longer, but he'll live."

"Awe, man!" Ashton said from the doorway, holding his towel.

Caroline yawned and sat down on the couch. "Ash, why don't you show Mindy and Elle which mare is pregnant?"

Ashton grabbed my hand, shocking me. "Come on!" He began to drag me towards the door we came in through. I quickly told Caroline it was nice meeting her, although, in all honesty, she barely spoke to me.

Mindy followed behind us. "Slow down, Ashton."

There was no slowing Ashton. I could tell he thought that the sooner he showed us the mare, the sooner we could go swimming. I didn't blame him. It was hot!

We passed several people who tried to say hello, but the greeting was thwarted by young Ashton. If I didn't have such long legs, I'd nearly be running to keep up with him.

We moved into a barn with oversized double doors for storing farming equipment. I briefly saw two puppies chasing each other, but I didn't have a chance to really take notice of them. We walked past half a dozen stalls and stopped about halfway down. "Here she is. This is Bella," he told us.

"Have you been around horses before?" Mindy asked.

"I've seen them, even pet them a few times too, but I've never ridden one."

"Bella will be a little ornery." Mindy unclasped the lock on the stall and slid the barn door open.

Bella was a fawn-colored mare. Her mane was a coarse blonde that looked like it had recently been brushed. She whinnied as Mindy approached her. "There, there, girl. You're okay."

It was one of the strangest things I'd witnessed to date. Mindy put her head up against the mare. They stared at one another. There were a few more whinnies from the horse, then Mindy moved back.

"She's in a lot of pain, but contractions haven't begun yet. Maybe a day or two more. Elle, do you see on the shelf behind you, there's a tin?"

I nodded, glancing behind me and up.

"Can you grab that and hand it to me? It's a liniment used to treat sore joints in horses. It will help soothe her. I reached up, realizing that there was no way Mindy would've been able to grab it. My guess was she was five-five in heels, and since we were going swimming... I handed Mindy the liniment, and as I approached the horse, the horse kicked its back leg and blew out large puffs of air, making her nostrils flare. "It's okay, girl. She's not going to hurt you."

Bella became increasingly irritated. I'd never been around horses before, so I was unsure of what to do.

"Back up slowly," Mindy ordered.

Just as I began to take a few steps backward, the horse reared up. I fell back, seeing that if I didn't move and fast, I'd be crushed. Like I was in some ninja movie, I quickly rolled to the side, avoiding her stomping on me.

"Get her out of here," Mindy ordered Ashton.

Ashton grabbed my hand. "Come on. Quick!" He tugged me out of the barn. I was panting and shaking, unbelieving that I almost got crushed by a

mare!

"I've never seen her act that way. Are you okay?" Ashton asked me.

With my arms crossed protectively around my front, I began to pat myself down, ensuring I was intact. "I'm okay."

"Whoa, your ring! Is that like some type of mood ring?"

I looked down at my ring, and the ruby was now thrumming between a dark red and black. I momentarily stared at it. "That's really happening? I didn't hit my head or anything?" I asked. No one had seen this yet. I thought I imagined it when I'd seen it turn black before.

Ashton laughed, "You're funny. Let's go to the car."

I held my hand out in front of me and stared at the ring, which seemed to change back to its ruby red the farther away from the barn I got. I turned on the car and stood outside of it. I didn't want to wait in a steaming hot car. I looked at my ring again, and it seemed completely normal. Perhaps, I imagined that. I needed to Google and check if rubies ever changed color. Maybe it wasn't even a ruby? Could there be something with the heat that made the ruby do that?

I'd never heard of that before, but hey, anything was possible, right? I vowed to look into it. Maybe I could check at work when I had the Internet. The thought of work and being around that woman made me feel uneasy. Truthfully, the work part of it was great, but what Ryker said about me not trusting my intuition niggled at the recesses of my mind.

After a few minutes, Mindy showed back up.

"Is she okay?" Ashton asked.

"Yes," Mindy glanced at me speculatively. "How about you, Elle? Are you hurt?"

"No, just shaken up is all."

"I'm sorry. She's never behaved that way."

Even though I was more than a little shaken up, I shrugged and got in my car. Everyone else followed.

I looked back at Ashton. "Do you need a booster seat or something?"

"Hey," he snapped, "I'm nine. I might be small, but I'm not a baby."

"No offense meant, kid." I put my hands up placatingly.

Mindy gave me directions. I continued down the dirt road that the houses were on, and we suddenly began to drive downhill. We became surrounded by trees. It was shocking because everything had been so flat, so to be surrounded by large trees seemed out of place.

I was going slowly, having never driven on these roads before. I was also unsure how my car would handle the dirt road. It was a Jetta, not a Land Rover.

"See how the road has an angle up there? You'll turn, go slowly, or you'll miss it."

"Not sure how much slower I can go," I mumbled.

I turned at the angle and thought she was right. If I didn't know to look for the turn, I would've missed it. She had me make a few more turns, then directed me to park and told me we would walk the rest of the way. I briefly wondered if there were so many people here, where all their cars were, then I lost that train of thought because we arrived at the most beautiful place I'd ever seen.

"Whoa!" I said, taking it all in.

"It's cool, right?" Ashton said, running ahead of us and whipping off his shirt while he did. Mindy grabbed it from a nearby tree and laughed as Ashton came to a small cliff about four feet from the water and jumped in!

There were maybe thirty people here. Music blared, playing classic rock. People stood in line at a cliff that was at least twenty feet up from the water. I watched in fascination as Reece swung out, then did a flip in the air and landed with little splash in the water. A group of girls giggled from the sidelines. One of them yelled out, "eight and a half." Another yelled, "Nine."

The swimming hole was maybe one hundred feet in diameter. There were cliffs on all sides that people jumped off. There were also huge rocks that jutted out where girls laid out or families gathered. Several people floated on inner tubes. Their laughter mingled with the music, instantly creating a contagious, happy vibe.

The trees were so dense that it seemed you would never be able to spot this place unless someone told you it was here. The green, so vibrant, and the water so clear, I felt like I was in a private oasis, not the middle of Ohio.

"Come on. Let's put our stuff down over here." Mindy motioned with her head to follow her, and we walked to a large, flat black rock.

"This place is so cool. What is it? I mean, like, why is it here?"

"It was formed from the ice age or something. You'll have to ask Ryker. He's better with stuff like that."

Mindy took off her shirt and shorts and was left wearing tiny triangle swatches of fabric covering her parts. She looked amazing. I didn't think I could pull off a suit like that any longer since I was approaching my thirties.

After looking at the swimsuits she had to offer last weekend and not finding anything, I ended up putting on a black sports bra with a tank over it to hide my back and these tiny black workout shorts. Admittedly, they were booty shorts, and I'd never worn them out of the house before, but hey, when in Rome, right?

I laid my towel on the rock and took off the jean shorts I had on top of the athletic clothes.

"Hey Mins, who's your friend?" A guy floating by called up.

"Don't worry about who she is," I heard from behind me in a deep gravelly voice that could only belong to Ryker. I turned to look at him, and when I did, I caught him checking out my butt! He wasn't even hiding the fact that his eyes were glued to my cheeks.

"Hey, Ryk!" Mindy said.

It was then I took in Ryker. He was barefoot, and his thick corded thighs had wet cut-off jean shorts sticking to them. He had a slight dusting of hair leading into his shorts, and holy shit, I could see the faintest outline of his...

"Eyes up here," Ryker laughed.

"I could've said the same to you," I replied, feeling thrown. Why would he mention that I was checking him out after the way he denied me?

Ryker shrugged then asked, "How are you doing?"

I didn't know if he was asking about how I was since Doc left this morning, how I was since he rejected me, or what happened with the horse?

"Fine," I said, guessing he'd heard about the horse incident. I looked down and noticed that my arm was bruising from where I fell on it. I also saw my ring and wished I'd locked it in my glove box. I didn't want it to fall off in the water.

"What happened to your arm?" he asked curtly, surprising me with his tone.

"You didn't mention that you were hurt when you fell," Mindy said from beside me.

"I didn't notice it before." I rubbed my arm.

"Is someone going to tell me what happened?" Ryker growled, yes, growled, then grabbed my arm, inspecting it. I get it. He had people he looked out for, but his protectiveness felt excessive.

His touch sent tingles up my arm, shocking me. It wasn't like those "Oh, my God, love at first sight" tingles, but it was something. Something different from anything I'd experienced. I thought about when we touched before and how it felt like static. This was different. It was like I felt it through my entire body. I pulled away from his grasp. "It's fine. It was just a horse."

That perhaps was the wrong thing to say.

"Mindy, talk."

She huffed, "She said she's fine. I'm sure she's fine."

"Mins!" he said exasperatedly.

Just then, Ashton walked up soaking wet. He shook out his hair and said, "Did you tell him how your ring did that magic in and out thing after Bella almost trampled you? I never saw her act that way. We've had her for years. One moment she was good, and the next moment, she got a whiff of this one, and you would've thought she thought Elle was going to hurt her. It was crazy!"

"It's not magic," I protested, covering my ring protectively.

"Um, yes, it is," Mindy said, while Ryker nodded.

"Come on. Magic isn't real. It was probably just the heat or something that made it look that way." I'd already told Ryker about it once before, but this was insane.

Mindy and Ryker exchanged looks. I didn't understand and thought they were a little kooky. Come on, magic? My dad was a scientist. I knew there was a logical explanation. I just needed to get to the damn internet.

"Mindy." Ryker tilted his head to the side, indicating that she should leave.

"Come on, Ashton! I'll race you to the jump." They took off running to the small cliff that Ashton jumped from earlier.

"Do you burn easily?"

"Pardon?"

"You're blonde. Your skin isn't super fair, though, so do you burn easily because the sun can be fierce when you're on the water."

"Not really, but I did put some sunblock on because even if I don't burn, I still don't want to be old and wrinkly." I shook my head because who cared if I had sunblock on. I wasn't some spring chicken who didn't know how to take care of herself. Why was he changing the subject? This man, albeit hot, might have some serious split personalities. That had to be it, right? I didn't get his back and forth.

He reached out and grabbed the smallest piece of my hair as if examining it. It was strange, and I felt scrutinized in a way I wasn't sure I liked. I wanted to both smack his hand away and pull him closer to me. Gah! I didn't know what was going on with my libido or why this pull between us every day, with every look and touch, got stronger?

With Ryker that close to me, I noticed a silver scar running from his pec down, slicing across his muscular stomach. I had an urge to reach my hand out along the scar. Ryker dropped my hair, "Let's sit."

I sat down on my towel, aware of the looks we were receiving from other people. I didn't even know why I listened to him. Who was I kidding? I would've probably done anything he asked of me.

Some of the looks we received were curious, some women looked on with jealousy, and I caught a few eyes squinting on me in distaste. I didn't like it. I didn't want attention on me, not like this. Not with my back exposed.

It took a lot for me to pretend I wasn't scarred on my back; I was just grateful that no one had asked me about it yet.

Ryker sat next to me, making my dry towel wet. His leg brushed my thigh, and I inhaled, aware that the small brush of skin made my nipples react. I changed positions and bent my knees to my chest, trying to hide my obvious attraction. Still, give me a break. The man was fine.

I thought it was a whole lot harder to pretend my attraction to him wasn't real when he acted friendly and his nearness bordered on cruelty. If he didn't want me, why wouldn't he just leave me alone? I didn't think his behavior was fair to me. What were his exact words? "Not you."

I shook off those thoughts. Thinking about Ryker's hurtful rejection wasn't going to do me any good, no, I needed to figure out what Mindy and Ryker were talking about, and I needed to decide how far off the cuckoo train they'd flown.

Wanting to get on with the lunacy of magic, I prompted, "So you think my ring is magical?" I asked humorously.

Ryker didn't smile. He didn't do anything to communicate that he was joking when he finally replied. "No. The ring is a ruby, and it's a conduit of your magic. The ring will alert you to danger. Sometimes it's a reaction to how you're feeling, and sometimes it will alert you before you are aware. The ring has no power. It's you that is wielding it."

Well, that sounded... "Are you high?" I asked.

He shook his head quickly as if saying, what the hell.

"Smoke some ganja?"

"Ganja?" he asked with a small amount of humor lacing his words.

"Weed, pot, Mary Jane. You know, cannabis."

"I know what weed is. I can assure you I'm not high."

"Shrooms then?"

"Not tripping either, Ariel."

"Elle," I corrected, gritting my teeth. "Stop calling me, Ariel."

"You really have no idea what you are, do you?" What in the actual what!

"Uh... human. Is this the part where you tell me, I'm on MTV and am being punked?"

Ryker laughed, and the sound of his deep rumble warmed my insides.

"Punked?"

"Ugh, you never saw that show with Ashton Kutcher?" I looked at him like, 'Is it ringing a bell?'

"I don't watch much TV."

"Of course you don't," I mumbled, then squinted my eyes at him. "Are you guys in some type of strange cult or something? I'm not drinking your Kool-Aid. The next thing you'll tell me is, 'I do believe in fairies. I do. I do.'"

He sighed, "Sometimes, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Peter Pan?"

He glared at me like he was trying to be serious and wasn't amused. "I know it all sounds like a lot, but what if I told you everything you thought you believed in was wrong? What if I told you magic does exist and that there are other things out there too? What if I told you that I have an exceptional sense of smell and you're not human? I don't know what you are yet, but you hold magic, and there is more to you than meets the eye. What if I told you the reason I didn't want Doc to take your blood was that he would have to send it out to a lab, and they'd know your blood wasn't normal?"

I looked around. There had to be a hidden camera around here somewhere. Besides, I'd had lab work done before, hadn't I? I thought about it, then realized it was always Dad who drew my blood. He never took me to a hospital for it.

Ryker's declarations freaked me out, and I felt on edge as I answered, "I'd tell you that I think you're insane, and I think it's time for me to go." I grabbed my shorts and was about to put them on when he placed his hand on my arm, stopping me. I felt those weird damn sparks again. "Just wait. Watch people. I think you'll see what I'm talking about if you pay attention."

"Elle! Are you coming in or what?" Ashton called from the water.

I looked at the water and felt the sweat dripping between my breasts. So, Ryker was hot and certifiable. It didn't mean I couldn't swim, right?

I set my shirt down and scooted away from Ryker. "Fine, but I think you're insane. I appreciate what you've done for me, but can you leave the cuckoo crazy talk for someone who will actually buy that shit. I'll swim, but I think after today, we might need to distance ourselves." I said the words hoping I'd believe them. I wasn't sure I could keep my distance, but the things he was saying felt impossible.

He looked at me in disbelief, his eyes saying, "We'll see."

I squinted my eyes back at him, silently replying, "Yes, we will."

I WAS RUNNING. I DON'T know how I let Reece and Micah talk me into this. I was afraid but in a good way.

"In 3... 2... 1... Go!" Micah shouted.

I leapt from the cliff. There was a moment of exhilaration where I was flying, then the cold water, which was a refreshing shock to the system, cooled me off instantly as I submerged into its depths. I began swimming to the surface when a small blue light caught my eye.

I needed to see what it was. I wasn't even sure why, but something inside me told me I had to swim to the blue light. The closer I got to it, the further it seemed to move. My lungs were burning. What was I doing? I had to get to the blue light, but I needed air. Which way was up? I began to panic. Where did the light go? It was there. I looked around and felt my chest starting to ache. I needed to get to the surface.

The blue light was gone. I had to take a breath. My lungs hurt. Think, Elle. Think. My air; it would move toward the surface. Was there even any air left in my lungs? I let out a small air bubble and watched as it moved. What did I need to do next? My mind was feeling fuzzy. I needed to kick, right?

Suddenly, there was an arm around my waist, and Ryker was there, pulling me up. I could tell there was a sense of urgency within him, but then everything was getting darker. My vision began to darken, and I wanted to hang on, but I just couldn't control it any longer. I had to breathe. I opened my mouth and felt the water rush in. It hurt. God, why did it hurt so badly? I couldn't breathe. It burned. Everything ached, then there was blackness, and I felt absolutely nothing.

There was darkness everywhere—complete nothingness. I felt cold seeping throughout my body; then I saw the light—not the take me to paradise light—the blue light I'd been following. It was a single spark, and the closer I got to it, the warmer I felt. My insides felt warmer with each advancing step. This time, the light wasn't moving further away.

I approached the light, which I could now see was a flame. I was startled when I heard a voice. The voice came from all around me and not from any one person, which was odd, but no stranger than everything else.

"You are the keeper—the keeper of the flame. You hold immense power, and you must protect the flame," The voice felt layered as if several voices were on top of one another. "You must keep your dagger with you from now on. It will help you yield your power."

"What power? What are you talking about? What is the flame? Why am I the keeper? Who are you?" I asked question after question.

"I've been guarding the flame for you. It is yours as it was your father's and his father's. You must take the flame. Do it quickly. We are running out of time."

I have no idea why I did what the voice told me to do, but I reached my hand out and grasped the flame. Starting at the tips of my fingers, then traveling up my arm and spreading all over my entire body, I felt this electric current, filled with warmth and power.

"Yes, that's it." The voice cooed. "The light will guide you. Trust in the light."

My entire body felt electrified as the light moved through me. I felt it everywhere. After it had spread throughout my whole body, everything went dark again.

"Be safe, Keeper," the voice said, trailing off.

I CAME TO COUGHING. Water sputtered from my mouth. I blinked, and there was a crowd of faces surrounding me. I coughed again, and Ryker pulled me up and against his chest. He hugged me. "You're okay," he said into my ear. "You're okay," he repeated. "Everyone get back. Give us space," he ordered.

Why was he hugging me? What was happening? I thought back to what I remembered. I saw something...

I remembered jumping off the cliff, and I couldn't breathe. Oh, God. Did I drown?

I pulled back from Ryker's arms, "Wha... what happened?"

"You drowned; that's what happened," Ryker bit out, sounding angry.

"I jumped," I said, trying to make sense of everything.

"Yes, and then you fucking swam deeper and deeper instead of coming up for air. What were you thinking?" He sounded so angry, and I didn't understand it.

My mind replayed what had happened. I saw that flame. The words *keeper of the flame* flashed through my mind. Then everything Ryker had said about magic.

"I have to go." I tried to get up to stand. I felt weak. I looked at Ryker, and he looked confused and concerned. Then suddenly, looking into his eyes, I saw the quickest vision of a wolf. I scrambled backward. I had to get away. He mentioned magic and whatever I saw down below wasn't normal. I nearly died. And his eyes. Why did I see a wolf when I looked into his eyes?

Fuck this!

"Ariel," he called. "Calm down."

"No. No, I have to get out of here." On shaky legs, I managed to get myself up. Then, unsure of how I did it, I ran. I didn't know which way I was headed, but it was away from Ryker, away from the water, and away from these people. Something was very off, and I had to go, now!

"Stay, I got her," I briefly heard Ryker order, but there was no way he *had* me. I dashed through the trees, jumping over fallen branches. Thorns pricked at my skin, but it didn't matter. I had to go. I had to get out of here. My speed was increasing, and I began moving at a pace I'd never run before. I knew I was fast, but this was different.

The wind started to whip past me, and the trees became a blur. How was I moving this fast? The trees grew less and less dense, and I found myself up against a cornfield. I made a snap decision to go into the field and hoped that I could move just as fast but not get lost. I moved with purpose. The corn wasn't at its full height, so I soon realized I wasn't covered by it. I reached a break between fields and stopped running. I felt like no one could've possibly followed me.

Catching my breath, I thought about everything that had occurred. I saw a light, drowned, had this nagging feeling that something else happened, then saw a wolf in Ryker's eyes. All this after Ryker told me I wasn't human and

held magic. And I was fast. I mean, what in the actual *what* was happening? My heart was racing, and I felt hyper-alert.

I heard a crunching sound and turned in that direction. There I saw a massive wolf. Bigger than anything I'd ever seen at the zoo or on National Geographic. Its eyes were dark as it sniffed the air, stalking me. Its fur was black with silver under its chin. I noticed the scar running down its chest, and it made me think it matched Ryker's. That was impossible.

This was insane.

I needed to get out of there again. I needed to go. I turned to sprint but heard the wolf growl, warning me not to move. I thought about my training and my kickboxing class but knew I had no chance in hell of fighting this wolf. It was too big. Its teeth were too sharp. I did not doubt that it could tear me in two.

I started to move and heard him snarl. Then he jumped straight over me and landed on the other side. He was mere inches from my face. Suddenly, he didn't seem threatening. Instead, the wolf nuzzled me. He was so large that as he moved against me in the way that a dog would when it wanted attention, his back was chest level, and his head was just a smidge taller than mine. His head continued to nuzzle me, and he moved against me several times. I had no idea what to make of this. He wasn't a threat, but I had no clue what was happening. Why did he have the same scar as Ryker, and why did I see this wolf in Ryker's eyes? Unless... No, it couldn't be.

"Ryker?" I asked the wolf, as if a freaking wolf would respond to me. I was losing my ever-loving mind. That was it; I must've been drugged. He told me about magic, and I thought he was certifiable. Now all of this was happening. I knew it was too unbelievable, too impossible.

A nearby noise made him freeze, and he stopped his nuzzling. Several other wolves appeared.

None of them were as big as this wolf. There was a grey wolf, another black one, like this wolf, but smaller, a dark brown wolf, and a fawn-colored wolf that howled. I had no idea what was happening, but they seemed to be communicating. The wolf next to me did a half-growl-half-bark. The grey wolf half-howled-half-barked, then before I knew it, the black wolf next to me snapped his teeth at the other wolves and bent low like he wanted me to mount his back. The smaller black wolf howled then whimpered as the wolf next to me bared its teeth again. I had no idea what was happening, but I didn't want to be eaten alive by wolves.

I climbed on his back, surprised at the softness of his coat. I didn't have time to think about what happened next because the wolf showed his teeth, then growled at the other wolves one more time. His growl was fierce, and it cut through the air. The other wolves seemed to react physically and appeared unready when he leapt past them and took off at full speed.

The force from his speed made me grip his fur. I soon learned that wasn't enough, and I leaned forward and wrapped my arms around him. I wasn't sure how long we ran, but somehow, I knew he had lost the other wolves. There was no way they could've kept up with him. He was just too powerful, too strong.

We came to a wooded area. The wolf stopped running and bent forward like I should get off. I wasn't sure how I knew what he wanted me to do, but somehow, I did. It was as if the massive beast wanted me next to him. I looked at my ring while I was on his back and noticed its bright red color. If what they said about my ring was true, wouldn't it show me if I was in danger?

Since when did I give the idea of magic any merit? I sighed. Maybe once I started seeing wolves communicate? I still wasn't entirely sure that I wasn't stoned out of my mind, passed out somewhere, and this was all one big hallucination. That was the most logical thing.

The terrain began to change, and we were around large boulders, some reaching forty or so feet in the air. I'd never seen anything like it, but the swimming hole seemed like a smaller version of this. I wondered how many of those boulders we were playing on went beneath the water's surface?

The boulders were also cooler, which I suppose was due to the shade the trees and boulders provided. We walked between a large fissure. It was a tight fit for us, side by side, so the wolf led the way. If I weren't close enough behind him, he would stop, turn around and look at me silently, communicating I needed to move. It was so odd, as if he cared about my well-being. He was a wolf, and I was human. What was wrong with me that I was following a wolf into the woods?

The further we walked into the space, the more I wondered if this was a good idea. Then again, the wolf saved me, and he seemed to like me. I mean, how many wolves let you ride them? Even thinking that sounded absurd. Again, I wondered if this was all a dream and that maybe I was sleeping on the boulder.

I lost my train of thought as we came to a dark opening of a cave. The wolf stood off to the side and motioned with his head for me to enter. I shook my head. I didn't want to go into a dark, scary cave with a wolf. His chest rumbled, then he snarled at me and motioned again.

"Seriously, you're one moody wolf. If you eat me, I swear I'll find a way to haunt you."

I walked into the dark cave, unsure of what to think. I continued to question my sanity because why was I following a wolf again?

It was pitch black, and the wolf nuzzled next to me. I could tell he wanted me to hold onto him as we moved further into the darkness. A small beam of light from above poured through, and I hoped we would soon stop. The

ground below me was luckily flat and dry. Besides the small amount of light trickling through, I couldn't see anything. Finally, we came to an area where more sunlight filtered through. There was even a tree and a small amount of moss covering the boulder next to it. The wolf nudged me to a boulder that was about the right height for me to sit. I did what he wanted, and he licked me. I pet his head, and he moved his head into the crook of my neck. I had no idea what to make of this. I was just glad he seemed to like me.

I watched him move away from me and sniff the air. He then howled long and deep. I heard a few howls returned that seemed to be much further away. He howled again, and I couldn't help but think how beautiful this massive beast was. I heard even more wolves howl back, and I shivered, hoping they didn't find me. I had a feeling he would protect me, but still, what if he just brought me here as dinner for the rest of his pack?

Trust your instincts; that's what my dad would say. That's what Ryker accused me of not doing. I was going to be okay, right? He could've just eaten me if he wanted me dead. It would probably be easier to drag a dead body to his cave over a live woman, right? No, something else was happening here; I was sure of it.

The wolf moved further away from me, and with one more howl, he hunched forward and began to change.

"Holy shit!" Everything happened fast. His fur began to change, and his snout shortened. His legs cracked unusually. Before I knew it, he was a hunched-over man. No, he wasn't just a man. "Ryker?" I called out in a shaky voice. He stood completely naked and cracked his back, adjusting to his full height.

Oh. My. God.

What in the freaking what?

I was freaking out. I knew it. This was beyond impossible, and yet, I thought he reminded me of Ryker in the field. I had to be high. Someone had slipped me something, and all of this had to be a dream. I pinched my arm to see if I was dreaming.

Ouch.

Nope, definitely not a dream.

I took a step back and put my hands up to protect myself, which was dumb, considering he was a wolf just seconds ago!

"It's okay. Let me explain," Ryker's rich deep voice said as he moved closer to me.

I couldn't help but look at his naked form and suck in a deep breath.

He was aroused, and holy shit, he was large and thick, and I couldn't unsee what I was looking at because that thing was a work of art. And those thighs of his were strong. I moved my eyes upwards towards his muscular abs, his firm pecs, and broad shoulders. I made it to his eyes, and he watched me curiously.

I was getting turned on looking at him, which made no sense. Maybe I was awake, but it was ecstasy or something? I never did drugs. Did ecstasy make you hallucinate?

I had no idea how I could feel turned on. But he was a thing of beauty, and I felt wetness pool between my legs. My nipples hardened, but my brain knew this wasn't right.

He was a wolf, for God's sake.

"Wha... What are you? What's happening? What are you going to do to me?"

He had a wicked gleam in his eyes, "What do you want me to do to you?"

He took another step towards me, and his cock moved, his balls swaying as he did. I needed to look away, but my body wanted to move towards him, not away from him.

"What did you do to me?" I asked, wanting to take another step back, but I was against that darn boulder, and there was nowhere to move.

"I didn't do anything to you. It's the fates. They've fated you to me. You feel it, don't you? This pull to me. I thought I felt it at first but wasn't sure. I've waited so long. I thought I would never find my mate. My wolf knew it, though. He smelled you and knew. I can't even tell you how much control it took for me to get you here without shifting and fucking you on the way."

"Fate, mates, fucking, hold on just one minute."

"I nearly lost you before I've even freaking had you! I'm barely holding on here," he semi-shouted, semi-growled.

He took another step closer to me. Only a foot or so separated us, and I would be lying if I said I wasn't seriously turned on. I had no idea my body could even feel this way. I felt feverish with my need for him.

That was it; I had to be on something.

"Did you give me something?"

He ran his hand through his hair. "Gods, no. I would never."

This was beyond anything that seemed possible. I looked around to see if anything else felt off. Were my senses all skewed, or was it just that I wanted

him? Nothing else seemed amiss, just that I had an overwhelming sense of desire for him.

He was a fucking wolf; my logical side screamed! To hell with logic, my libido replied.

"Are you a werewolf?"

"You already know the answer to that." He took another step closer. My heart rate changed, and I felt like it was ready to burst from my chest.

"That's impossible." I breathed heavily as I spoke. "Werewolves aren't real."

"I told you anything was possible. I told you you held magic. I knew you smelled different. It's a mix between your magic and your scent calling to my wolf. It's why I wasn't sure if you were my mate. The smell of your magic is strong, but somehow, after I pulled you out of the water, your smell became clear. I still wasn't one-hundred percent certain, but my wolf was."

"That's crazy. I'm not your mate. We're not fucking either," I told him as if saying that out loud would somehow change my body's reaction. I felt an intense ache between my legs. "Two days ago, you didn't even want me."

"Oh, I wanted you. I wanted you in a way I didn't think I should have."

I had no time to think about that response.

He inched even closer, and that massive dick of his was nearly face level with me. "Get that thing away from me. It's huge," I said, leaning back to move away from it.

"Well, if you'd look up here at my eyes, maybe it wouldn't be so frightening."

"I'm not afraid of that!" I lied. "And I'm not your mate."

He moved even closer and braced each arm on the boulder. His broad chest caged me in. "Ariel. The sooner you give in, the sweeter it will be."

"Elle," I corrected. "I need you to step back," I said with little power behind it.

"Are you so sure about that? I can smell your arousal. I can smell how much wetter your pussy gets the closer I get to you. I know that you want me. You need to give in and accept what's inevitable."

"Just because I'm physically attracted to you does not mean we're mated." I breathed heavily.

He ran the tip of his nose up the side of my neck and sniffed. His nearness made me involuntarily moan, and I wanted to kick myself for my reaction to him.

"You can't fight it, Ariel."

"I can. Even if my body is responding to you, we don't have to do anything about it." He moved his arm and ran a finger up the inside of my leg, making me shudder and arch my back.

"Don't we? Do you really think you can ignore this pull?" He bent forward, kissing my shoulder, and I felt his cock press against my flesh. I realized I only had on booty shorts and the sports bra I was wearing to swim in. Not a whole lot of material separated us. I could be naked in seconds. I could even move my fabric to the side.

I shook my head. What was happening to me? Why was my mind traveling there? I closed my eyes, trying to get a grip on myself.

Oh, God. I could smell him. He smelled like earth, pine, and my wolf. My eyes snapped open at the realization that I thought of him as my wolf. I stared back into his dark eyes, seeing his wolf in those eyes.

I closed my eyes. I needed to block Ryker out. Maybe if I didn't look at him, I wouldn't want him so badly. My clit throbbed, and every part of my body was at war with my head. My back arched, and my breasts pressed against him.

"Look at me, Ariel."

I snapped my eyes open, staring into his eyes, which blazed with desire. How could he possibly want me like this? How could I possibly want him this way? No, it wasn't want; that wasn't right. I needed him. I needed HIM.

"If you fuck me, it's just sex. Nothing else. I don't even know what being mated means. I don't even know you."

"You know me, and what you don't know, you'll get to know. You'll know passion and lust like you've never imagined. You'll know what it feels like to be lit up inside. I'll fuck you so often and so raw that you'll always know the feel of me. You'll wake sore from the fucking I gave you the night before, but my mouth between your legs will ease the ache. You'll have a pack that will have your back, and they'll all want your time, but I won't want to give it to them because I'll want you all the time. The need will lessen, but how much we want each other never will."

I was panting from his words and the nearness of his body. It wouldn't take much for him to be inside of me, and I couldn't ignore how badly my body reacted to him.

"Let me taste you, Ariel. I'll make you come. Then you decide if you want anything more. Let me take away the ache between your legs. Just close

your eyes and feel."

I melted into him and did as he said. Maybe he was right. If I could just close my eyes and he could take away the ache, then we could move on from this preposterous notion of mates. I just needed him to take the edge off. That was all. Jesus, I sounded like a junkie.

I felt the air hit my breasts with my eyes closed, and then his hands cupped them. His mouth covered my nipple, and his tongue flicked the hard bud. He released that nipple with a pop then moved to the next. His thumb moved over my other nipple while he sucked and flicked. My hips rocked, wanting more and thinking there was a good possibility that I would orgasm just from his touch.

"Damn, your breasts are perfect. I like how you react to my mouth on them. I can't wait to see how you react to my mouth in other places."

"Mmhmm." I half-moaned-half-agreed that it was what I wanted.

He kissed down my stomach, and I felt my shorts tugged down. Then, his mouth was there. He didn't make me wait for it as he parted my folds and licked my clit.

I opened my eyes, needing to see. Ryker was on his knees in front of me, licking my clit, and with his other hand, he stroked his length. He devoured me. I was so freaking turned on and ready to come. As if knowing that my body was lit up, I felt his finger push inside of me, making me moan out, "Yes, there," I cried out, grinding my hips forward.

I gripped his hair and pulled it. God, this was good. He pushed another finger in, and that was all it took. With his head against me, I cried out in ecstasy as the most intense orgasm rippled through me. He stilled his fingers but didn't release them. Instead, he continued pumping his dick. They were slow, even strokes, and I wanted... No, I needed to touch him. My body desperately burned for him. I had to have him. It was the only thought coursing my mind.

Need. Need. Need. A mantra played on repeat in my mind.

I no longer could think about how he was touching me or where. All I thought was he needed to be inside me, and I needed him to fill me up. I needed him.

I'd never needed anyone, and especially not like this.

"I need you. I need you. I need you," I panted.

"You feel it? That undeniably strong pull? It's the bond between fated mates." Ryker looked up from between my legs while he spoke and continued

to stroke himself.

I should've thought about what he was asking, but having him was all I could think about. "Now, Ryker. I need you now."

I tugged him by the hair and pulled him up towards me. He removed his fingers and stood towering over me. He had a glint in his eye as he asked, "How badly do you need me?"

I grabbed for his dick, just needing it inside of me. I'd never felt so single thought-driven as I did in that second. I had to have him inside me. That thought was on repeat and wouldn't be sated until he was seated.

He moved back a step, so his dick was out of reach, and I lost it. I smacked him on his arm, and my nails hit him just right, scratching him, and nearly yelled, "Stop playing with me!" I saw his wolf flash in his eyes, and then, I swear, his face morphed between half-man and half-wolf. It was fast, but I saw it, I was sure of it.

Ryker's face lost all playful demeanor, and he lunged for me. I barely felt the cold stone from the boulder beneath my back as Ryker leaned over me. I hooked my leg around his back and pulled him closer to me, but he didn't need prodding. In one deep thrust, he came down and slammed into me.

My God, he was big. His fullness stretched me to almost a painful place, but it didn't matter because he was inside me. My other leg wrapped around his back, and I ground down as he pumped frantically in and out of me. It happened so fast that I wasn't prepared for it. My orgasm rippled through me like a hot lightning bolt, and I screamed out, "Yes, Ryker. Yes. Fuck me."

He nipped the skin on my collarbone. That sweet pain added with the force of his thrusts made me scream.

"Fuck, your pussy is sweet."

He lifted me up by the ass and took me off the boulder. I clung to him with my arms wrapped around him and my legs around his waist as he continued to fuck me. He moved us to a flat area on the ground, and he sat down, still completely rooted inside me.

I knew an opportunity when I saw one. I unhooked my legs and planted my feet on the ground, and used that leverage to ride him. I'd never been so wild in my life. I'd never felt so out of control and in control at the same time as I rode him. He grabbed my breasts and thumbed my nipples as I bounced up and down.

"You feel so good," I said in between moans. Ryker pushed up hard and fast, making me yell out. Suddenly, I realized he was letting me play, but he

quickly shifted the power between us. His thrusts were so wild that I planted my hands on his shoulders to hold on. When that didn't work, I bent forward. My breasts pressed against his chest, and I wanted to be closer to him. I realized we hadn't even kissed yet. I grabbed Ryker's beard and said in a breathy tone, "Kiss me, Wolf." His eyes lit up in surprise as I slammed my lips against his, stealing whatever he was about to say.

His lips were soft, but his facial hair was prickly. He nipped at my lip, then he parted his lips and licked them. I opened my mouth, and his tongue thrust inside mine. At the same time, his dick surged forward. He swallowed my moan, and I found myself clawing at his skin as another longer, sweeter orgasm tore through me. He broke our kiss and stared into my eyes as the orgasm rocked my entire world.

"Your eyes," he said as the last ripples of pleasure shot through me.

"What about them?" I asked as he looked at me, nearly mesmerized. His dick throbbed inside of me and pushed me up, making me forget about my question. I gently raised myself on his dick then moved back down, sitting up again as I did.

"Swing around on my dick. I saw your tits bounce. Now I want to see that ass."

I bit my lip, feeling turned on by his order. I'd never been with a take-charge kind of guy, and I liked it. Using my planted feet, I turned around without losing him. His shift inside me made me pause and adjust to his size and the new feel from a different angle. Once I turned away from him, I felt his hands on the curve of my ass.

"Your ass is so fucking perfect. It's the sexiest thing I've ever seen."

I lifted up and down, and I swear I felt him part my cheeks so that he could see everything. I'd never been exposed like that, but it didn't really matter. I was riding him, but I did not doubt that he was the one in charge here. I lifted slowly and played with the tip, squeezing it with my pussy, and gently rocked the top of his dick. If he wanted a show, I could give that to him.

He groaned in response, so I slowly came down on his shaft, and wow, oh, wow, was this position a different sensation.

"You got it in you to take more play?" he asked, and I moaned.

"Mhmm," in response.

His hand roamed up my side, brushed against my breast then came back down around my front, where two fingers rolled circles on my clit.

"Yes," I said breathily and continued to move up and down. Then was shocked when I felt his other thumb rub against my anus. There was so much sensation going in every direction. I was going to come again soon. I wondered how much longer he could hang on without his own release. His fingers continued circling in the front. Then I felt the smallest prod from his finger at the back. I'd never done anything remotely like this, and this was our first sexual encounter. He pushed his finger in just a little further and cooed, "That's it. Ride me just like that."

I did what he said and moved. It was slow at first while I adjusted to everything, then felt his patience wane as he thrust inside me in a hard fast stroke. The sensation, all of it was too much, and I was screaming then coming. Without pausing for my orgasm to fade, he moved me to my knees. His hand left my clit, and his thumb left my ass, but I never lost his cock.

Everything else had felt like it was simply play up until that point. It was then that he fucked me. His hand was in my hair, and his thrusts were hard and fast. He slammed into me over and over. There was a bite of pain, but it was a delicious pain. He bent over me, and I felt his warm breath by my ear, "You're mine. Your body. Your heart. And your fucking soul, all of it. All of you. Your hot cunt, and this tight ass. Mine," he declared, then I felt his teeth graze my shoulder as he bit into my skin. He jerked forward at the same time, causing me to orgasm again, only this time he did too, and the feel of his warm seed spurting inside of me did something to me. I felt tingles throughout my body. It began at the tips of my toes and shot up my body, down my arms and through my torso, and finally to my head. My heart rate began to increase, and I felt off. Not like I was in an orgasm-induced haze. No, this was different.

I began to feel panicky and wanted to pull away. I couldn't take it. My body started to feel like it was on fire. Ryker felt me trying to pull away and jerked my hips holding me in place. "You take all of me." He had no clue what was happening to me, and I tried to speak but couldn't get it out. He continued to orgasm, and I clawed at the earth, trying to get away. My vision was fading, and I felt like I was electrified. I'd never felt anything like it before.

Ryker grunted then I faintly heard him howl before my vision turned blue and everything around me was in a blue haze. I tried to get away with one more failed attempt when I felt him still behind me and kiss my neck. It was then that everything went dark, and I lost consciousness.

"I want fucking answers, and I want them now," Ryker snapped. I opened my eyes but couldn't see anything.

"We're doing everything we can. I have a call out to Roderick and one to Smith," Mindy said, trying to calm Ryker down.

"I know that, Mins! I'm the one who fucking ordered you to do it. When will Doc be here?"

"As soon as Janis Davies delivers."

"Find out how dilated she is," he ordered.

"I called..."

"Call again!"

I heard shuffling, and it sounded like Mindy had left the room. Then it was confirmed when I heard her further away say, "Reece, you're up!"

"He's not going to listen to me. How would you feel if you were him? He's been waiting how long for his fated mate? She's not even wolf, and then this?"

"Enough!" Ryker yelled, and I heard something hit the wall and break as it hit the ground, clattering in several places.

"Fuck," he cursed. I heard his voice more like a murmur and realized he must've left the room. I started to sit up, but my entire body was in pain as I moved.

I thought back to what I could remember. I was at the lake; I nearly drowned, and then, oh, my God, Ryker was a werewolf! I had this undeniable urge to fuck him, and then he was coming, and there was pain.

My vision was blue!

I moved my hand to my eyes despite the pain, clenching my teeth the entire time. I felt a cloth, and as quickly as I could make my painful hand move, I removed it. I blinked, adjusting to the dim room. My eyes were sensitive and a little painful, but I could see, and thankfully, it was back to normal. I wonder why they had a blindfold on me.

Taking in my surroundings, I noticed I was in an entirely new-to-me space. The bed was massive. It was similar in color to the furniture I'd seen of Ryker's. It was too dark in the room for me to see the details. My eyes scanned the room, and I found it hard to turn my head. Why did I feel like I was hit by a freight train?

I should just call out to Ryker and see if he had any answers, but I was a little afraid I'd want to jump him again. I could barely move, but for some

reason, I thought the pull would still be strong. Then again, when I woke up, he was in here, and I didn't pounce, so maybe I was okay.

Well, I couldn't just lay here in pain with no answers, could I? I opened my mouth to call out Ryker's name, and a squeak came out. All right, I needed water. I tried again, and this time, I managed a very raspy, "Ryk."

He rushed into the room. "Ariel, you're up. Thank God," He moved next to me and sat on the edge of the bed. "You took off the blindfold."

I nodded and whispered, "Water."

"She needs water," Ryker ordered, and I didn't see anyone in the room, but a second later, Reece walked in holding a glass of water. I tried to sit up to take it from Ryker but winced in pain as I did.

"Get her a straw," he ordered.

"Don't move, okay? I can see how much pain you're in. He'll get a straw, and I'll put it to your lips." He brushed the hair back from my face and caressed the side of my cheek. I tilted my head into his palm and felt a little bit of relief where he touched me.

Reece walked in with a metal straw. "What's this?" Ryker asked Reece.

"I don't know. It's Mindy's. She's all about 'Save the turtles.'"

Ryker nodded, took the straw, motioned for Reece to leave, put it in the glass, then pressed the metal to my lips. I sipped the water and felt the cool liquid ease the dryness in my throat. After a few seconds, he moved the glass away and set it on the nightstand.

He touched my face again. "God, I was so scared."

"Where am I?" I managed to get out.

"You're at my home on the farm."

I looked at him confusingly.

"I have the apartment in town. I like to watch over things and be near the center of town, but then I have a house on the farm. I'm the big one at the end, by Ashton's."

I suddenly wondered if they were all werewolves. It didn't cross my mind earlier, but now that I had a second to think, I wondered if the wolves in the field were... Holy shit, I think they were Grey, Micah, Reece, and Mindy. If I thought about it, I knew which wolf was who. Mindy had to be the fawn-colored wolf. Grey was the large grey one. Reece was the smaller black one, and Micah was the brown one. Wow.

"I can see wheels turning in your head. You have a lot of questions, but so do I. Here, drink." He put the straw to my lips again. I drank, and when he

pulled the straw away, I had a small amount of water on my lip. His thumb stroked over my lip, and it instantly made me think of his lips on mine. Then, I thought about his lips in other places. That was the sexiest experience I ever had. I quickly thought about all the orgasms and found myself getting wet at the thought of it. My entire body ached, but could I still react to him?

"I can smell you. Whatever you're thinking about, stop. I can't fuck you again, and the need to do so is still so strong."

My mind traveled to him fucking me, then coming, and the pain. Why did it hurt like that? Why was I still in so much pain?

"What happened?" I asked. My voice felt better the more I drank, and the more he touched me.

"Do you not remember?"

"I remember how badly I needed you." I squirmed, and for the first time, I felt the ache he promised I'd have between my legs. He noticed the movement, and I watched his face as it morphed into what could only be described as a sad smile.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I don't know why that happened, but I'm so sorry it did."

Hurt washed through me. Was he sorry we were together? As if he sensed where his apology led me, he quickly said, "Not for that. Never for that. I'm sorry for what happened to you."

"What happened? I remember the pain and ice and blue."

"Blue?"

I shook my head, trying to make sense of it all. "Tell me what happened."

"First, let me say to you, I've never had sex like that."

Okay, did I do something wrong? I looked at him like WTF, and he ignored my look and pressed the straw to my lips again, making me take a sip.

I wanted him to continue, but something occurred to me. When his hand was on me, my pain was less, and the moment he took it away, I felt it come back. "Your touch lessens the pain."

"What?"

"My entire body hurts. Every muscle. Sort of like whiplash, but worse. My eyes are sensitive, and my head is killing me, but when you touch me, it makes it a little better."

Ryker stood and kicked off his shoes, then climbed into bed next to me. Where his bare skin touched me, I felt the pain recede, but where his jeans

touched me, it was abrasive and caused me a little more pain. "I need your skin on mine. It's your bare skin that's helping."

He immediately whipped his shirt off, tossing it on the ground, then stripped himself of his jeans and boxer briefs and pressed his entire body next to mine.

"It's working. Oh, God, the pain was horrible. You're doing it." I wiggled my fingers and could move them without feeling like every inch of my hand would shatter. "Take this shirt off me. I need as much skin-to-skin contact as possible."

He did as I asked. I winced as he moved me, but the pain was considerably less than when I first woke up. "I'm going to roll you on top of me. Do you think you can handle it?"

I knew it would hurt, but I hoped it would stop this pain by fully touching him. "Yeah."

"Ready?"

"Mmhmm."

His arm went under me, and as quickly as he could, he rolled me on top of him. I couldn't help the cry of pain that escaped me.

"I'm sorry."

I settled on him. My head pressed against his chest, and I breathed in deeply, grateful for the contact and how much my pain was lessening. "Thank you. It's getting so much better."

His arms wrapped around me, making me feel safe, and my pain level reduced to just aches instead of debilitating pain. I relaxed into him.

"Now, back to what happened. You were saying you never had sex like that before."

He groaned. "I'm not sure I can talk about sex with you pressed against me. My instinct to mate with you is strong. The only thing holding me back is my instinct to protect you overrides all else."

"What does that mean, 'your instinct?'"

"Wolves have mates. Sometimes, it is a mate they chose, and sometimes, it's a fated mate. I could've had a mate, but as the Alpha in the pack, I've waited for my fated mate. It always felt important for me to wait."

"And you think that's me?"

"Not think, Ariel. I know it's you. When I said I've never had sex like that before, I meant it. I'm always in control. Always. And my wolf fought me to get out. It was like he wanted you as badly as I did."

"Are you two separate entities?"

"In a way. The wolf is me, but he's an animal. When I'm in that form, I don't think like myself. It's more primal. I've never experienced a time where I was a man, and my wolf tried to merge with me. I'm always one or the other. There were a few moments when we were fucking that I had to fight it back. For wolves, our fated mate is in our DNA. It's like the cells all come to life when we are near our fated mate. I've only known a few wolves who have found theirs. They've told me how powerful the draw was, but nothing could've prepared me for how intense it really was. My wolf instinct with you is compelling me. I feel different. I feel like being around you is changing me, making my wolf stronger. That's what I meant about never having had sex like that."

"When I told you I needed you," I squirmed at the mention, "It was the only thought going through my head. It was like my mind roared, 'need... need...need.' So, in that sense, I understand what you mean. What happened at the end when you climaxed? I remember coming, then felt your release, and your seed; it burned. My entire body burned. My vision was blue. That's it. That's all I remember. You literally fucked my brains out," I joked, trying to lighten the mood.

"Fuck," he hissed unamused, "I should've sensed something was wrong. I'm so sorry." His arms tightened around me, and I could tell how much regret he held.

"Don't be. It's not your fault."

"I was having the best orgasm of my life, and when I say that, I'll tell you, I'm three hundred and forty-two years old. I've never felt anything like that. Then your body went tight, and it grew cold. You passed out, and I thought you were dead. Your body was so cold. I raced you back here, and you've been asleep for a day."

"A day! Shit, I have to work tomorrow. I can't be all sex-crazed. And hold up, you're over three hundred years old?"

"You're not going back to work for the Valderes."

"Uh, yes, I am."

"I just told you, you nearly died, and you're concerned about work and for them!"

"Has anyone ever told you how incredibly moody you are?"

"A time or two," he gritted his teeth, annoyed.

"Well, you are. My pain is almost gone, just give me another second or two, and we can see if I'm better."

"What if I want you to stay?"

I felt his erection dig into my stomach. "I'm not sure that's such a good idea considering the last time it nearly killed me," I joked.

That was the wrong thing to say.

His entire body locked up. "You think it was us together that hurt you? Me in particular? You think you almost died?"

"I don't know what that was, but what I do know is that you just said you thought I was dead." I sighed, moving to his side, so I wasn't lying completely on top of him. I didn't need his erection to make my mind muddled. "I..." I began to speak; however, my pain immediately started to return. "Nope, this isn't going to work. The moment my skin isn't touching yours, the pain returns. So, you must also be the cure."

He turned to his side and hooked his leg over mine. His chest pressed against my body, and his arms went around my back. It felt so intimate. He stroked my back, "How's this?"

I relaxed into him. "It's better. Thanks."

Ryker's deep voice held me captive, "I know the idea of fated mates is new to you. I'll try to be patient with you. The idea that my sperm caused you pain makes me feel at war with myself. My instincts scream for me to be buried inside of you, but they also want to protect you. I'm angry. How could the fates bless me with my mate then make it so that the moment we finally bond, I hurt you? We'll figure this out so we can be together again, but please let me take care of you? I need it."

"Your sperm... we didn't use anything. It was so intense. I didn't think."

"We'll never use anything. The fates will deem what will be."

Now, what did that mean? Surely he couldn't think that he should knock me up. We had sex one time.

As if sensing my distress, he stroked the side of my breast, causing my body to react to him. I quickly forgot that train of thought. "I've waited and trusted the fates to bring me to you. And I couldn't have dreamed up a more perfect version of my mate. I'll trust in them, always." His sincerity made me melt into him. My body relaxed, and I pressed my lips against his kissing him. It was sweet. Neither of us took it further than light kisses, but it went on for a while. Eventually, unavoidably, I felt the heat between my legs. Ryker pulled back, "Your smell is intoxicating. We need to stop."

"Okay." He tightened his grip on me, making me feel safe and pain-free, and it didn't take long for me to fall asleep.

I BLINKED MY EYES OPEN to a very dark bedroom. The only light filtering into the room was from the moon. Ryker was asleep. His long thick erection pressed against my sex. And he gently moved back and forth, but at the same time, a gentle snore exhaled from his lips. My leg was thrown over his hip, so I was opened up to him. It appeared that our sleeping bodies sought each other out.

It felt so good. Come to think of it; I felt terrific. I wasn't in any pain. In fact, my body felt stronger somehow, and with Ryker rocking against me, I felt beyond good. My nipples pebbled, and I pressed my chest closer to Ryker's. I needed the feel of his body against mine. He rocked forward again. I shifted just a little so that the next time it would hit my clit. Was it wrong of me that I was getting pleasure from a sleeping man? I wasn't sure I cared.

Need.

Need.

Need.

The thought racketed through my body.

I moved my hips a little to increase the gentle rocking motion. His dick slid through my folds, coating him in my wetness and making him glide that much easier. I tilted my hips just a tad, and the next time he rocked, his tip pressed against my entrance.

Need.

It was all I could think about. I needed him. I didn't stop him when he rocked a little more. Instead, I pushed down, seating him inside of me entirely. Yes. That was what I needed. His eyes shot open.

"Ariel," panic coated his voice.

I clenched my sex around him, squeezing his dick. "Mmm, I need you," I purred.

He grabbed my hips, holding me in place. "I'll hurt you."

"I need you," I repeated, squeezing his cock with all my muscles.

He groaned in response, and I have no idea why I did it, but I bit his shoulder, and I wouldn't let go. That sparked something in Ryker, making him give in to my body's demands. He pumped in and out, and I just needed to feel full of him.

I released his skin from my teeth, and I knew I drew blood, but I held no remorse. What was happening to me?

"Roll me on top. I need to be fully in you," he demanded.

I saw his wolf blaze in his eyes, and it made me feel powerful for some reason. I didn't feel like myself. I was empowered in a way I'd never been before. He rolled us so that I was on top. I situated myself, so he was completely rooted inside of me. He tried to pump, but I growled. I fucking growled!

"Don't you move! I need every inch of you inside of me. Let me work you."

His wolf blazed, and I swear, for a second, I saw his face morph. "Fuck me, Ariel. Have at it."

I rocked back and forth and gripped his dick inside as I did it. "Yes."

"More," he panted. "Jesus, the way you're gripping me."

I continued to move back and forth, but not up and down. I needed him inside of me. I needed to be full of him. Need. Need. The thoughts moved through my mind like a mantra. I needed to orgasm, but more than that, I needed him to fill me up and come inside of me. The need was so strong, it felt like a hot current pulsing through me.

I was singularly focused—possessed by my desire.

Ryker's hands gripped my hips. I'd never been this brazen—never felt this wild. I relished in the feel of him and the power riding him gave me.

I was getting close. I needed him to get there. I rocked harder and faster, swirling my hips in circles and clenching my muscles.

"Fuck," Ryker roared out, and I felt my muscles tighten, and my climax began at the same time I felt him coming inside of me. It was glorious. My mind screamed yes, yes, yes. Then my vision went blue.

"No, Gods dammit, no!" Ryker yelled, then everything went black.

I heard the clashing of swords, steel against steel. I was dreaming again. I'd been here before. It was so odd that I knew that! The warrior with red eyes spotted me. His horse galloped towards me at a speed I'd never seen before. My instincts screamed that I should run. I looked for the man I thought was Ryker, but I didn't see him. Fires seemed to blaze everywhere. People screamed out in agony. I had to find a place to run to. He was getting closer. My ring pulsed black, and I knew something terrible would happen if I didn't get away from him. He was getting closer even though my feet were moving fast, taking me in the opposite direction.

"No!" I heard a voice roar. "You can't have her."

Then I saw him, my wolf. He was coming for me. He charged in my direction. His long black fur splattered with blood as he ran at full speed toward me. Other wolves appeared at his flank, and they pounced on anyone that came anywhere close to my wolf.

"I'm coming for you. Run faster." I heard in my head. How I knew it was my wolf communicating with me, I had no idea, but I did. I put everything I had into my speed, moving my legs faster than I'd ever done before. Everything was a blur around me, but I knew the man on the horse was still hot on my heels.

Flames rose in front of me, making me stop and cutting off my access to my wolf. I darted to the side, and flames rose there too. I heard a loud neigh and turned to see how close he was. He was right there, pulling back the reins.

"Why do you run from me?" his voice had a deep timbre as he dismounted the horse and stalked toward me. I held my dagger in my hand, prepared to defend myself. "You know why," I said in a voice that wasn't like my own.

"Give me the light," he demanded.

"I am the light."

"Then you must die."

I BLINKED MY EYES OPEN. The early morning sun rays were filtering into the room. To me, Ryker's massive naked back was slouched forward, and his head was in his hands. I placed my hand at the small of his back, causing him to jerk. "Hey," I said sleepily.

He turned toward me. His eyes were red-rimmed. "Ariel?" he questioned.

"I did it again, didn't I?" I rubbed my hand along his back, wanting to comfort him, and he jerked away from me.

"Don't touch me."

I felt like I'd been slapped, and dread filled my stomach. "Did I hurt you?"

I watched as he closed his eyes, held them shut for a long moment, then reopened them dejectedly. "It's me that, somehow, has hurt you. I should've stopped you. I should've stopped myself. I wasn't strong enough to resist the pull of you, and I almost lost you again."

"Hold up. It was me that was all wanton, and I'm okay. I'm not even in pain. My body feels great." I sat up and stretched my arms over my head. The sheet fell, exposing my breasts. His eyes momentarily moved to them, and I could sense the stir in his cock. Well, hello, super-spidey-sex-senses. I ignored this thought and tried to talk this out with him. "I'm not sure what came over me, but if what you said about fated mates is true, which based on how focused I was on getting you to come, then could we really have stopped it?"

His eyes squinted on me. "You could've died. I have no idea what is happening to you, and I should've been stronger. It's not anything to make light of, Ariel."

"Elle."

He glared at me.

"What happened?" I asked again.

"We orgasmed, and you passed out."

"Damn, it must've been one hell of an orgasm." I attempted to lighten the mood.

"Your body locked up. You felt hotter than hell on the inside, but your skin felt frozen. I've no idea what's happening to you, but what I do know is that my seed is affecting you."

"Look, if all I did was pass out and my temperature changed a little, then I think that's not that big of a deal."

"Not that big of a deal!" He was pissed. "Yesterday, you almost drowned, and since then, I thought you were dying—twice!—and both times, I was buried to the hilt inside of you."

I understood why he was upset about what happened. However, I felt like his anger was misdirected. I wanted to reassure him that I was okay and that he didn't hurt me. His back was to me still, so I slipped out of bed and stood

in front of him. It didn't matter that I was naked. I felt like we were well beyond that.

He closed his eyes when I stood in front of him. It was like he didn't want to look at me. "None of this is your fault."

His eyes remained shut, so I grabbed his hand and linked his fingers with mine. His touch immediately made me feel more energized. "I don't know what is happening here or why, but I know it's not your fault. I've been dreaming about you," I finally shared.

The door to the bedroom opened.

"I think I found something," Reece said as he walked in.

Suddenly, Ryker was in front of me in his wolf form, growling. He shifted so fast; I didn't even blink before he was his wolf. He snarled at Reece as he protectively tried to cover me.

"Whoa, Ryk. It's me. Your brother. I don't mean any harm."

Ryker snapped his teeth.

I had a feeling that my nakedness was part of his problem, so I grabbed the blanket from the bed and wrapped it around me. "Ryker. It's okay. He's not here to hurt me. Are you, Reece?"

"No, Ryk. I found something, that's all. I was excited. I should've knocked. I'm sorry. I'll go." He began to move backward and out the open door. Mindy showed up at the door, and the hackles on Ryker raised. I was beyond afraid that Ryker would attack one of his siblings.

"Shit," Mindy cursed.

"He changed so fast," Reece rushed out, telling Mindy. Ryker snapped his teeth and moved toward his brother.

"Ryker, stop." I threw my arms around him, somehow, unafraid of his snarling wolf. I scratched him behind his ears, then moved close to his face. "It's okay. They're your family. I'm fine. Don't worry."

"Elle, maybe you should step away from him. I've never seen him act like this. What if he snaps?" Mindy was worried about me.

"That's his fated mate. He's not going to snap," Reece said.

The two of them talking was irritating Ryker. His ears pricked, and I knew they needed to shut up and get out of here.

I thought about what dogs liked, and I gently pet him, cooing, "Ryker, I need you to relax. Reece..." at saying his brother's name, Ryker snapped his teeth, snarling. "All right, you don't want me to say his name." I continued stroking his fur. "He has something that might help us. What if helping us

helps me? You want to help me, don't you?" I stroked down his chest, ready to pet his belly. He let me do this, and I could feel his tension releasing.

"What is she doing?" Mindy whispered to Reece.

"Looks like she's taming the beast."

His ears perked up again.

"Would you two be quiet? He feels protective, and every time you talk, he's about half a second away from eating you."

"Not sure it's us he wants to eat," Reece snickered.

Ryker broke from my embrace, and he lunged towards his brother, pinning him against the wall with his snarling teeth. Reece looked panicked, knowing he had gone too far. I had to make this stop. I had to do something. Remembering my dream and how we seemed to communicate without talking, I moved to him, put my head against his, and in my mind, I yelled, "Ryker, stop."

Ryker's head snapped to me. I think it worked! "Ryker, listen to me. He means me no harm."

"You're mine," Ryker said back in my freaking head. How weird was that, right!

"I know. He knows it too. Now, back down because if you hurt your brother, I'm not sure I could forgive you."

Ryker released his brother, and I moved back toward the bed and patted it. "Let them leave," I said out loud. Ryker seemed to understand me because he hopped up on the bed, and I sat beside him. "Go," I ordered Mindy and Reece.

Both of them scrambled away, closing us in the bedroom, and I laid next to my wolf, petting him. He was massive, yet, I had no fear. I knew he was trying to protect me. "It's okay. They're gone. The wolf cuddled next to me and threw a paw over me. He was warm, and I was still wrapped in a blanket, so I was downright hot, but I had to ignore it. I needed to calm Ryker down enough that he would change back. I'm not sure how long we laid with him snuggled around me, but I felt myself getting sleepy. My eyes drifted shut, and before I knew it, I was out again.

I REAWAKEN TO FIND a naked sleeping Ryker next to me. "Ryker," I whispered, gently shaking his shoulder. "Ryker."

His eyes snapped open, and he took me in. I knew my hair had to be the most unmanageable crazy thing, so I tried to tamper it down, which caused Ryker to grin. "Are you better?" I asked.

"Do you mean, am I about to shift again? Not that I know of, but I think it's safe to say my wolf did not like anyone walking in when you had no clothes on."

"How about I shower, and we can figure out what that was all about. Is that the bathroom?" I nodded to a closed door.

"Closet. There's no ensuite. It's off the hallway." Ryker stood and pulled on boxer briefs, then found an oversized t-shirt on the ground and handed it to me. "Put this on."

I did as he said and watched as he opened the door and hollered, "Mindy."

He held the door slightly closed, and I realized Mindy must've come running when he called her because it took not a second for him to speak. "I need you to find something for her to wear. Once you do, put them in the bathroom and give one knock on the door. Make sure no one is on this floor or comes to this floor. I can't have anyone near her while she showers or is naked."

"Holy shit, Ryk."

"I know, Mins. I know."

He closed the door, and we waited. There was an awkward silence that I felt I needed to fill, "So I take it, that's not how the wolf thing normally happens?"

He glared at me.

"You almost ate your brother."

I got another glare. Then we heard a knock on the door. "Let's go." I shook off his strange behavior and followed him into a modest bathroom. He turned on the water in the shower and locked us in.

"What are you doing?" I asked. A girl needed her privacy.

"I have to be in here with you. I don't know how my wolf will react if he knows you're in here naked, and I'm not in here to protect you."

"Okay," I said, drawing out the word. "Can you at least turn around while I pee?"

"I've been buried inside of you. Do you think I really care about watching you pee?"

"I care."

He turned around, and I quickly sat on the toilet and did my thing, then I washed my hands and confirmed that my hair was a rat's nest. He turned back around. "Do you have a toothbrush I can use?"

"Mine's in the drawer. Use that."

I scrunched up my nose, not loving the idea of using someone else's toothbrush, but whatever. This entire situation was unbelievable. Using someone else's toothbrush was the least of my worries. I found Ryker's toothbrush, used it, then set it down next to the sink. He grabbed it, put toothpaste on it, and brushed his teeth. That was weird, but, again, not the strangest thing to have happened in the last forty-eight hours. I felt the temperature of the water and took the t-shirt off, then stepped into the shower.

Once I was in, I heard Ryker sigh, "I've never changed that fast. I've never lost control of my wolf. All of that was a lot for me. And how the hell did you talk to me in wolf form? We're going to figure this out."

I found the shampoo and quickly started to lather my hair when the shower curtain was inched open. Ryker's powerful legs came into view as he stepped inside with me.

"What are you doing?"

"I better shower too." His eyes raked over me, and I saw his large erection jutting toward me. It was hard to take my eyes off it. I knew looking at it was like waving drugs in front of an addict, and I'd need it soon enough, so I turned away from him and rinsed my hair.

"Did I scare you?" he asked. "Are you afraid of me? Is that why you don't want to look at me?"

"Nope, afraid I'll jump you," I answered honestly, then looked around for the conditioner and cursed when I saw none. "My hair is going to be a nightmare."

I tried to take my mind off the fact that there was a very naked Ryker behind me, so I tried to think of my responsibilities.

"Will you take me today to get my car?"

"It's already here."

"That's good," I mumbled, letting the hot spray wash over me. "Do you have soap?" I put my hand behind me, hoping Ryker would pass me the soap. He handed me a bar, making our fingers brush.

Nope, not going to look at him or acknowledge the way that shot tingles up my arm!

"After we shower and find out what Reece knows, maybe I should go back to the apartment. I need to contact my job, and hopefully, I still have a job. Is it still Sunday? Did another day pass?"

I rinsed the soap from my body and knew that I had said the wrong thing when Ryker gripped my hips and spun me around. Dammit!

"You can't work for them," he snapped.

"Don't get all growly on me, Wolf. I moved here for a job. Look, the sex is amazing between us, the best I've ever had, but this is all happening so fast." He walked me forward, so I was directly under the shower spray. "I told you, they're bad news. You will not be working for them."

God, why did his cock have to be aimed at me? I would be so much more on my A-game if that thing weren't right there. "Step back," I warned.

He didn't step back. Instead, he walked under the spray, not giving me much room to move. "Worrying about some fucking job for those people—" he snarled, "—Is the last thing you need to do. We have so much to figure out. So much you don't know."

I barely registered what he said because his nearness and his muscled solid body made me react. "I need you to move, so I can get out of the shower," I squeaked.

Ryker grabbed the soap from my hand and began to rub it all over his chest; then, his hand slid over his shaft. I closed my eyes, breathing in deeply. *I'm not looking. I'm not looking.*

"You have to stop and move back. I'm going to jump you in two seconds, and we don't know what that will do to me." He took a second, rinsed off, then did as I asked, and took a step back. Every second he was near me was excruciating. My body felt more and more alive, and I began to thrum with want. It took everything in me to step out of the shower and grab a towel.

"I'm going to wash my hair. Don't leave this bathroom."

"You're so bossy." I never really took well to people giving me orders.

"It's not being bossy. If you leave this bathroom, I have no idea how my wolf will react. I need to keep you safe, and I also need to keep my family safe, Ariel. Do you think I like the idea that I had my brother pinned to the wall, and I could've killed him?" The water shut off. He stretched his arm from the curtain and grabbed a towel from the hook, then a moment later stepped out with it wrapped around him. The black terry cloth hung low at his waist, and I needed to get a grip because, at the sight of him, I found myself licking my lips.

"Will you put those clothes on?" His head tilted to the folded stack of clothes. There were capri athletic leggings, a sports bra, and a black tank. There wasn't any underwear, but I didn't want to wear another woman's underwear, so commando it was. I turned away from Ryker and dropped my towel, then quickly dressed. Every moment near him in this small space was a challenge.

Once dressed, I turned around and saw Ryker gripping the edge of the sink. This wasn't easy on him either. My face softened when I saw the amount of pain this seemed to be causing him. "I'm sorry. I can see how hard this is for you too. How about you get some clothes on, and we try to figure this all out?"

He nodded, then opened the bathroom door and looked down the hall as if searching for any danger, then we walked into his room. I sat on the edge of the bed and worked my fingers through my hair, trying not to look at Ryker while he stepped into a clean pair of boxer briefs. Ignoring how beautiful his body was and how it made me react was no small feat, but I tried by distracting us with questions.

"So, were you born wolves, or do you turn into them? Like, is it like *The Howling*?"

"I don't know what that is."

"1980's werewolf movie. One scratch, and it's all full moon changing from there."

"We're born this way."

"So, you can't accidentally turn me?"

A low growl came from his chest.

"Nope, okay then. I'm obviously not a wolf..." Another growl. I continued, "Is it common for a fated mate not to be a wolf?"

"I've never heard of it, no." Ryker pulled up his shorts, and much to my dismay, pulled on a soft blue t-shirt. "I told you, though, you don't smell human, and everything happening with you has been anything but normal."

"What do I smell like?"

"Magic," he answered without hesitation.

"I've never had magic. Never been exposed to anything like this. Nothing remotely special has ever happened to me."

"Tell me about your parents."

"My mom left when I was a baby. I don't know her, or anything about her really, but my dad was the best. I told you I lost him. September will be a

year."

"Was the ring his?"

"It was."

A knock at the door had Ryker snapping his head in that direction. He moved to it and threw it open to Reece. "Keep your eyes down and away from her. If my wolf even senses you looking at her, there is no telling what will happen."

"This is crazy," Reece said, looking at the floor and stepping into the room. It was then I saw what was in his hands.

"My dagger." I jumped off the bed and moved toward Reece to snatch it from his hand. Again, Ryker didn't have a great reaction to me approaching Reece. His head snapped to me, and he huffed. "Stop." Ryker held his hand out in front of me. "Reece, hand that to me."

Reece handed the dagger to Ryker, and I watched as Ryker flipped it over, inspecting it. "It's similar to your ring."

"Give it to me," I ordered. "I'm supposed to keep it with me."

Ryker handed it to me and looked at me curiously. "You have no idea that you're magic, but you're supposed to keep a dagger so drenched in magic it makes the air thick with it with you?"

I held the dagger protectively. "I have no idea why I said that."

My mind flashed to my dream. The blue light. The voice telling me to keep the dagger nearby. I went back a step, feeling the onslaught of memories. The dreams and visions were all hitting me at once. I gripped my head, feeling exhausted as memory after memory assaulted me. This was all too much. I needed to get out of here and away from *these* people.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Ryker led me to the bed to sit down.

"I have to go. So much has happened. I need to clear my head. I need to think."

"Calm down, Ariel."

"Elle!" I snapped.

He held his hands up like I was a wounded animal, and he was trying not to scare me off.

"I'm just going to go," Reece said.

I began to breathe deeply. This was all too much.

Keeper of the light.

What did that even mean? I sucked in a lungful of air.

Werewolves, fated mates.

It all seemed too extreme, too unbelievable, and *magic*?

Panic seized me, and for the first time since I was a child, I felt like I couldn't breathe. Flashbacks from my childhood suddenly assaulted me.

"You have to tell her, John." A man spoke to my father. I was lying in bed and had been since the accident.

"She's too young. She'll never understand."

"What if something happens to you? Then what?"

"I'll leave instructions for her to open if something were to happen to me."

"She'll be without guidance."

"I want her to have a normal life! Do you know how hard it was to have this hanging over my head my entire life? I never wanted this for anyone else. I didn't even think it was possible that she could conceive."

"And she left not long after Ariel was born. You have to know that is no coincidence."

"Coincidence or not, she gave me my daughter. I cannot hunt her."

"You know you should."

"It's not as black and white as I once believed it to be. Look at her. Look at my daughter." It was then that both men turned to me and saw my eyes open. I was in a haze of sorts and was young. I didn't understand what I was hearing. But I now saw the man's face who was speaking to my father, and I knew exactly who it was. Father Archibald.

"Breathe, Ariel. Breathe." Ryker rubbed my back. "You're okay. Take a deep breath. That's it."

My breathing began to even out. What did it all mean?

My dad was keeping something from me. Something huge, and he said he'd leave instructions—the letter. I needed to read the letter that was left for me. My breathing evened out as I planned what I needed to do.

"I'm okay," I told Ryker.

"I think you had a panic attack when you grabbed the dagger."

I shook my head, but for some reason, I couldn't find it in me to tell him everything. This fated mates thing was utterly new to me. The vision of my dad and Father Archibald left me feeling like a lot was being kept from me, and perhaps I couldn't trust what I thought I knew. How did I even know what Ryker was telling me about fated mates was true? What if all of this was magic and not fate. I needed to get away from Ryker and clear my head. I needed to read my dad's letter, and I needed to get a hold of Father Archibald.

Then, there was my job for the Valdere Estate. It was the reason I was here. I needed to contact them and make sure they were okay with the fact that I didn't show up. I know Ryker had an issue with them, but I still didn't understand what that was about.

"I need some space, Ryker. I need to go back to the apartment. A lot has happened in a short amount of time, and I need to digest it all."

"Let's go."

"I mean, I need space without you." I winced as I said it, but there was just too much I needed to figure out—too many unknowns.

His eyes flared, and I saw the wolf blaze behind them.

"Why do I see your wolf in your eyes?"

He tilted his head curiously at me. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, I can see your wolf in your eyes sometimes, like an image of him flashes there."

"That doesn't happen."

"I'm telling you that it most certainly does."

He shook his head at me like he didn't know what to do with me. "Why don't we sit and talk and try to figure everything out?" His hand brushed against the side of my face, and I knew I had to get out of there fast. His tenderness only made me want to strip my clothes off, and I had too much I needed to figure out.

"No sitting. I'm telling you I need space from you. I need space from all of this. It's a bit much to find out werewolves are real and that I'm something magical, don't you think?"

"I get it. I do. This must all be confusing, but Ariel..."

It was on the tip of my tongue to correct him.

"I physically will go mad if I'm not around you. It's this need to protect you that is unlike anything I've ever felt before. Being away from you is dangerous. Do you want something to happen to Mindy?"

"What? Of course not."

"Did it look like I was in control?"

I gritted my teeth. He had a point. "No," I reluctantly answered. "How about this? We go to the apartment, and you give me space. I'll stay in my room where I can get my head on straight, and you can be all alpha-wolfman in the other room."

"Fine. Grab your blade, and let's go."

He opened the door and hollered, "We're going to the apartment. Clear the way."

It all seemed over the top. "You follow me, and we'll walkthrough. Please, try not to talk to anyone. They'll be making themselves scarce, but I don't want anything to happen."

"All right," I agreed.

I heard footsteps as people tried to get out of our way. There were a few door slams, and it made me curious how many people were there.

I wish I had more time to take in his house. He was pulling me, and we were moving through it in a way that left little time for me to take it all in. Once outside, we stepped onto a large wrap-around porch that was scarcely decorated. I didn't have much time to take that in either as we moved to my car, and he opened the passenger door. "Get in."

"Um, it's my car. I'll drive."

He glared at me, and I didn't have it in me to argue, so I got in the car. I saw my purse sitting there, so I stuck my blade inside of it. I mean, who wanted to drive around with a dagger? Weren't there laws against that sort of thing?

We drove to the apartment in awkward silence. What did you say to the guy who was your fated mate, whatever that meant?

We pulled up and parked the car in Ryker's spot. So, now it was okay for my car to be there. Hmph.

I got out of the car as soon as we stopped. Ryker followed, slamming the door. "If I'm driving or nearby, let me open the damn door for you."

"You're so moody," I mumbled under my breath. We walked towards the front of the apartment building, and Ryker placed his hand in front of me, halting my progress when an SUV, then a limo, followed by another SUV, pulled up in front of the curb.

"Stay behind me." His body grew rigid, and I could see that he wanted to shift but held himself back.

"Who is it?" I whispered.

"The Valderes."

"Oh, they probably just want to make sure I'm okay."

Several large men who wore suits and dark sunglasses got out of the SUVs and stood on each side of the limo door. I'd never seen either of them, but I had no doubt they worked for Bronson.

A man opened the limo door and out stepped Bronson Valdere dressed in a dark suit similar to the others but of finer quality. He also wore sunglasses. Something felt strangely familiar about Bronson, and it caused shivers to break out on the back of my neck. He reached behind him and helped Lillian from the car, who also wore black, including a black hat and black sunglasses.

Without giving me even a second to greet them, Ryker shouted, "What do you want?"

Bronson stepped forward, and my eyes were glued to him. That eerie feeling was screaming at me to pay attention. I shook my head. It was as if my mind was trying to connect pieces to a puzzle, but it couldn't. "Look, Darling, she is well," he said to Lillian.

"Um, hello." I tried to step around Ryker, but the big oaf wasn't having it.

"You're breaking the treaty by being here, so unless you want war, I suggest you leave."

"Now, now. No need to get hasty. We're here to check on Miss Katz. After how sick she was after lunch last week, we're worried for her well-being."

"I'm sorry. I totally should've called today. "

Ryker glared at me, "She's not working for you."

"Uh, yes, I am."

His glare intensified. "Ariel, could you wait for me inside?" He asked through gritted teeth, and I knew it was hard for him to ask and not order me.

"Well, considering these are my employers, no."

Boy, if looks could kill.

It was then I saw his wolf flash, and I knew that looks *could*, in fact, kill. I needed to calm this situation down and not provoke it.

"Can I call you? You caught us at a bad time. I'm really sorry about not showing up, it's just I wasn't feeling well, and things are complicated."

"You don't need to explain anything to them."

Lillian stepped forward, "Are you okay? Did this mongrel do something to you?"

"Mongrel," I snapped in disbelief. I was ready to charge her. I wanted to smack her coiffed hair right off her head.

I moved my foot forward to go toward her. I wasn't about to let some snooty uptight... Ryker put his arm out, halting me at the same time she stepped forward, then Bronson did the same thing to her, stopping her progress and shooting a look in her direction.

She spoke, and it was almost regal as she did so, "Is there anything you need? Anything we can do for you? I was worried when you didn't show. It's the only reason we're here now. I apologize if this seems over the top. Sometimes, I'm not sure Bronson understands how showing up with a motorcade comes off. We mean no harm, and we're not here to break the treaty."

All right, I really had to sit down with Ryker and find out about my employer, but first, I needed to find out about myself. I tried to let that comment she made about Ryker slide, but all I did was glare at her.

Bronson sucked in air, nearly making a hissing sound. "Will you be at work tomorrow, Miss Katz?" he asked.

"I should be. Can I call you?" I asked at the same time Ryker said, "No."

I watched as Lillian and Bronson shared a look, communicating that they didn't like my response. "Please do contact us if something comes up."

Ryker began to pull me back toward the house, and I didn't fight him as it seemed our exchange was over. I was starting to heed Ryker's warning about trusting my instinct. Something was off about those two. Something I wasn't sure I could get past.

"YOU CAN'T WORK FOR them!" Ryker yelled, slamming the door to my apartment. Hold up, the infamous Motorcycle Dick was back.

"You're not going to yell at me. There might be this thing that makes us want to bone like crazy, but you do not control me. No man does!"

"I'm your mate. You'll do as I say."

"Oh, hell no. You did not just say that. Sure, we have undeniably amazing sex, but it's not like you're my husband. And even if you were, I'd never marry a man who thought he could control me. Now, I think it's time for you

to leave. I need to get my head on straight, and I can't seem to do it when you're around."

"It's because you need me."

"It's physical," I countered.

"It's more than that, and you know it. And you're forgetting one important piece of information."

"Oh, what's that?"

"I own the building, and I'm not going anywhere."

"Fine," I said, storming into my bedroom, slamming the door, then locking it.

Ryker followed me and banged on the door. "Ariel, open the door."

"Nope, not happening! You can just sit your alpha butt on the couch! We came back here because I needed to think. Now, give me space!"

I heard a thump against the door, and I figured his palm connected with it, then he cursed as his voice faded down the hallway. I sighed. I might've been too hasty with him. None of this was either of our doing. He knew about all this his entire life, and I felt like I was falling down a rabbit hole. Everything wasn't what it seemed, and I felt off-balance. In fact, ever since I drove into town, something inside of me felt different, and the longer I was here, the more I was around Ryker, I felt like I was changing.

I sat on the edge of the bed—the beautiful bed that his skilled craftsmanship created—and tried to piece everything together. I knew what I needed to do. It wasn't something I wanted to do. In fact, I've avoided it for nearly a year, but I knew I needed to read my dad's note. I knew I needed to figure out what my dreams or memories meant, and I needed to know what the heck was going on with me. There was only one place I could get answers, and it was right here with me. The problem was I didn't open the letter because I knew it would hurt. Maybe that was a tad chicken shit of me?

I grabbed the letter then laid on the bed, clutching it against my chest along with the picture of my dad and me. I could do this. I could open the letter. I said this to myself, but I wasn't really sure I believed it. It wasn't like I hadn't tried before. Sometimes, I felt like the letter was haunting me, just sitting there, coaxing me to open it.

I was being silly. I knew it. It was just a letter that quite possibly could hold answers that I desperately needed. Somehow, as time had passed, I began to feel like if I opened the letter, it would be Dad's final goodbye to me, and I wasn't ready for that. Then again, was I ready for magic and

werewolves—let alone fated mates? It was all just too much. But I needed answers. I had a sense that something huge was going to happen, bigger than everything that already did, and if I didn't get answers soon, I would be in a world of hurt.

God, if you're listening, protect me, okay? I prayed. I wasn't a big believer in organized religion, but I believed in a higher power. Dad had instilled that in me, and so had Father Archibald. He tried to get me to follow Christianity, but my dad taught me that it was okay not to, as long as I had faith. I closed my eyes, afraid how the words on the page would change me, then opened them, knowing I needed to be strong.

"Ariel," I heard through the door, and somehow, armed with the knowledge that he was still out there, still there for me, it gave me the courage I needed.

I sat up and readied myself for whatever I would learn. I mean, it couldn't be more than I'd already learned in the last forty-eight hours, could it?

I rubbed my ring, something that was becoming a habit, and finally opened the envelope.

My Dearest Ariel,

If you are reading this, then I'm sorry our time was cut short. Please know that I love you with all my heart, and I'm sorry I didn't have this conversation with you in person. It's been you and me, kiddo, for as long as I can remember. So, I know how much losing me has cost you because if it was the other way around, I'm not sure if my heart could take it. But you're stronger than me. You always were and always will be.

There is so much I should've told you. So much I wish we had time for, but I wanted you to have a normal life for as long as you could. It's why I did what I did, and I hope that you can find it in your heart to forgive me when you learn the truth.

I find it hard to know where to start, so I will begin with a brief history lesson.

Did you know our last name comes from an ancient line? History would say that it means priests, but history would be wrong. We come from an ancient sect of what's now known as the Rosi. We are not one religion but seekers of truth and the divine. Our line is different than most Rosis, though. We have been charged with seeking and protecting all things divine. We do this by protecting the light. We are its keepers. The light will guide you on your journey. My journey was to protect you. It's why I pray that you'll forgive me. Each generation from our bloodline has been shown their paths differently. I cannot say how yours will present itself to you, but what I can tell you is that you are the most powerful Rosi I have ever studied. You have a natural mythical element to you that is unknown. You, dear, are one of the great mysteries. For a Rosi, unraveling mysteries is one of our greatest truths.

I know this may sound strange to you, but you are now and have always been part of an order: The Order of The Rose. Father Archibald will help guide you. Find him. Your ring and dagger are to be treasured as well as the medallion. You must keep them with you. It will help protect you and those that you protect.

I know this is a lot. I'm purposefully being vague. This is an experience that you need to go through on your own, and I'm so very sorry for that. I pray that you have lived a good, happy life—that I've done my best giving you that. I wanted you to live before all of this came at you.

I've lived with this my entire life, and although I've been blessed to have you in my life, there were times where I felt burdened by the Rosi, and it is

something I've struggled with myself. I do not want that for you. It should never be viewed as a burden. I learned this the longer I was on my journey. Being a Rosi is a gift, one I am eternally grateful for. I hope you, my seeker, my absolute, will find what all Rosi seek: completeness and understanding. I love you, my daughter— my sweet precious Ariel. Forgive me for leaving you, and forgive me for keeping this from you.

May the divine guide you in all your journeys.

So mote it be,

Dad

I read the note over and over again. If everything from the last two days hadn't happened to me, then I would've thought that my Dad was pulling my chain, but now, I wasn't so sure.

I needed Google.

I needed to get a hold of Father Archibald.

What I didn't need was this complication with Ryker. I wasn't sure if I could put him off, though. With him being away from me, I felt a pull to him even though it was only in the other room. Had I been harsh? He'd been extra pushy and domineering in a totally unattractive way. But was I pushing the beast in him to the surface, and he was doing what he needed to tame him?

I thought about my job and the Valderes. They seemed familiar, but I wasn't sure Bronson was familiar in a good way. Plus, there was some type of feud between Ryker's family and the Valderes.

Ugh. I had so many questions. Could I put my trust in Ryker? I had no freaking clue. Besides wanting to bump uglies all night long with him, I didn't really know him. But if we were fated, would they have chosen someone for me that I couldn't trust?

I grabbed the pillow, held it to my head, and screamed into it. There was a bang on the door, and before I had a chance to tell Ryker I was fine, his wolf charged through the door, splintering it wide open.

His wolf snarled and looked around the room, searching for a threat. I held my hands up. "It's okay. I'm fine. I was just frustrated."

He walked around and sniffed the room. Because of his size, he didn't have far to go. Once he was completely satisfied that there wasn't a threat, he jumped up on the bed and sat down next to me, then shoved his snout into my neck.

I couldn't help it; it tickled, so I giggled. The giant wolf licked me, and I laughed again, moving back. Dog slobber was one thing, but wolf slobber

from such an enormous animal was something different altogether. I scratched behind his ear and began to stroke his fur. My tension melted away. His tail slowly wagged, and as I stroked his coat, he curled up on the bed like a giant dog. I could handle a guard dog, right?

I shook my head then pinched my arm. It didn't work the first time, but it was worth a shot, right? If I'd fallen down the rabbit hole, maybe I'd wake up, and all of this would have been a dream. Perhaps I'd just bumped my head and made all of this up.

Okay, my pinch hurt. I wasn't dreaming.

The wolf licked my arm where I pinched it, then laid down and put his head in my lap. After a few minutes, he relaxed even more, and I began to stroke his belly. He was so enormous that the sight of this beast lapping at my attention made me smile.

"This is a lot, you know?" I spoke to the wolf, putting me at ease. "First, I've never had any sexual experience even close to what I had with Ryker, or you? I don't know, that whole 'the wolf is me but not me' is confusing."

The wolf's ear perked up, and I heard a slight huff. "Then, there's this letter that is basically telling me that I'm destined for greatness. I need answers. I thought the letter would give me some, and now I'm just plagued with more questions. Can I trust you? I guess that's my number one question at this very second. Will you help me wolf-um Ryk? Will you put my interest first?" I laid down next to the wolf and put my head against his side. "I need the Internet. Is there a public library?" I sighed. I was talking to a wolf. He wasn't going to answer.

Sitting up, I decided I couldn't just lie here. I needed to be proactive. I dug through my bag, found my phone, and plugged it in. It was pretty much useless here, but I needed to get Father Archiblad's number. I could use Ryker's landline and call him.

The wolf watched me as I moved around. I took my letter, folded it, and stuck it into the side of one of my bags. I didn't know what I should share and with whom, and for now, I felt like I needed to keep my letter to myself. My door was ruined, so I carefully stepped over it. I wasn't mad about the door; I knew Ryker would fix it.

I decided to change my clothes. Wearing someone else's clothes was fine in a pinch, but not my favorite thing to do. I changed and couldn't help but notice the wolf never took his eyes off of me. I quickly dressed but kept my

back to the wolf because the way his eyes darkened unnerved me. I needed to understand this wolf thing more.

I tilted my head towards the wolf. "Can you change back to Ryker now? I need to ask you a few questions."

He scrunched his nose at me, and I thought perhaps he couldn't understand what I was saying. As much as I liked hanging out with an enormous wolf, I needed to find answers. I started to walk out of the room. "If you're not going to change, then I'm going to go find the answers I need on my own." He crouched low, then his body morphed and changed. It was gruesome and painful-looking, but at least it was fast.

Then, there was a very naked, very beautiful Ryker lying in my bed. I squeezed my eyes shut and unconsciously squeezed my thighs together. Ryker laughed, and I opened them to glare at him. Then, he noticed my pebbled nips through my shirt, and his smile faded. His eyes darkened, and I turned around as his growing erection was a distraction I didn't need.

"You need to put that thing away," I urged through gritted teeth.

"Mmm, I don't think so," he said, his voice was deeper and more gravelly than before. I turned because his voice was alluring when it went that deep. And, blast it to hell, he was stroking his shaft!

"What are you doing?"

"Come here, Ariel."

"Would you stop calling me that!" I snapped.

"It's your name," he said, sliding his hand up and down, circling around his tip.

I licked my lips then bit my bottom lip. Holy heck, that was sexy.

I took a step towards him, not even realizing that I did. His hand stroked his length again, and I was so very drawn to him. I went to take another step but stopped myself. "Stop it. We can't do this."

"We have, and we can again. Take another step. I want those lips wrapped around me."

I totally wanted to wrap my lips around him. But...

"We've been here. It's amazing until our sex knocks me on my ass. Do you want me knocked on my ass, Ryker?"

"Shit, no." he cursed, then stopped stroking himself and wrapped a blanket around himself. "Jesus, I'm like a horny teenager around you. I'm sorry." He hung his head low. "It's crazy. I've never felt this way. It's like the barest hint of skin, and I can think of nothing else but sinking into you."

"Don't feel bad. *The force is strong with this one.*"

"Sometimes, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Oh, c'mon. You don't know Star Wars? How in the world could the Fates have paired us? You literally know nothing when it comes to pop culture."

"Being the alpha in the pack, making sure war doesn't break out, overseeing the farm, overseeing the bar, this apartment... it doesn't leave me much time to watch television."

"Still, the fact that if I said, 'may the force be with you,' and you'd have no idea what I'm talking about, is a concern."

"You're very distracting."

"Is it working? How's the boner?"

"You're in the room, not sure it will ever go away when you're near, but talk about some more geeky stuff. I'm sure it will help ease the tension."

"Hey, it's not geeky."

He gave me a look that said he thought I was full of it. "All right, hot stuff. Want to get pants on? I think it will be much easier to talk with a bit more between us."

"If I get up, then you'll have to come with me across the hall, so I don't turn again and destroy my house. How about I keep covered, and I'll sit further away from you, but we just talk." He pulled a sheet over him, and I sat on the bed at the furthest possible spot away from him because knowing there was all of that waiting for me under the sheets was hard, literally.

"Okay, fine. I need to use your phone."

"Of course. Who do you need to call?"

I ignored his question, then asked if he had access to the internet.

"I don't, but the library does."

"That's good."

"How many wolves are in this town? Like, is everyone a wolf and I'm the only human walking around, or are there plenty of regular folks and only a handful of wolves? Wait, you said something at the lake about there being others. Am I going to walk outside and come face to face with an ogre or something equally scary?"

"That was a lot of questions. How about I start with the wolves?"

"Just like that, you're going to tell me all kinds of pack secrets? Doesn't that break some code or something?"

"First off, you are a member of my pack. Being my mate sort of makes you honorary, even though you're not a wolf. Secondly, anything you want to

know is yours. I can't keep things from you."

"What do you mean can't?"

"I mean, it's physically impossible. It's the bond."

"Hmph," I squinted my eyes on him, unsure how any bond could make me tell him whatever he asked. "Does it work in reverse? Like will it make me tell you everything as well?"

"I don't know. You're an anomaly."

"Great, that's me, an anomaly."

"I don't mean that in a bad way. It's just humans and wolves don't typically mate. Although, it's not unheard of. I've just never heard of a human being a wolf's fated mate."

I studied him. All of this was fascinating. He scooted closer to me, and I froze. "Stay in your lane. The two of us on the bed spells S-E-X-Y-time, so the further away you are, the better."

He obliged, then said, "You realize I'm six-four, and this is a queen. Even on opposite sides, we're still within reach of each other."

"Whatever. Just tell me about the wolves." I sat on the very corner with one leg tucked under my butt, facing him. Amusement flickered over his features.

"Everyone at the lake was a wolf. There are about seventy of us. The town is mostly human, and they do not know we exist. This needs to stay this way. You cannot broadcast to the world that there are werewolves. There are rules."

"Like a secret handbook?"

"No, but there is a code that, if broken, could result in death, so you need to keep what you know about us a secret."

"Cool. What happens in fight club stays in fight club. Got it."

He again looked at me like he didn't know what I was talking about. I seriously hoped that the library had DVDs and that I could continue to educate Ryker on movies. He'd already gotten my dose of comedy; I think he'd dig Fight Club.

He began talking, which took me out of my DVD thoughts. "We are the largest pack in the Midwest. There is a pack in Upstate New York, one in Montana, and one in Washington State. There are also various packs around the world. In general, we don't like heat, but we can tolerate it."

"So, you have to love this heatwave, then?"

"Not even a little," he grinned. "Though, I must say the best part about it is watching you sweat."

I momentarily thought about his body covered in sweat, tiny droplets running along his hard-tanned skin. I shook my head. "Focus. That was very distracting."

He grinned. "I've been the leader of this pack for close to seventy-five years."

"Jesus, you're a geriatric."

"I'm young for a wolf. My dad is far older than me."

My eyes may have bulged out of my head when I remembered how old he told me he was. "You sure don't look that old. Are you immortal or something?"

"No, but we do have a much longer lifespan than humans."

"So, why would you want to mate with me? I'll get old and die."

A deep rumble emanated from Ryker.

"Circle of life and all of that," I said like it was obvious.

"You can't mention that possibility. As in ever, Ariel. It makes my wolf enraged. And like I said before, I don't think you're human, so..."

"What do you think I am?"

"There is a heavy magic scent that comes from you."

I smelled my armpits. I could use a little deodorant, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

"Wolves have an impeccable sense of smell. You've heard about dogs being trained to smell cancer cells, right?"

"Oh, I did actually watch a documentary about this. It was fascinating."

"A wolf's sense of smell is ten times stronger than any dogs', and werewolves are even stronger than that."

"Wow."

"Our sight is impeccable, and our speed in wolf form can top sixty miles per hour. Most of us, in human form, are exceptionally strong, but nothing that would seem unnatural. Some of us have additional skills like Mindy. She has a natural affinity for stones and herbs. She understands the balance quite naturally."

"And you, do you have any unique abilities?"

He licked his lips, and I squeezed my thighs, remembering some of his unique abilities. He grinned, knowing the effect he had on me. "I'm a master

strategist. I have a unique ability to scent deceit. It's a trait that helped make me one of the youngest Alphas our pack has ever seen."

I felt a sense of pride wash over me, which was odd because besides having sex with Ryker, I didn't know him well enough to be proud of him.

"This pleases you." He watched me from his side of the bed.

"How can you tell?"

"There's a slight shift in your pheromones when your feelings change dramatically."

"Far out." I nodded my head. This was fascinating.

He shifted slightly, and my eyes went to his chest and the dusting of hair across it. My eyes trailed down to his fabulous six-pack.

"And that—when you look at me like that—I can smell your lust. I can scent what you like. When I'm touching you, and something excites you, your scent tells me, along with your body. It's why I'll be able to please you in ways you've never experienced."

I gulped. Ryker talking about pleasing me made my nipples harden, and I really didn't need that.

"I think as much as I physically react to you, we need to cool it with talking about anything pleasurable."

He emitted a low pleasurable hum.

"Trust me, I wouldn't mind staying in bed with you, but a lot is going on here. Tell me about the Valderes. Lillian and Bronson both seem familiar, but I can't put my finger on it. I thought about it for a second when I met Lillian, and now when I saw Bronson again. I got this peculiar feeling that there was something familiar about him, too."

"I could smell your apprehension when he spoke."

"That trick could really come in handy."

His eyes gentled in a way I wasn't prepared for. "You can't work for them. Don't get mad. Let me explain."

I took a deep breath. I really didn't like when people thought they could tell me one way or another what I could or couldn't do. I nodded my head at him to go on.

"They're bloodsuckers."

I jolted backward, which made me nearly fall off the bed. Amusement danced in Ryker's eyes.

This shouldn't have shocked me. Ryker told me there were other magical elements. He thought I was something completely unknown, yet the fact that

I was just in the company of vampires scared the hell out of me. I was working for them. Images of Lillian drinking from her plastic take-out cup and red on her lips flashed through my mind. She drank blood from a cup, right in front of me!

I held up my hands. "Whoa. Explain. They're vampires?"

"That's one word for them. Technically, they're Nosferatu. You can call them vamps, though. I prefer bloodsuckers. The land here is special, as is the land where other packs live. There is something here that helps us mask ourselves to the public. It also helps us heal and come into our own in a way that we wouldn't be able to if we were raised elsewhere. There have been rogue wolves that have survived outside of pack lands, but their lives are generally faced with more challenges. In the same way that the lands help us, it's also why the Valderes choose to live here. They are not in town. They are not allowed to kill our townspeople. If they do, it will break the treaty we have. I am not allowed on their property. They're not allowed on mine. This includes the farm and the lake. The lake is sacred."

"So, if they're not allowed to kill the people here, how do they eat? Did they convince me to come work for them because I'm dinner?"

His nose flared at the suggestion. "I checked you for bites when you came from there the other day. I couldn't find any puncture wounds. I wouldn't put it past them. When they feed, they usually do it sensually, though. They don't kill often, but there can be blood lust if they haven't fed for long periods of time. It's repulsive. If I find out they've killed one of our townspeople, our truce is up, and we're at war. It's been at least a century since we've been at war, but we'll fight if we have to."

"Oh. Come to think of it, Lillian did mention it is special here, and she asked me if I felt anything when I got here."

"What did you say?"

"I told her no, but I actually did feel something. I'm just not sure what."

"That's interesting, but not surprising. My guess is your magic is responding to this place the same way wolves and vampires do."

"Do you think that's why I'm suddenly passing out?"

"I'm unsure, but it would make sense. As for why the Valderes brought you here? I find it hard to believe that there wasn't an ulterior motive for them hiring you. I don't know what that is, but I surmise that it has something to do with what you are. They will use you. I don't know how or why, but there is no reason that they would find you in Seattle and bring you here just as a

pretty snack. They have to know that there is something different about you. Why else would she ask you if you felt anything?"

"I think you're right. I think they must know. Vampires... that still seems so unreal. I can't believe I was working there for them." I sighed. The surrealness overwhelmed me. "Maybe I should just leave, and my life will go back to normal."

"You cannot fucking leave!" Ryker roared, and I somehow felt his fury, startling me. It was a physical feeling, not emotional, almost like a wave crashed into me.

My eyes squinted. "When you try to tell me what I can and can't do, it pisses me off." I stood from the bed, crossed my arms over my chest, and gave Ryker my best ticked-off glare.

"I've waited centuries for you," he said in a low, eerily calm voice. "Centuries of thinking I would never have a mate because I wouldn't settle. I knew there would be a fated mate for me, and so I waited. I hope you understand that it angers me when the one person who is meant for me so easily dismisses us and decides that she should leave without thought. It doesn't appear that my feelings are reciprocated, and after waiting so long, I'm disappointed and angry. It's not your fault. You're not a wolf. I can't expect you to behave like one. However, you should know that the thought of being without you after waiting so long for you and only having you for a short amount of time unnerves me. For the first time in my entire life, I have a sense of completeness, and you impetuously deciding that leaving would be best guts me."

Remorse coursed through me. "I'm sorry. You're right. I don't think it is the same for me. I mean, I want you, and there is the overwhelming desire to have sex, but I don't feel like I'm in love with you or anything. I'm sorry if that comes off harsh. This is all new to me. Maybe we could be there, I don't know. All I know is that in the last two days, I've found out werewolves are real, and now you're telling me my employer's a vampire, so can you blame me for wanting to get out of here?"

I felt bad. Truly. But what did he expect from me? I hadn't even gotten into my dreams yet and to Father Archibald and the Rosi. He made me feel like I was hurting him on purpose. All of this was new to me, and all of it was unbelievable.

He stood from the bed in all his naked glory, walked close to me, and spoke with a harshness I'd yet to hear from him. "I'm just a good fuck."

Noted." Then he left my room, and a moment later, I heard the door to the apartment slam.

There was a knock at my door. I was sitting, turning over everything. Was I too harsh with Ryker? What the heck were the Rosi? Vampires were real? My dad, why did he keep from me? It was more than one woman should have to process. I had a fated mate! What the heck was up with that?

Shrugging out of my thoughts and carefully walking over the splintered wood, I opened the door. Micah stood there, wearing black running shorts, a grey tank, and running shoes.

"You sure did a number on him." He strode past me into the living room, and I knew I should be wary, he was a freaking werewolf, but I couldn't. I felt at ease with Micah.

"Is it safe for you to be here? I mean, what if he comes down and eats you for getting near me?"

"Safe, I'm not so sure about that. But, as long as you promise to keep your clothes on, Ryk promises to behave."

As he spoke, I wondered how well Ryker could hear. Was he sitting in his room listening to everything we talked about, and the moment he heard something he didn't like, he'd be here?

I shook my head, "Promise to stay fully dressed. So, did you pick the short straw or something?"

He looked away guiltily.

"You did. You totally drew straws to see who would have to come and talk to me. Not cool."

"To be fair, you were pretty brutal with him. He might be a massive guy to you, but he also has a huge heart, and we all heard how you stomped all over it. None of us were really amped up to come in here."

"Now, hold on. That's not how it was. I don't even know him. Sure, our bodies crave each other, but that doesn't mean we will be head over heels in love with each other. Who knows, maybe we will be someday, but I'm not the kind of person who believes in love at first sight or anything. All I was saying was that it was a bit much, all of it, and a bit too soon."

He looked at me skeptically. "That's not all you said. You talked about leaving."

I sighed, "What would you do if you were me? You can't honestly tell me that you would be fine with learning all that I've learned."

He paced the apartment, then spotted the broken split door. "Ryker did that?"

"The big bad wolf himself."

"Christ, no wonder you're ready to bolt. He probably scared you half to death."

"Honestly, I'm not frightened of his wolf."

"Why? If I was some damsel in distress and a big bad wolf broke through my bedroom door, I'd be frightened."

"Damsel in distress?"

"What? You used the little red riding hood analogy. I thought we were talking in princess speak."

I shook my head. "Little red riding hood is a fairy tale, not a princess."

He cocked his brow at me, perhaps thinking I was a little goofy. Maybe he was right. Maybe this was all I could handle. I sighed, then sat down on the couch and clutched the pillow to my chest. "It wasn't what frightened me. A lot is going on. I want to tell you, but I don't think I should talk to you before talking to Ryker about it. I have a question for you, though."

"I got an answer for you."

"Is he going to freak out if we leave? Can we go to the library?"

"Book nerd, huh? I didn't take you for the type."

I scowled, "What type is that? The educated, I-can-read type? The awesome type? The..."

"All right, I get it. Book nerds are cool."

"Hell yeah, we are."

"Ryker gets that he has to give you space and do things differently with you than he would a wolf. His need to win you will supersede his possessive tendencies. Beware, I think all you did was prompt him to win your heart."

I wasn't sure about whether I wanted Ryker to pursue me, but that needed to be the least of my worries right now.

"THE LIBRARY'S CLOSING soon."

I looked around, amazed at how empty it was. I'd been researching all day and had a stack of books that I had already checked out. Micah was beyond bored, and I felt only slightly bad for him. He was on babysitting duty. But I didn't think much could really happen to me in a library.

Grey brought Micah lunch. He offered me food, too, but I was too immersed in research about the Rosi. It had been around before most religions and went by various names over time. Still, mostly they were just peaceful truth seekers. I also found Father Archibald's email address and

emailed him asking him to contact me. I explained where I was and that my cell service stunk here.

The librarian walked past us, glaring. "They actually closed ten minutes ago," Micah whispered.

"Shoot. Okay. I can always come back, right?"

"Yeah. We can. What's this? I've heard of the Rosi. I've seen some documentaries on them. Hey, this looks like your ring."

I nodded my head and logged off. "How did you watch a documentary?"

"I do leave here sometimes, and besides, some people have these things you may have heard of called satellites."

I wanted to ask him more. It had seemed like the Rosi were secret, but thinking back, maybe it was only my line that was. After all, there was information in this small library about them. My stomach rumbled, taking me out of my thoughts.

"You should've had lunch," Micah said.

"Whatever, you guys and your spidey senses."

"Please, anyone would've heard that thing."

I shook my head at him, and we walked down the street. It was only a block or so from the apartment, and I suddenly missed Ryker. It was odd because I didn't think I could miss him, but I had a longing for him that I couldn't explain.

"Do you think Ryker will be around?"

"Should be. He's got to be at the bar later."

"He sure has a lot of responsibilities."

"You have no idea."

Once we made it to the apartment, I immediately noticed Ryker's bike was not in his parking spot, and I couldn't help but feel a tad disappointed. Man, no wonder he was upset, even I couldn't keep up with the whiplash of my emotions.

Once inside, I was surprised to see a new door, and any evidence of the broken door was gone. It was as if it hadn't happened.

Micah left. I could tell he was relieved to be off duty, and I was alone with all my books and research. I hoped Father Archibald contacted me. The other thing I did today, which I was sure would please Ryker, was I emailed the Valderes and told them that I regretted to inform them that I would not be able to continue with my employment, effective immediately. I apologized for the short notice. That was it, direct and to the point.

Now, I'd have to figure out a job because although my dad left me money, it wasn't enough to sustain me long term. It was a nest egg, something to fall back on if times got tough. I would give myself a small amount of time to figure out what this mate thing was about, but then I'd have to find a job. I figured I owed it to myself to see where things went with Ryker. What if he was the absolute best person for me in the world, and I was too stubborn with my prejudices about all things supernatural that I didn't give him a real shot? Could I live with that?

I also had to admit, I was scared. All of this had been one extreme to the next.

I haven't been exactly lucky in the man department. Now that I found myself completely attracted to one, he was a werewolf. Plus, when we slept together, I passed out and saw a glowing blue light. It was trippy and scary. Today, I concluded that I needed to tell Ryker about everything the letter said and what I'd seen in the dreams.

There was a knock on my door, and I hollered, "It's open."

"Um, hey. I have a delivery." A young guy said at the door.

"Oh, sorry. I just assumed... Nevermind. What kind of delivery? I didn't order anything."

"Ryk asked me to bring you takeout."

It was then I noticed a small Wolf's Den logo on his shirt.

"Oh, thanks, let me get my purse to pay you."

He shook his head, shoved the Styrofoam carton at me, and left. "Thank you," I called after his retreating back. I couldn't believe that Ryker had let anyone come near me. Maybe he could give me space and respect my boundaries. I didn't understand this instinct-thing completely yet and how his needs worked, but I appreciated his need to win me, which meant people could be near me.

I opened the container and found a burger and fries. That was incredibly thoughtful and sweet of Ryker to think of me and want to feed me. The burger was delicious, and I wondered if he cooked it himself or if he had a team of cooks. Then, I wondered what his bar was like. It was getting late, and although I was tired, I was also curious, and admittedly, I wanted to see Ryker. I owed him an apology. I was just a jumbled-up mess, and I took my frustrations out on him. I couldn't imagine waiting centuries for someone and it not being everything you hoped for.

I fixed my hair and makeup, and I felt done up for the first time since I'd been here. Perusing myself in the mirror one final time, I wondered what the hell I was doing. Talk about mixed messages. I straightened my hair, which, in itself, was a small feat considering the humidity. It had taken me several outfits before I finally decided on what worked. I chose a short white jean skirt that was probably long on someone not as tall as me, a black dressy tank with tiny white flowers embroidered at the neckline, and black sandals that I loved because they were both comfortable and cute. I rarely wore heels because of my height. It occurred to me that Ryker was tall enough that I could easily get away with heels. I found a black handbag to store my dagger and medallion in, then slipped on my Rosi ring with some silver and gold bangles and a long dangly necklace. I was a firm believer that jewelry made an outfit. I'd have to get used to accessorizing my Rosi ring.

I went back and forth on whether I should walk or drive. I was going to a bar, but I could always leave my car and come back to get it. I know they said there was little crime here, but knowing werewolves and vamps were close by didn't make me feel warm and fuzzy about walking.

Gah, I couldn't believe I was doing this. I was going to a bar called The Wolf's Den to see my wolf. *My wolf?* I'd done it again. Once was a slip-up. Now I thought of him as my wolf more than once, and I needed to admit that to myself. Even if all of this was a lot to comprehend, I was beginning to accept that the two of us were tied together. The thought scared me, but knowing that there was something special about me, even if I didn't know what that something else was, constantly reminded me that we were all different.

I made the short drive to the bar. Hairs prickled the back of my neck, causing me to feel like I was being followed, but I quickly forgot about it as I pulled into the packed bar's parking lot. I was surprised by how many cars were in the lot. It was definitely crowded compared to the first night I ran past. Stepping out of my car, I heard a howl in the distance. I was for sure in the right place.

Reece sprinted towards me. "Thank God you're here. I was on watch duty and left for two seconds to use the bathroom."

"Did you just run here?"

Ignoring my obvious question, Reece eyed me, "Holy shit. My brother is going to lose his mind when he sees you."

"Is it too much?"

He chuckled and didn't answer. "Hey, what's that supposed to mean? And why were you watching me?"

"He's trying to give you space, but that doesn't mean he would leave you unprotected."

"Why would I need protection?" Besides the paranormal stuff, I thought.

"Elle, you've passed out how many times?"

"Good point," I mumbled as we walked past several men on our way into the bar. A man carding at the door took one look at me and said, "Damn, Reece."

Reece hissed, "She's Ryk's. Mind your manners."

I took in what I could, considering how many people were here. The first thing that stood out to me was the amount of PDA going on. I wasn't a prude, but almost everywhere I looked, people were groping each other in some way. It wasn't an orgy or anything nefarious. It was just that I could see multiple people making out, and it was not a PG session either. "Why's it so busy?" I shouted at Reece over the noise.

"You don't have to scream, excellent hearing and all."

"Right," I mumbled.

"There's a band playing tonight. They haven't started yet, but they always draw a crowd."

"What?" I called. He might have super hearing, but I didn't.

"Sorry. I forgot you're human. Band tonight!" He said louder. I got a few stares, and I wondered how many people here were humans or were they all wolves? Was I human? God, even asking myself that made me question my sanity.

We reached the bar through the throngs of people, and the breath left my lungs. I was frozen, staring at Ryker, unaware how much my body missed him until I saw him again. He had a white t-shirt on with a Wolf's Den logo on the pocket and jeans with a dish towel tucked into his back pocket. He looked good. He always looked good. Jesus, it hadn't been that long since I'd seen him, and I felt like I was setting eyes on him for the first time. He was pouring a drink into a shot glass. The way the muscles on his thick arms moved made me want to hop over the bar and forget the rest of the crowded bar existed.

Who was I around him?

His eyes connected with mine, but I had no doubt he knew I was here from the moment I walked in. I watched as his nose flared the slightest

amount and his eyes darkened just a tad. Could he smell me in this crowded room over all the other smells?

He tilted his head at his brother, silently saying something. Reece led me to the side of the bar then lifted a small section of it. "Go behind the bar with Ryk. I'm off duty," Reece said.

I walked behind the bar, and Ryker was handing someone cash. He turned and took me in. I felt his eyes trail over every inch of me. When that happened, the strangest thing occurred, the volume in the bar quieted to a degree, and a bunch of eyes turned to me. It seemed I wasn't the only one who felt it. My guess was that those who didn't look my way weren't wolves, which answered my question about humans being here.

Ryker approached me, and without saying anything, he ran the tip of his nose up my cheek. It was oddly affectionate. I placed my hand on his back while he did this, and my entire body wanted to press into him. Damn, it was hard to just be around him and not want to tear his clothes off.

"Hi," I finally said as he moved his face away from mine.

He studied me, and it was unnerving. Then, he grabbed a piece of my hair. "Your hair looks nice. You look pretty."

I blushed. That simple compliment made me suddenly feel shy. I was never shy. I looked away from him. He grabbed my chin. "I've given you space all day, Ariel. Kiss me, sweets."

I was relieved that he wasn't mad at me and pleased that he wanted me to kiss him. I couldn't deny him, and I didn't really care that there were still a ton of people watching us. With him this close to me, I needed to kiss him, so I did. I took a step closer and pressed up at the same time he bent low, and our lips touched. His lips were like a drug. Euphoria washed over me, and all I wanted to do was let him consume me.

"Hey, can I get a drink, Ryk?" Someone hollered.

We broke our kiss, and Ryker glared at the average-sized man. A taller, dark-haired man next to him bumped him with his shoulder and glared at him. My guess was that the man who interrupted us was human, and the man who bumped him was not.

"Shelby called off. I'm slammed tonight."

"You need a hand? I'd be happy to help you, but you'll need to split the tips with me, seeing as I sent an email telling a certain employer that I could no longer work for them."

"You did?" He asked, pulling himself closer to me. So close, I could feel his growing erection. His hands pressed against my ass, and I was close to whimpering over how good he felt.

"I did. I think there's a lot we need to talk about, but I didn't think you'd be so busy."

"Fuck, if Mindy wasn't singing tonight, I'd shut this place down so I could talk with you. I'm half-tempted to do it anyway."

"No, don't!" I shouted. "Mindy sings?"

"Yeah, she sings. She didn't tell you?"

"No, I had no idea."

Ryker swiped his hand along my back, then released me, taking a step back. "Gods, I'm going to be hard all night working beside you."

"So you're going to let me help you? Awesome."

Ryker chuckled and ignored a few people who were irately trying to get his attention to get a drink. "It can get kind of messy back here. Let me get you an employee shirt, and you can change in my office."

I was excited. I might've come here to have a talk and sort myself out, but I always wanted to be like Tom Cruise in *Cocktail* and flip some bottles around. I wondered if he'd let me try it. He dug through a cabinet at the other end of the bar. He pulled out a shirt, handed it to me, and nodded to the office door off the bar before he put a finger up to the patron who wanted a drink.

He followed me inside the office.

"I'm trying really hard to control my wolf. Do not let any men get near you. There are humans in this crowd, and they all know me. Kissing me right away was good. They'll know we're together, but this is going to be hard on me, so can you please help me, so I don't lose my shit?"

He was being patient and explaining to me what he needed instead of ordering it. It was a change from this morning when he almost ate his brother. He was really trying, and there was something endearing about his effort. I didn't know what it was like to be a wolf, but I could sympathize with him.

"Yeah, I can do that."

"Thank you," he said, then a low rumble emanated from him, "You look so fucking good, Ariel. All night long, I'll be thinking about what it will be like to have those red lips wrapped around me and how tight it is when I'm buried inside of you. Maybe the fates aren't against me. Maybe they know that working for the most precious thing in the entire world makes it worth it

even more. Christ, Gods help me, you're worth it." At that, he left, closing me in his office.

I couldn't believe that he had just said that. His words both turned me on and melted my heart. This big, beautiful man thought I was precious. That meant something to me.

I perused his office and noticed a storage room filled with liquor bottles off to the side. Another door was open, and I could see the edges of a pedestal sink. It must be a bathroom. His desk was a bit messy, and I had to stop myself from organizing it. Beside it, there was a small loveseat, and on the ground next to that was a safe.

I cleared a small space to set my purse down on the desk and quickly changed shirts. The navy-colored Wolf's Den tee was on the longer side, so I tied it in a knot at the side.

Ryker grinned at me as I stepped out of the office, and I could've sworn that I heard a low hum of approval coming from him, which was odd considering the noise level had picked back up.

"I've never tended bar. What do you need me to do?"

"Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked again.

I nodded excitedly.

He chuckled.

"I'm cash only. I don't do tabs, and I don't take cards. Domestic beers like Buds and Millers are three dollars. Corona and Labatt are four. Tall drafts are four. Liquor varies. I'll help you figure that out as we go. Mostly, it'd help if you backed me up. You could grab bottles and help with getting glasses cleared from the bar. I have a sink here with soapy water, and we wash as we go. The kitchen closed ten minutes ago, so you won't need to worry about anyone ordering any food."

"Got it."

"You do, don't you? Why are you helping me?"

I shrugged, then nodded at a patron who needed something. "Let's do this!"

"WOW, SHE'S REALLY GOOD," I told Ryker something he clearly already knew. His arms were around me, and he gently rocked us back and forth. No one was looking for drinks because the entire bar was entranced by Mindy,

Grey, and a few other people on stage that were only okay compared to the duo.

"She's got more talent than our small town, that's for sure. She'll never leave here, though, but I bet she'd make it huge if she wanted to."

Mindy, who was always so cheerful, had this soulful quality to her voice when she sang. She stopped singing, and she said into the mic, "That's it for me, folks. And remember..." The entire bar said it with her as if they'd said it dozens of times, "You don't have to go home, but you can't stay here."

I smiled. "We did it," I said, looking up at Ryker.

"You were a great help, thanks." His arms squeezed around me. The bar started to empty out, and Mindy made it to us. She'd seen me earlier and hugged me. It was so strange the way the people here reacted to me. It felt like I fit like some piece of a puzzle that no one knew was missing.

"You were amazing!"

"Thanks, I'm pooped. Can you grab me a water, Ryker? Also, proud of you for keeping your cool. When I saw her here, I was afraid we'd all be dead by the end of the night."

"I'm not a savage, Mins, but it appears that my wolf is on the same page and is learning to live with his possessiveness. You really were great tonight," he said, handing her water.

"She was," Grey agreed, approaching. He wrapped his arm around her and kissed her temple.

"You weren't so bad either," I told Grey.

"Meh, guitarists are a dime a dozen."

Mindy slapped his arm. "You are not. I'd be nowhere near as good without you, and you know it. First, your voice harmonizes with mine in a way that no one else's could, and second, do not sell your guitar skills short."

"She's right," I agreed. "I'm from Seattle. Do you know how many live bands I've seen? Heck, you can't even go to Pike Place without running into half a dozen or so just begging to be heard." This wasn't one hundred percent true; I knew plenty who were there for the acoustics.

"Really?" Grey asked like he didn't hear this all the time, which considering how good he was, I had no idea how he couldn't know it.

"Seriously, you're good. But the two of you together, the way your voices blend and complement each other. I'm a fan."

Mindy beamed at the compliment. Ryker wiped the bartop down. A few of his waitresses sat at the bar in front of him and started to count their tips.

"How'd you do?" Mindy asked me.

"I think Ryker would agree that I was an asset."

Mindy chuckled, "I bet." She yawned, then added, "I'm exhausted."

It wasn't until she said she was tired did I yawn. I suppose I was pretty pooped as well. It had been a long day. I couldn't believe I was still standing once I thought about it.

Ryker, being Ryker, noticed. "Ariel, you're dead on your feet. Why don't you sit down in the office and relax? I'll be done soon. I have a cleaning crew coming in tonight to do the rest."

It was on the tip of my tongue to correct him and tell him to call me Elle, but I was starting to think it was useless. No matter how many times I corrected him, he never changed. Instead, I said, "I can just drive home and..."

Ryker cut me off with a low snarl.

I narrowed my eyes on him, then another yawn snuck out, and I decided he was right. I was done. I chose not to argue with him and moved to the office. As I passed him, he pulled me close and did that odd thing where his nose trailed up the side of my face, then let me go.

The small sofa beckoned me as I walked into the office, and I sat down for about a minute before I fell asleep. I wasn't really sure, though, because I was that tired.

"SHH, I GOT YOU."

My eyes snapped open. Ryker was carrying me. No one I'd ever dated would've been able to pick me up. I was taller than most women I knew, and I wasn't a beanpole.

"What are you doing?"

"Shh, we're almost inside."

I looked around and saw that we were in the hallway to my apartment. How in the world could he have moved me without me waking up already? I had no idea.

"My purse! Did you grab my purse?" I squirmed.

He set me on my feet and opened the door, then handed me my purse.

I grabbed it from him and wasn't surprised when he looked through his keys, found the correct key for my apartment, and unlocked the door. He followed me inside and closed the door behind us.

I was exhausted, but I didn't think Ryker and I could let any more time pass before we spoke.

"I came to the bar tonight to talk to you."

"I know. I'm sorry about how slammed we were. You did amazing back there. You may have found your calling."

I rolled my eyes. "I was your backup. Really, you did all the work," I said on another yawn.

"Seriously, you were a huge help tonight. I appreciate it. I liked working beside you, but right now, you're exhausted. Why don't we sleep? We can talk tomorrow."

I shook my head. "I don't think we should wait." I dug into my purse and took out the medallion, and handed it to Ryker. "Do you know what this is? Have you ever seen this before?" He took the medallion from me and looked it over, flipping it around and examining it.

"No, but it's cloaked in magic. Is this what those books are about?" He asked, nodding his head toward the stack of library books.

"Yes, so much has been happening that I need to tell you about." I yawned again.

Ryker watched this and stalked towards me, then swooped me up in his arms again.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing is going to happen from two in the morning until tomorrow. You need sleep. Come on, Ariel." He walked us into my bedroom and laid me down, so my head was on the pillow. I was exhausted. I didn't argue when I felt him slip my sandals from my feet, nor did I argue as he told me to lift my hips so he could help me take my skirt off. The way he took care of me was nice. It had been so long since anyone looked after me. I didn't think anything of it when he took his shirt off and laid in bed beside me, holding me close to him. I was nearly completely asleep when I heard Ryker whisper, "You're the most beloved person in the world to me. I vow never to let anything happen to you and to always put your needs first. I understand this all must be a lot for you, and I'll do what I can to keep my wolf in check. I'm changing in ways that are new to me, too. We'll talk more about that tomorrow, as well. Tonight, sleep. Tomorrow will be a new day."

I wanted to think about his words, but I couldn't. I was too exhausted, and before I knew it, I was fast asleep.

"Ariel."

Only slightly registered my name being called, and that was because this felt too good. The pleasure... I needed more. I felt his hard length against my sex. "Yes," I said, grinding my hips forward.

"Ariel," My name was said like a whip, and I jerked in surprise, reality slamming into me. I was in my room, and dawn was approaching. That wasn't what was alarming. What alarmed me was that I was on top of Ryker, shirt off, and grinding him. I froze, mortified.

"One heck of a dream you were having, huh?"

I tried to scramble off of him, but he grabbed my thighs.

"What are you doing?" I hissed.

He chuckled. "I was sleeping, and when I woke up, you were on top of me. So maybe I should ask you that question. What are you doing, Ariel?"

I huffed, "Well, I'm not sleeping *now*! So, let me get off."

"Oh, I intend to." He pushed up slightly, and his hard length pressed into my clit.

I stared down at his broad, expansive chest. I wanted to be mad at him, which wasn't fair. I was the one who was on top of him.

"We can't. What if I..." I didn't want to say pass out again, but what had been happening to me was scary, and make no mistake, my body craved him, but I feared what would happen.

"It's only happened when I climaxed inside of you. I should be able to take care of you, though. Yeah?"

His large hands moved up my thighs, and I nodded feverishly. I thought about all the other times he touched me, knowing he spoke the truth. As long as he wasn't inside of me when he came, I should be okay.

I nodded, giving my consent.

"Kiss me," he demanded.

I kissed him—hard. And even though it had only been a day since I'd kissed him like this, I felt starved. The softness of his lips mixed with his facial hair, the way his hands ran up my skin, and the calluses on his palms; he was all man! The unique blend of hardness and softness was the balance I'd always wanted, always needed, but perhaps never acknowledged before to myself.

He thrust his hips and, although there was clothing keeping our bodies from joining. The movement gave me the friction I so desperately needed. I

broke the kiss so I could kiss his jaw, then his neck. His hands continued to roam over me like he needed to feel every inch of me.

He thrust again, harder this time to our already rocking bodies. I moaned in pleasure, so he did it again.

"Let me feel my dick against your heat."

I looked into his eyes, wondering if he had that kind of self-restraint. I lifted my hips, and he pulled down my underwear and helped me free myself from them without losing too much contact. Next, I pulled down his black boxer briefs, licking my lips at his thick shaft. "Yes," I said breathlessly.

"Hungry for me, Honey?"

I didn't respond because I was more than hungry for him. I was insatiable.

We moved against one another, never letting him slip inside. I wanted him to, boy did I ever. Our bodies touching invigorated me. We slid against one another, and with how worked up I'd apparently been in my sleep, it didn't take long for me to come apart.

Ryker held me, then I used my hand on him.

When we finished, the sun hadn't even fully risen yet. "That wasn't enough," Ryker sighed, tucking me into his side, "but it'll have to do."

I knew what he meant.

"Want to make coffee, and I'll clean up, then we can talk, or do you need more sleep?"

"I'll make coffee."

He nodded, then released his hold on me and moved to the bathroom. I lay there, not wanting to move. Life had been moving in the strangest directions, but somehow, I truly felt like Ryker, besides being my orgasm-inducing Motorcycle Dick Werewolf was beginning to feel like he could be a partner, truly someone I could confide in. When he wasn't being bossy, okay even when he sort of was, in a totally Alpha bad boy way, I liked him, which made me feel like a jerk for how I acted yesterday. Even though last night went well, I knew that I owed him an apology when we talked today.

On that thought, I grabbed a robe, and moved to the kitchen, and brewed a pot of coffee.

I SAT ON THE OPPOSITE end of the couch from Ryker and had a light blanket draped over our laps. I needed space from him if I was going to get

this story out. His nearness turned me into a wanton teenager with one thing on my mind.

"Anytime, Ariel."

"Why do you call me that when I continuously tell you, I go by Elle?"

"You're an Ariel, that's why. Your given name is beautiful." His eyes gentled. "You're beautiful. Ariel suits you. Elle is nice, but it's simple. You're a heck of a lot more complex than Elle."

"I don't know how to respond to that."

"Then don't. Tell me what you need to tell me so I can figure out how I need to protect you."

I began to tell him I didn't need protection, but truthfully, I needed help. I couldn't figure out the riddle my life was on my own.

"Alright, I'm not really sure where to start, so I suppose I'll start at the first thing that has happened since I've been here. That night you found me in the shower. I was dreaming. I was on a battlefield, and I swear you were there. You were different, but it was you. I don't know. It's confusing. You know how dreams aren't as clear after they've happened and time passes. That's sort of how it feels. I do remember there was a guy who skeeved me out with red eyes."

I watched Ryker's body language change from being relaxed to completely wired and on alert. I could physically feel his energy, and I knew my dream upset him.

"When we were at the lake, and I dove into the water, and you told me magic was real, I thought you were insane, but then in the water, something happened."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm trusting you with this, something tells me I can, but something also tells me that we need to hold this information close." I took a sip of my coffee, needing Ryker to agree not to tell anyone.

"Ariel, I know you don't understand mates or the ways of the wolf, but you are my fated mate. The Gods gave you to me, fated us to be. I will never betray you. My loyalty will always lie with you."

I don't know why, but his words made the back of my throat burn, and tears threatened to fall. I wasn't a crier, not really. But this vow of loyalty from him made me feel cared for and not alone. Since my dad died, and honestly, with him gone for work, maybe it had been longer than that, I was

alone, and Ryker made me feel like that wasn't the case any longer. I could fall in love with this man.

He noticed the change in my emotions and stroked my calf under the blanket. It wasn't sexual. It was comforting, urging me to continue.

"Okay, so the water and my memory... that was fuzzy at the time too, but it's getting clearer. There was a blue light-no not a light, a flame. And I know this is going to sound crazy, but there was a voice that told me I was the keeper of it, as was my father and his father, and I needed to take it. So, I grabbed hold of the flame, and I felt it everywhere. It was as if it invaded every inch of my body. Then I woke up and ran... Well, you saw what happened after that. When I had that panic attack, I saw a memory of my dad and Father Archibald, and I knew I needed to read the letter."

"What letter?"

I stood and retrieved the letter, then handed it to Ryker. "Dad left it for me. I've never opened it. I guess somehow I felt like if I did, I would be letting go of the last thing I had between us, and I wasn't ready to do that."

"You went through all of that alone?"

"Yeah, I was alone," I said, taking my spot on the couch again. "I was in Seattle. I had friends. It wasn't like I was a recluse or anything."

"That's not what I mean. You opened the letter by yourself. It caused you pain, Ariel, and you were alone. You shouldn't have been alone. I wanted to give you space, but if I had known you were going through something so monumental, I never would've left you. I'm sorry."

"Whoa, hold on there, Big Guy. I needed that space. There is nothing to apologize for. Go on, read the letter."

"I need to touch you."

I raised an eyebrow because it didn't really seem like the appropriate time.

"Not like that. It calms me. I'm navigating the mate thing just like you are. It's all new to me. Any type of pain you feel, whether it's physical or mental pain, affects me. It's my duty as your mate, your pack leader, your wolf, and your man to make sure all of your needs are being met."

"That's a lot on your shoulders. You can't shield me from things. I'm going to feel them. I get to have a reaction, and it's normal too."

"But if I can ease the pain of something even a little, I need to try." He grabbed my calf again and stroked it. "Tell me my skin against yours doesn't affect you. Tell me it doesn't calm you."

I nodded. There went that tight feeling in the back of my throat again.
"Read the letter."

I watched him as he poured over dad's words. He took his time, taking it all in.

"So, the library today?"

"I was researching the Rosi. I need to know everything about them. I emailed Father Archibald because the information I found online was as vague as dad's letter. I feel like the letter says a lot, and at the same time, says nothing. What does he mean, mythical and divine? Divine as in God? Angels? It's a lot."

"Did Father Archibald respond? What do you know about him?"

I went over my dream with Ryker and what little I could remember about Father Archibald. It had been years since I saw him last.

"I know you want to keep this between us, but I want you to think about letting the council know. The more eyes on this, the better. We can figure it out together."

"The council?"

"Yeah, sorry. That's everyone you've met: Mindy, Micah, Reece, Grey. Plus, my dad is the historian."

"They seem so young. That's your council?"

"How old do you think Mindy is?"

"She's in her early twenties."

"She's one hundred ninety-two. Which you're right, they are young for wolves standards, but they've all had interesting lives. They're good at what they do. The speed my wolves have is incredible, and the way we work together... Even my old man says he's never seen a pack work quite so well together."

"I thought all of the wolves were a pack?"

He sighed, "We are, it's just I'm the Alpha, and they are all part of my council. Think of them as the elite. Look, all I'm saying is you can trust them."

"I'll think about it."

"Can I see your medallion and dagger?"

I reached over on the coffee table, grabbed my bag, and handed him the dagger. He flipped it over, studying it. "This looks like a script of some kind."

"Yes, it's on my ring too." I went to take off my ring to hand it to him, but he shook his head. "Keep it on."

"You have a pretty big stack of books over there. Do you want help combing through them?"

"Thanks, I'd like that."

We looked through the books for hours, and finally, after finding nothing, I slammed the book I was paging through shut. "Everything I see just makes them seem like a non-religion."

Ryker raised his eyebrow up at me, silently asking what the hell I was talking about.

"I mean, just because you say you're not a religion doesn't mean you're not. They still have an organization. They still have a set of values and core things they believe or don't. They believe in 'The Divine.' Just because the place where they meet doesn't have a steeple..."

Ryker put his hand on my knee. "I get it. Maybe it's not that simple, though. Maybe it's more like a culture?"

"I don't know. What I do know is reading through these books is beginning to feel useless. It's a lot of the same stuff."

"Something else has been niggling at the back of my mind." Ryker's hand stroked my calf, and I realized that since we woke up, there wasn't a time that we weren't touching in some way. It felt completely natural. "It can't be a coincidence that the Valderes hired you and got you here. I never thought I'd be grateful to them for anything, but if they hadn't, how in the world would I have met you?" He shook his head. "All I'm saying is, there is no way they would hire an assistant from Seattle to come to Ohio. I'm sure that position doesn't require a ton of skill. Sorry, babe."

"No worries. I get what you're saying, and I've wondered the same thing. Let's hope Father Archibald gets back to me. How about we shower and go check my email at the library?"

"We can shower," he said suggestively.

I was about to protest when he stood, scooped me up, and threw me over his shoulder. "What are you doing?" I giggled. I actually giggled! "Put me down."

"Not when I know you'll be naked and wet in a few seconds." Then, he slapped my ass!

I laughed at his caveman antics as he brought me to the bathroom and set me upright. He turned on the water to let it warm then ordered, "Take off your clothes, Ariel."

"ANY RESPONSE?" RYKER'S hot breath against my neck made goosebumps rise on my skin. What on God's Earth was he doing to me? I felt like a walking turned-on sex bomb, waiting to go off at the slightest touch. I wondered if it would always be this way. Granted, our shower this morning was just fooling around, and don't get me wrong, he could set me off, but it was like my body physically needed him inside of me. I was beginning to feel like a junkie whose craving was just out of reach.

We were in the library, researching. A day had passed since I told Ryker everything I'd been holding back, and he'd helped me research.

I clicked the mouse, checking my spam folder just in case. "Nope, nothing."

"How about we check back later? I have someone I want you to meet."

I logged out of my email and ended my session on the library's computer.

"Have you ever been on a motorcycle before?" Ryker asked.

"Not only have I been on one, but I have my endorsement."

"No shit? You know how to ride?"

"There's a lot you don't know about me yet."

"Mysterious, I like it. How about today you sit behind me on my bike, and if you want, I'll work on finding you a bike to ride?"

"Really? You don't need to do that. I have money. I can buy my own bike."

"It's not easy for you to let someone take care of you, is it?"

"Whoa, hang on." I had no idea how we got from A to B in this conversation.

"Shh. You're in a library. What's the matter with the two of you carrying on like you're not supposed to be quiet?"

Ryker chuckled, "Sorry, Mrs. Longwood. We're just leaving."

The robust, older woman, wearing an oversized tee that read *Books are badass*, harrumphed and walked away, but not before giving us the stink eye.

Ryker's accusations that I struggled to let people care for me were quickly forgotten as we left the library. We walked home, which kind of felt weird saying, but Ryker lived there too. Instead of us going inside, he led me through the parking lot and to a large barn that I strangely hadn't given any attention to until this point.

It was a large, weathered grey barn with double doors that had to be at least fifteen feet tall. "How old is this?" I asked, curiosity getting the best of

me. Something about super old barns was both spooky and beautiful at the same time.

Ryker tugged on a handle of one of the doors, and it easily slid open. "I think it's a little over a hundred years old." Ryker slid the other side open, and I followed him in.

"What are we doing here?" It was getting dark, and I couldn't really see what anything was.

Ryker moved about and eventually located the light switch as the space suddenly lit up. "The seat I have on my bike isn't good for passengers. I want to change out the seat, so it's more comfortable for you. It shouldn't take long."

He walked away, and I had a chance to take in everything. Well, not everything, as I could probably spend all day here. This, I could now tell, was where Ryker built furniture. There was a beautiful, large, dark-colored wooden wardrobe with roses etched into it. I ran my fingers over the roses then went to look at a piece that was in its rough form. It appeared to be the start of a table, but I wasn't quite sure. There were large tools and saws in the room; huge workbenches that had to be at least ten feet long were in the center of the room.

Along the walls, I could see each furniture piece stacked alongside one another. I felt a spark of excitement. It wasn't like I just walked into a dusty old barn with a bunch of old furniture. No, it felt more like I was stepping into an artist's workshop. I swooned a little, thinking about Ryker building all these pieces.

All too soon, Ryker walked back to me, carrying a seat and a couple of wrenches. "You ready?"

"No, I mean, yes."

"Which is it?" he chuckled.

"This is amazing. I can't believe you built all of this, and own a bar, and manage an apartment complex."

He laughed, "Don't forget, the pack leader."

"God, how do you do it all?" I asked with a little bit of amazement. Sometimes, I had a hard time completing one task, and here he was juggling so much.

"Easy, Ariel, I ask for help if I need it."

Score one for Ryker.

I gave him a look that said 'har, har,' then I followed him as he made his way outside. "Your work really is beautiful. I could spend a day in there looking at it."

"Have at it. A few pieces are commissioned, but other than that, if you see anything you want, it's yours."

"Really? Why would you do that?"

"You really don't get how this mate thing works do you? There's not a thing in the entire world I wouldn't do for you. Anything that is mine is yours. Anything you desire, I'll make happen. I've spent lifetimes waiting for you. My heart, my soul, it was yours before you were even conceived. I know you don't grasp the depth of what I'd do for you. I know it frightens you. But you should know, I'd lay the world at your feet, just to see you smile. So, anything you want is yours."

My jaw opened, but no words came out. What could I possibly say to that? It was the biggest declaration I'd ever heard. I wanted to cry. I wanted to hug him, and at the same time, I wanted to run because what he said felt so big. How in the world could I ever live up to that!

He saw the fear cross my features and shook his head. I wasn't ready to hear those words, and we both knew it. He grabbed my hand, and gave me a reassuring squeeze, indicating he understood he freaked me out, then we walked to his bike.

Surprisingly, it only took him a few minutes to switch out the seat. "I'll be right back," he said and moved to the barn to put his other seat away. I stood there and thought about Ryker teasing me with playful slaps to my bottom. Then I thought about his words... *He'd lay the world at my feet*. I tried to push those aside because they made my heart do funny things. One thing I was learning was how many layers there were to this man. I'd initially misjudged his attitude. He was so much more than anything I'd thought, and I liked him. Why I kept reminding myself of the fact, I had no idea. I think that perhaps I was trying to adapt to the idea of us. Maybe this mate thing wouldn't be so bad?

"Ready?" he asked, handing me a helmet. I was so lost in my thoughts I hadn't heard him return.

"Yeah. Where are we going again?"

"I never told you." He started the bike, drowning me out, and I fixed the helmet to my head. He climbed on the bike, and I got on behind him. We drove for a few miles and were quickly outside of town, driving on the road

surrounded by farmland. I was comfortable behind Ryker's muscular frame. I held onto him and wondered where in the world we could be headed. He turned down a side street, driving much slower as dirt kicked up around us.

Finally, we pulled up to a small old white house. He turned his bike off, and we got off. I took off the helmet and looked around. There wasn't much to see. The house needed a paint job, and frankly, it looked like no one was home. I didn't see a car in the drive. There was an old barn off to the side, but I wasn't even sure it was safe to enter.

"Where are we again?" I asked, knowing he should've answered me already.

"I didn't want you to freak out, but we're at my dad's."

"Your dad's?"

"I told you, he's our historian."

"It doesn't look like anyone is home."

"He's here. I can smell him."

"What are you going to tell him... about me? About us?"

"What do you want me to tell him about you? As for us, he'll know you're my fated mate. The bonding smell has begun."

"Smell? What are you talking about?" I lifted my arm and smelled my armpits. I didn't think I smelled.

Chuckling at my antics, Ryker pulled me close to his side. "Everything has a scent. Every person, every object. You smell like roses and rain with a sweet undercurrent, but the more we are together, the more both of our scents are changing. There's a spiciness mixed in with your scent now, and I have some of your sweetness."

"Wow, that's..." I shook my head, unable to find words.

"Before I introduce you. What do you want me to tell him about everything that's happening?"

"I want to keep the Rosi and the light to ourselves."

"He's old and wiser than most. He might know what your ring means."

I was about to respond when the door opened, and a man just a bit shorter than Ryker and a tad older but definitely resembling him walked out.

"Are you going to stand here all day gabbing, or are you going to introduce an old man to his future daughter-in-law?"

Whoa, future daughter-in-law.

"You're freaking her out, dad. This is Ariel. Ariel, this is my dad, Brogan."

Brogan walked with heavy footfalls down his creaky porch toward us. I wasn't prepared for the impact of his body against mine when he hugged me. It was tight while his broad chest and wide arms enveloped me.

Ryker emitted a low rumble from his chest, and I saw a smirk form on Brogan's face and noticed he was thicker but shorter than Ryker. He didn't look much older than Ryker, but something about how he carried himself made me instantly think he was.

He released me, after ignoring Ryker's growl, and slapped Ryker on the back, "It's about damn time, Son. And look at her; she's a real beauty."

"Dad," he snapped because I was embarrassed. I wondered if my cheeks were pink; I certainly felt like they were.

He grabbed a strand of my hair, "Look at all this hair. Son, you're in trouble."

"Dad!"

I nervously giggled.

Ryker, seemingly wanting to get down to business, asked, "Have you ever heard of a human and a wolf being fated mates?"

His dad took a step back and said more seriously, "First, she's clearly not human. I don't know what she is, but she reeks of magic. And secondly, I've heard of mates, yes, but fated... not that I know of. It doesn't mean it hasn't happened. It's just that I haven't heard of it."

"What about cubs? Have you heard of how my seed will affect her?"

Hold the front door! Cubs? We just met. I liked the guy and all, but I wasn't trying to grow a small puppy in my womb.

I coughed, and if I'd been drinking anything, I was sure I would've choked on it. I wasn't ready to be a parent. Sure, I wasn't even thirty. For many women my age, their biological clock went tick-tock, but for me, I wanted time to get to know the man I would be forever linked with before we had a child. I mean, how many marriages ended in divorce? And cubs?

"Relax, we just need to know what he knows," Ryker attempted to reassure me, but it did little to ease my fears.

Brogan raised an eyebrow at me, then continued like I wasn't the spectacle I felt like. "There have been several instances where cubs have successfully been born from such a union, but I must warn you, there have also been many losses. But, I do not think the Gods would fate the two of you if it was their intention to not give you the joy of offspring."

I was beyond embarrassed. "I can't believe you brought me here to talk about knocking me up," I hissed. Maybe this was normal for him, but it certainly wasn't for me.

Ryker ignored me, "Twice now when I was inside of her and came, she blacked out."

Brogan grinned and looked at his son with a triumphant smirk.

I wanted to die!

"Not like that. Hours on end, not sure if she was going to wake up, passed out. It's the scariest thing I've ever experienced. Ever heard of anything like that happening?"

Brogan seemed to stand up a little taller, and his carefree demeanor seemed to change. "No, nothing like that. Where are my manners? Your mom

would have skinned me alive for not asking already. Do you want a beer? Pop? Water? How about you come inside, and we talk?"

"That'd be good, Dad."

Ryker grabbed my hand, and we followed Brogan inside the house. It was modest, with the exception of several stunning pieces of furniture that were most likely crafted by Ryker. There was something slightly different about the craftsmanship, but it was still equally as beautiful. His living room was dark, with the curtains drawn and only a small side table light switched on. The space looked masculine, and it made me wonder what happened to Ryker's mom and how long ago. Something told me that she never lived here. Now was not the time to ask him about it, though. He guided me to the sofa, which was surprisingly comfortable as we sank into the soft leather.

A small white cat popped out from under the sofa and purred around my legs. "Oh, look at this pretty kitty," I said, picking her up and petting her behind her ear. Her eyes were blue, and I wasn't sure if I'd ever seen such a pretty little kitty.

Brogan grabbed a few beers from the kitchen, set them down on the coffee table in front of us, then grabbed a chair from his dining room table and sat it across from us.

"When did you get a cat?" Ryker asked.

"She found me. Just showed up here one day. Skittish thing. I've never seen her come out like that. It took me two months before she ever let me hold her. You have a gift, Ariel."

"Elle, call me, Elle."

"Elle, it looks like she likes you." The kitty snuggled onto my lap and hissed when Ryker tried to touch her, making me grin.

Ryker grabbed a beer and opened it taking a long swig. "Ariel is in Ohio because the Valderes offered her a job." At the mention of the Valderes, Brogan let out a snarl. The kitty curled into me.

"That can't be a coincidence," Brogan said, low and deadly.

"No, it can't. There are other things too that have come to light, but Ariel isn't comfortable sharing that yet."

"What's your connection to them? Have you ever met any of them before? What about your parents, do they know them?" Brogan asked, firing question after question.

I felt the familiar pinch in my chest at the mention of my parents. "My mom left when I was a baby, and my dad passed away last year."

Brogan sat back and sighed, "I'm sorry." I watched as his eyes grew soft. "We lost my wife years ago, but it still feels like it was only yesterday. It's why I live out here by myself. I like the quiet. I like feeling like she's with me. I hate getting the sad eyes from the rest of the pack all of the time. I don't need sympathy. What I need is something I'll never get back.

"My wife, we were fated like the two of you. Mary wasn't only my wife; she was my world. When she died, I lost a part of myself. It's not uncommon either. You should know that with having a fated mate if something happens to him, you'll never love again."

"Dad," Ryker said sympathetically.

"I'm just saying. Being out here is good. I get to feel however I need to feel without all the watchful eyes. I don't need sympathy. What I need is something I'll never get back."

I could tell Ryker wanted to go to him, and it pained Ryker to hear his dad talk about how empty he felt.

Brogan put his hand up, "No, Son. You should know what it's like—the pain of losing your fated mate."

"I'm sorry, I didn't think bringing her here would bring mom up for you."

Brogan laughed, "So much to learn. She's always on my mind. Don't be that arrogant. It's always like this for me, and I can't wait for the day that the fates finally decide I can join her."

It was then as if sensing Brogan needed some affection, the kitty jumped off my lap and hopped on to Brogan's. At first, he didn't touch her, then after several attempts from the kitty pushing her head under his hand, he finally pet her.

Good girl, I thought. And I swear, no lie, that the kitty looked at me and blinked at my thought. It was the strangest thing.

"What do you know about your mother?"

"Truthfully, not a whole lot."

"I've known the Valderes a long time. If your mother just up and disappeared, then they asked you to work for them some years later, that's no coincidence. Since your father has passed, knowing them, it must have something to do with your mother. And your smell... it's so unusual. Did your parents hold magic?"

"I..." I began to answer when Ryker cut me off.

"I don't know what she is. She's so human, and yet she can't be. She ran the other day, and it was faster than any human I've ever seen."

"I'm betting the Valderes know who your mother is and know what you are."

"Hold up. If you think they know my mother, do you think there is a chance she could be here? With them? I mean, I worked there. I'd have known, right? What if she was in one of the rooms or the basement. What if they've been feeding off her? Oh, God. I have to go back there. I have to know."

"Abso-fucking-lutely not," Ryker sneered.

"Hear me out."

"No, because going anywhere near them is not up for discussion."

"Why? If they wanted to kill me, couldn't they have just sent someone to Seattle to find me? Wouldn't that have been easier than paying me a sign-on bonus to relocate here? I don't think their intention was to harm me. Well, Lillian is up for debate, I'm not sure about that one, but Alfonzo is nice. Maybe he knows something. If my mother is involved, then I want to know. Don't you think it's better for us, for me, to know what we're in for? Why I'm here?"

"Not if it puts your life at risk. You see what losing a mate has done to my father. Would you wish that on me?"

I snapped my mouth shut as frustration filled my thoughts. We were so new. I liked him. He was the best everything I'd ever had. Here he was talking about being fated to each other and essentially not being able to live without one another and whether I could carry cubs.

On top of that, he thought he could decide what I could and couldn't do? I'd already given up my job. Now he thought he could tell me I couldn't look into whether all of this had to do with my mom. She could be alive, and I could get answers to questions I've wondered about my entire life.

I couldn't help the slight squint of my eyes while I thought, and Ryker, unfortunately, noticed.

"I'm serious, Ariel. They're dangerous."

"Maybe so, but Ryker, you don't own me. You barely even know me. How would you feel if you had a chance to see your mom after all those years, and someone you barely know told you no?"

"There's a huge difference. My mom didn't choose to leave me."

That was the wrong thing to say. "You're a real dick, you know that?" I stood. I was so over this. So much for trying to win me over. I began to walk towards the door.

"Where are you going?" Ryker asked.

Ignoring Ryker, I looked at Brogan, "It was nice meeting you. I'm sorry, but your son's a real jerk, and I'm leaving."

"Ariel, wait," Ryker pleaded. But I was done! He thought I was fast. Well, I was going to show him how fast I was. Screw him. I opened the door and didn't think much about where I was going. I just ran.

"Dammit, Ariel," I heard Ryker yell, but it was distant as I pushed my legs to move faster and faster. Maybe running was rash, but I was pissed.

What the heck was that! I didn't need that kind of attitude from him.

My mind fumed while my chest burned from the exertion. I ignored it and ran harder. In the distance, I heard a howl, but Ryker wasn't going to catch me, not today!

Trees blurred by as I ran at full speed, and it hit me that this wasn't natural. I shouldn't be moving this fast.

I quickly approached the Valdere Estate, and I had no idea how I got here so quickly. From what I could tell, I was on the backside of the property. I couldn't see the entryway. What I saw were large brick pillars with wrought iron panels that were about ten feet wide. The closer I got, the closer I noticed that the landscapers didn't put any less energy on the backside of the property. It was all so meticulous. I stopped running and marveled that I wasn't out of breath.

I walked along the wall, taking it all in. Could my mother have walked along the other side of this fence? Could she be somewhere in there and see me?

"Hey," A voice startled me. I looked around and spotted a man who appeared to be in his early twenties sitting against a tree on the other side of the fence. He had shaggy blond hair that hung over his face. He shrugged his head backward and ran his hand through it to move it away from his eyes. He wore a t-shirt and jeans. He looked like an average guy with a medium build. I wondered how deceiving looks were. Could he be a vampire?

On that thought, I consciously took a step back. Ryker had ticked me off and all, but did I really mean to run to the exact place he was so adamantly afraid for me to be? Still, what if they knew something about my mother?

"You're not going to say hi back?" he asked. "I'll make it easy for you. You're Ariel, and I'm Gabriel, but you can call me Gabe."

He spoke so casually to me that it made it harder to fear him. "Hi Gabe, you can call me Elle."

"Sup, Elle."

"Uh, hi." I gave a small wave. I was weary. How he knew exactly who I was, made me uneasy. "Of course I know who you are. Everyone does."

How in the world did he know what I was thinking?

Before I had a chance to question him, he said, "Your boyfriend is coming. You better get him out of here before all hell breaks loose. He's not supposed to be anywhere near here. Then again, they weren't supposed to show up at his house the other day either, so I guess that makes them even."

He stood, and I was surprised at how tall he was. There was a familiarity about him that didn't put me on edge, though, and I soon realized that I wasn't afraid of him.

I thought if Ryker was about to be here, I only had a second to ask any questions I had. "If you know who I am, can you tell me why the Valderes wanted me to work for them?"

He smiled. "Now's a bad time for all those questions swirling around in that head of yours, but I'll find you, and we can talk." I blinked because, in the next second, he was gone. It wasn't like he disappeared. It was like he was fast, faster than I was, that's for sure. He was just gone. The exchange happened so quickly, I had to wonder if I imagined it all.

I heard a growl behind me, and I turned to see Ryker in his wolf form. Damn, he was a beautiful wolf, but I could tell by his growl he was pissed at me. "Don't you take that tone with me," I hissed, "You were a jerk!"

He showed me his teeth, then walked to my side and bent low, indicating that he wanted me to mount him. I looked back towards the estate and knew that I didn't want Ryker to end up in a fight with the Valderes, so I did what he obviously wanted, I climbed on his back.

His fur was soft, and I bent forward and held onto him around his neck. There was something magical about being on his back. He wasn't running as fast as he could. It was almost like a trot that he was enjoying. I don't know how I could tell, but it was almost like the further away from the Valderes we got, the less tension he seemed to carry in his gait.

After a few minutes, he became playful, jumping over things unnecessarily. We walked through a clearing, then came to a forest. It wasn't the same way I'd come, obviously, but Ryker was familiar with the landscape. The trees were close together, and it didn't seem like there was a path. We came to gigantic boulders, and he moved swiftly, jumping over them before we came to a familiar cave. We walked through it like we did before. This

time, I knew what was on the other side. Light shone through once we got to the opening, and I couldn't help but think of him inside of me here.

He bent low, helping me dismount, and I wasn't as shocked this time around when he changed shape. It was still an unusual sight to see, but I was not as taken aback as before.

"You ran right to them," he roared. Yes, roared. All right, I must've taken his wolf's behavior wrong. Maybe he wasn't playful.

"I didn't mean to! And maybe I wouldn't have run if you weren't a J-E-R-K jerk!" I was so mad. I poked him in his chest, then I blinked, realizing he was naked in front of me again, and there swung his massive dong! Shit, I shouldn't have looked. Gah! Would this attraction to him ever end? Could I ever not want him? Logically I was so ticked, but my body was betraying me.

"Eyes up here," Ryker smirked, knowing exactly where my head was at. He let out a puff of air, making his nostrils flare, and I saw his wolf in his eyes.

"I think I like him better."

"Who?"

"Your wolf, at least he doesn't say asinine things."

"You know I'm him, right? I just think differently, more instinctually, when I'm him. And what I wanted to tell you today is that being around you seems to be putting more of my human thoughts in my head when I'm in my wolf form."

I ignored him and let him have it. "Im really struggling with my feelings right now. You don't know why my mom left me. Maybe it wasn't a choice? But I won't know unless I find answers."

"Gods." He took a step back and ran a hand through his beard, then looked up to the sky as if asking the heavens for answers. I watched as he blew out a breath and said, "I'm sorry if that seemed harsh. I didn't mean it to be. My problem is that if it does have something to do with your mother and the Valderes. If she is working with them, then she could have had a part in my own mother's death, for all I know. It's not only that we hate them, Ariel; it's that they're the reason my mother is dead."

I felt like I'd been struck, but not by him, by the knowledge that my own mother could be involved with vampires who hurt good people, or werewolves, erm, whatever.

"Wait, that doesn't make sense. Your mother died fifty years ago. My mom was born in the late sixties."

"Unless that's not true, and your mom is where you get your non-human abilities from. You're nearly as fast as a bloodsucker."

"I don't drink blood," I gasped at the allegation and felt frustrated all over again because he didn't know my mom. He was throwing around accusations like he had it all figured out.

"I know that. Look, all I'm trying to tell you is we don't know enough about anything right now, and you can't walk into Valderes and just expect to get answers. Please trust that I'm trying to look out for you, and it scares the ever-loving daylights out of me that you ran directly towards my mother's killers."

I closed my eyes. How would I feel if roles were reversed? I thought about that question, and, drats, I think I ran a little too preemptively.

I sighed, "I should've talked with you. I shouldn't have run. It's just that it hurt my feelings, and I needed space. Brogan must think the worst of me." I was messing things up.

"Come here," Ryker demanded.

I took a step closer to him, and he wrapped his arms around me, providing comfort. "You know what we need?" he asked into the top of my head. Since he was naked, I could feel what he needed, but I didn't want my body to respond. I looked up at him questioningly.

"Not that, but I can smell what's on your mind, and I like it," he grinned. "We need time to get to know each other. To really talk, just the two of us. Let's close ourselves in at the farmhouse and spend time together. Nothing else. No outside world. No talk of the Valderes, just us. What do you say?"

I didn't really have to think about it. If I was fated to Ryker, I'd like for us to move past this fighting and learn more about one another. I didn't want to spend my time with him fighting. I needed answers about what was happening, but he was right. If we were going to work, we needed to spend time together away from all this craziness.

I nodded my head.

Ryker took a step back, "All right then. I'll shift back and bring us to the farm unless you want to run with my wolf. Do you think you can keep up with him?"

It felt like a challenge, and I liked the idea of running beside him. "Wait, does it hurt?" I had to ask.

"Does what hurt?"

"Shifting, or changing, or whatever you call it."

"Shifting is fine. When I was younger, it was uncomfortable, now it's just something I do. Although, I have to admit, being around you feels like it is getting increasingly easier. It's so odd how so many parts of my wolf seem to feel more natural around you."

"Wow," I responded.

"So, what is it? Are you running with me or riding me?"

Mmm, the idea of riding him was so tempting, but... "I'm running," I blurted.

"Let's go!" He turned away from me and changed so quickly I barely caught it, and I swore he was grinning at me in his wolf form. He howled, and it echoed off the boulders, then he took off running, and I sprinted right behind him.

I was out of breath. I was fast, but I quickly learned I was not fast for long distances, and his farmhouse must've been some distance away.

I got a cramp in my side and stopped running to catch my breath. Ryker didn't notice at first, too lost in the chase. I didn't see him, so I thought I would give that whole voices-in-our-head thing a try. I'd only tried it the one time he was about to eat his brother, so why not. "*Ryker!*" I shouted in my head. "*I need a break.*"

"*I'm coming,*" I heard back in my head, and that was so weird. I suddenly wondered if he could hear my thoughts. I wasn't sure if I liked that. I'd have to ask him when he was human, and he couldn't lie to me. My thought process told me I didn't fully trust him. Maybe spending time together would get us there. I had a feeling it was more about me than it was about him, anyway.

His wolf racing toward me took me from my thoughts. "*Get on,*" he ordered in my head as he bent low for me to mount him.

I climbed on his back, and I wrapped my arms around his neck. God, I loved how soft his fur was. It was different when he was in wolf form. It was like he could do no wrong. He raced toward his farm, and I felt free. All my thoughts and worries drifted away.

We made it to the farm and passed by several of his pack members in human form, who smiled and waved at us. We came to his porch, and he told me again in my head to wait there. I watched with fascination as he hit a latch on his front door that made it swing open, and he moved into his house. With nothing to do while I waited, I looked around and noticed the mare in the field a few houses away, and next to her was the foal! I couldn't wait to see her baby, and I wondered if she would let me get anywhere near it. Its tiny legs wobbled with uncertainty as it searched for a teat. It was beautiful.

So lost in the beauty, I didn't hear Ryker's approach. "She gave birth yesterday morning. Do you want to see it? It's a colt."

Turning to face him, I was stunned to see him dressed and in human form. He did that so fast! Then, I realized he asked me a question, and I thought about how the mom reacted. "Maybe I'll give its momma some time. She reacted protectively around me, and I don't want to cause her or her colt any stress."

Ryker must've liked my answer because his smile was warm and genuine. He grabbed my hand and linked our fingers. "We rushed out of here so quickly before. Let me show you around?" My stomach rumbled.

"You're starving?"

"How about a quick tour, then we eat something, sound good?"

I nodded as he led me up his porch and inside. I'd seen it before but hadn't noticed the small details, like the picture in the foyer. It was of a beautiful woman with long raven hair. The photo was black and white, but there was no denying that Brogan stood next to her.

"Your mom was beautiful."

He squeezed my hand in response. We walked past a beautiful entry table that I had no doubt Ryker built, then he showed me his living room that had a comfortable-looking grey velvet couch. There was a built-in bookshelf on either side of a beautiful stone fireplace. Across the room, there was a large wooden cabinet that, if I had to guess, housed a television, but then again, maybe not, considering Ryker's lack of TV knowledge. It was also beautiful craftsmanship, and I couldn't stop myself from walking over to it and running my fingers along the carved wolves etched into the wood. "It's so detailed," I whispered.

"You really do like my work, don't you?" he asked from behind me as he wrapped his arms around me.

I nodded. Ryker let me go and continued to show me his home. It was bigger than I initially thought, with four bedrooms and an attic that could be finished into a great space one day. It was a family home, sans the family, but I could tell it was meant to be that one day. Ryker explained that he built the home a little less than a century ago—a century! That just boggled my mind every time I thought about it.

Once finished with the tour, we moved to the kitchen. It was large but outdated. Still, it was clean, and the oak cabinets looked sturdy against the 1980s countertops. The appliances were newer, looking like they were replaced in the last ten years. The home was lovely. I thought it could use a woman's touch, but it pleased me that it didn't have one. I could tell no other woman had ever tried to make this hers, and I got the strangest satisfaction from that. I sat at the large kitchen table, which was also Ryker's handy work, and my stomach grumbled again.

"Do you cook?" he asked.

I laughed, "I can make a mean sandwich, but give me a flame... an oven... shit even a microwave, I can mess it up.

Ryker looked at me like I was crazy. Whatever, he'd learn.

He opened the fridge, grabbed a couple of steaks, unwrapped them, and set them on a butcher block. "Any desire to learn?" he asked. I shook my head. It was much too nice to watch him in the kitchen, and I'd had people try to teach me over the years, but I was no good at it.

"Do you like mushrooms?" he asked, foregoing the conversation about my lack of culinary skills.

"I sure do. I can clean if that's any consolation. If you have mushrooms, I can wash them and help you clean as we go, does that work?"

He gifted me with a huge grin, then answered, "Works for me."

I washed mushrooms then potatoes while he chopped and did other things on the stove. I was baffled when he stuck the steaks in the bottom part of the oven. I thought only pots and pans were supposed to go there. When I told him this, he laughed, and once he got his hilarity under control, he explained it was a broiler.

Dinner was amazing. Ryker and I talked throughout. Nothing too heavy, mainly just the basics of getting to know one another. He was forthright with the information he gave me. If I asked, he answered, and he didn't shy away from telling me whatever I wanted to know. With his age, I was sure I could talk with him forever. He had so much to share, so many stories to tell. He lived through nearly every monumental experience our country experienced, and by the time dinner was over and the sun long since set, I'd barely scratched the surface.

"I can't believe some of the things you've lived through."

He grabbed my hand and held it. How soft he could be with me contrasted with his hard exterior. "You're so young compared to me. I know that all of this may seem sudden to you and overwhelming. This is all brand new for you, I get that. I hope this feels as natural to you as it does to me. Logically I understand if it takes you longer to get used to the idea of it all, but my heart wants it all right now." He looked shy for a second, and I found his vulnerability endearing. "I have faith that it will all work out because we're fated for a reason, but I also understand that even the concept of fate might seem extreme to you. I'll do my best to be patient and if I'm an ass, call me on my bullshit. I can take it. There's not a single part of you that I won't be able to handle."

I squeezed his hand in response. I didn't feel like I needed words. He was reassuring me, and somehow, he knew that was exactly what I needed.

I stood from the table to wash our plates, and Ryker grabbed my hand. "Leave it. We'll get it in the morning."

Then, I was in his arms, and he was bounding up the stairs.

"What are you doing?" I giggled, unused to someone manhandling me so easily.

"We've had a great night. Now I want to lay down with my mate and kiss every inch of her."

The mate thing still sounded unreal to me.

"But..."

"I know, the whole passing out thing. We'll make it work."

"You know, when you're not being a jerk, I kinda like you."

Ryker laughed, and his deep rumble shook his chest. "You know, when you're not being a pain in my ass, I kind of like you, too."

We reached the bedroom, and Ryker threw, yes threw, me on the bed. I did a small bounce then harrumphed when he landed on top of me, caging me in on either side. His lips playfully nipped at mine. I moved in to kiss him harder, but he retreated, only giving me a little.

"I couldn't have dreamed up a more perfect version of you. Please stop running from me. I'm going to mess up. You probably are too, but we can work through anything, just as long as we're together."

My heart softened, and I melted into him. Honestly, how could I not? He kissed me again, and it became more heated, then he broke his lips from mine and proceeded to kiss me all over.

When it was just the two of us, everything about how he made me feel lit me up inside in a way that I'd never felt before. He could be sweet, and patient, and forgiving. He could be a jerk, but I had to admit, I liked that he also wasn't a pushover. He talked dirty. Telling me how good it would feel to be buried inside of me. How good it was to taste me. By the time he'd thoroughly kissed my body, I was hungry for him. Ravished.

"What if I'm meant to pass out? What if the fates need us to connect that way? We've both gotten stronger. Besides sleeping and a bit of pain—" Okay, a lot of pain, but I wasn't about to remind him of that. "—I've gotten faster, and we've started to communicate when you're in wolf form. What if it's meant to be?"

His head came up from a kiss along my hip bone. "That may be true, but what if it does more than make you pass out? No, I can't risk it. I can make you come. We can even have sex, but I shouldn't come inside of you."

"I don't like losing you," I admitted. "I know I push you away. I know I'm more unsure about everything than you are. But when you're inside of me, it's the only thing that feels completely right, and you pulling out feels like it goes against everything. I can live through pain, but I need you. No more kisses. You're driving me mad. No more light touches. I get you want to seduce me... Consider my ass primed and ready to go, but if you take me, take all of me."

He came up and studied my eyes. His wolf blazed to the surface behind his. It didn't scare me, and truthfully, I had no idea why it felt so important that he came inside of me; it just did. Him kissing me, him pulling out, all of it felt like a drug that was being withheld. I needed him.

"You truly feel that way?"

I looked him in the eyes and ran my hands up his thick corded shoulders, wondering how, just weeks ago, I was living a pretty dull life in Seattle. I had no idea that this kind of passion could even exist.

"I ache for you."

His lips crashed down on mine, no longer soft and tempting, and I felt his body shift on mine. His thick length pressed against my center, and I grabbed him and guided him in. We both stilled dopy high off of the connection, then completely caught off guard; I had an orgasm. All it took was for him to enter me, and my walls spasmed so hard against him.

"Gods, yes. You feel so good." He groaned out, picking up his pace. He pinched my nipple, and I had no idea I would like it. His hand held me loosely at my throat, and my God, how that made me spasm too. Pretty much every way he touched me had me coming undone.

He looked at me with awe. "You light up for me, no matter how I touch you."

"It's because it's you."

He slammed into me, and I couldn't help it, something primal in me made me bite his shoulder, and I don't know why, but he turned his head and did the same to my other side. It sparked a fire in me, setting me off. He pumped even harder, then he was coming. The moment I felt it, my mouth broke from his skin.

"Yes," I cried out, contentment and pleasure washing through me. It seemed like a never-ending rush. I felt stronger, more energized and I wanted more.

Somehow, with a speed and strength, I'd never possessed, I flipped him over and rode him. I could tell he was caught off guard by the way his body locked.

I paid no mind to it. It was about him and me, connected. I needed it, and I needed more.

I rode him.

I bit him.

I scratched my nails down his back.

I was wild, nearly feral.

He came again and again, and I didn't let up.

"Ariel," he called. It sounded far off. I needed to fuck him. "Ariel," he grabbed my legs, trying to slow my movements. I batted his hand away. I had to have him.

More. I needed more.

I rocked back and forth fervently. I had no other thought than my need to make him orgasm again.

"Ariel," he yelled again, and the strangest thing happened. He began to change. I lost him inside of me, and I fought to get him back, but he was strong and fast, then he was a wolf pinning me down and snarling at me.

I blinked in surprise, seeming to come to, unsure of what just happened.

I scrambled back on the bed, and even in his wolf form, I could see the scratches and smears of red along his coat.

"Oh, God. What have I done?"

I RAN FOR THE BATHROOM and locked myself in. What did I do? Who was that back there? It certainly didn't feel like me. I felt possessed.

I looked at myself in the mirror and gasped when I saw my blue eyes.

I splashed water on my face, trying to wash it away, thinking maybe I was seeing things. Realizing I was trembling, I suddenly felt like I was in shock. I had no idea who that was fucking Ryker, but it didn't feel like me. Sure, it was my body, but I felt possessed.

"Ariel, baby, open the door?" I heard Ryker say.

I flipped the lock as if on autopilot. I wasn't sure that it was even my own hand opening the door. I felt disconnected. He pulled me tight into his arms, and I saw red welts along his skin.

"Ariel, honey, look at me."

I shook my head, keeping my eyes averted. He couldn't see my eyes.
"You're shaking. Did I scare you? Are you all right?"

Did he scare me? Was he crazy? I was the nympho with blue eyes.
I shook my head again, unable to find words.

I clung to him. I had no idea what was happening to me or who that woman was in there, but I didn't like it. I felt out of control. I could've hurt Ryker. Clinging to him was the wrong move, and I instantly felt my body react as wetness pulled between my legs.

"No, step back," I said, releasing him. I had to protect him from me.

"What's happening? Tell me!" he demanded, losing his patience.

"I... you... gah!" I was at a loss for words.

"Talk to me."

I shook my head. This wouldn't work, not with him naked.

"G—get some clothes on."

He looked down at his jutting erection, which then made me look down at it, too. My mouth immediately watered, and I had to physically grab ahold of the vanity to refrain from pouncing on him. He saw my struggle, put up his hands placatingly, and backed out of the bathroom.

A cold shower would perhaps cool off this raging libido of mine. I turned the water on and shrieked when I stepped under the cold spray.

"Ariel! Is everything okay?" Ryker asked from the other side of the door.

"Just cold water. I'm fine. I need a few minutes."

I was so proud of myself for getting those words to form.

In the corner of the tub were the products I typically used in brand-new containers. I had no idea how they had gotten them here. I mean, Prime was fast, but how in the heck did Ryker know I would be showering here? I shook off the weirdness of it and was just pleased to wash my hair even though the water was cold. It was refreshing after everything we'd just done.

The longer I did the mundane task of washing my hair, the more I could feel myself relaxing. I turned the water from the freezing setting to a warmer temp. I wasn't ready for hot water yet. I was too afraid of how my body would react to the heat, which made no real sense to me. Still, I was almost done with rinsing my conditioner, and I wished that there was a razor in here for me to shave, too. I suppose I was only delaying coming out of the bathroom. Still, I had no idea how I would react to Ryker, and I felt like I needed to delay the inevitable.

Eventually, I came out of the bathroom to find Ryker sitting on the edge of the bed, concern laced his features. "You're okay?"

"I'm okay. I'm tired. That was..." I let my thoughts trail off because I had no idea what to say. Intense wasn't a strong enough word for the nympho-beast I became. "I'm tired. Can we sleep?"

He studied me, seemingly unsure if he should push a discussion.

Then, he pulled back the blankets, "Yeah, Honey. Let's sleep."

I walked to him and got into the bed. He hooked me around the waist and pulled me into him. His warmth enveloped me.

"We'll talk tomorrow about what happened, yeah?"

"Okay," I whispered, even though I had no idea what I would say to him.

I lay in the darkness of the room, surrounded by his warmth, and his words crashed over me.

"I couldn't have dreamed up a more perfect version of you. Please stop running from me. I'm going to mess up. You probably are too, but we can work through anything together, just as long as we're together."

There was a knock on the door, "Babe, I need you to hurry up in there. A car's coming down the drive, and I don't recognize the smell."
That wasn't weird sounding at all.

I was in the bathroom doing my business after what turned out to be a good night's rest. I decided to shower again because I went to bed with wet hair and one look at it told me it was freakishly insane.

I squeezed the last amount of water from my hair and turned off the water, then grabbed a towel for my hair and another for my body. A quick glance in the mirror told me my eyes had returned to normal. Ryker stood outside of the door, fully dressed—thank God. "There are clothes on the bed. Stay upstairs and away from the windows until I know who it is and if they mean us any harm."

"You're freaking me out."

"I'm sure it's nothing. When I get back, we'll talk about your freak out last night and why you rushed in here as soon as you opened your eyes."

I did not want to talk about my "freak out," hence why I rushed in here as soon as I opened my eyes. I cracked open the door and saw that he was gone.

I quickly got dressed and heard the front door open. Odd that I could hear that from up here. I swore I could also hear a car door outside, along with the scuffle of feet against the ground. That was impossible, though. I shouldn't be able to hear all those things. Maybe I was losing my mind.

Peeking through the curtains, I saw a car that I didn't recognize. Not that I knew everyone's vehicles around here. I pretty much only knew those giant black SUVs the Valderes drove and the truck that Grey drove. This was a small, red sedan. I heard muffled voices, and curiosity got the best out of me, so I silently pushed open the bedroom door to see if I could hear anything.

"She's here. I know she's here. I need to speak with her. It's of the most urgent of matters."

I knew that voice. Without waiting another second, I rushed down the stairs. "Father Archibald!" I cried, attempting to throw myself into him and give him a hug. I was halted when Ryker moved to block me, circling his arm around my waist and depositing me another few feet back.

"What part of 'stay upstairs,' did you not understand?"

"The part where I've known him my entire life, and I know he isn't going to harm me. Now, move, you big oaf."

Father Archibald chuckled. "I see you haven't lost your charm, sweet Elle."

I took this time to look over Father Archibald. He was dressed as a typical priest in all black with a patch of white at his throat. He did have short sleeves, which were slightly different from the long sleeves I was used to him wearing. He was a little balder and what little hair he did have was whiter. He'd aged since my dad's funeral.

"How did you know she was here?" Ryker asked, still not allowing me to go to him.

"I went by the place in town she told me she was at, and luck be told, I met a young man who said he was with Elle when she emailed me and explained that I could find her here."

"Reece," Ryker sneered.

"Ryker, please let him in. He is my dad's oldest friend."

"I read the letter. I know who he is."

"Then you should relax."

"Where you're concerned, I don't think I'll ever relax."

His words soothed me, and I felt a primal need to wrap my arms around him and melt into him.

"Elle, your eyes. Oh, dear. How did this happen? We must depart at once. There is so much you need to learn. I told your father there was a possibility, but did he believe me? No. Not him, not his angel. He thought the surgery would be enough to prevent it. I doubted it, but then he found this text and all that pain, and it's happening anyway. We must go. Time is of the essence."

Ryker snarled beside me, and it was only then I saw genuine fear wash over Father Archibald's face. I knew that even without his wolf form, danger emanated from him, the kind that said I'll destroy you if you say another word.

"Um, Elle, darling. Maybe you should step away from him," he said, his voice quivering as he did so.

"She'll be doing no such thing," Ryker growled, and I swear the windows in the house shook slightly as he did.

"Calm down, everyone. Father, this is Ryker. Ryker and I are together. Ryker would not hurt me. I contacted you because there are a lot of things I have questions about, like who are the Rosi? Please, can you come in? And Ryker, please, stop giving off 'I'm going to eat you' vibes?"

It wasn't like me to use please so often, and it really wasn't like me to try and act as a peacekeeper, but Father Archibald was one comment away from being lunch.

"I... I don't know. Maybe this was a mistake. Elle, are you sure you can't just come with me so that we can have a talk?"

I placed my hand on Ryker's chest to stop him from saying anything. "I trust him with my life," I told Father Archibald. "You will be safe here. It's a good place to talk. Ryker is just protective."

He nodded his head once, accepting my invitation to come in.

I glared at Ryker to move and let him in. He didn't move immediately, so I elbowed him in the rib. He gritted his teeth, saying, "Fine," and finally, moved aside.

We walked into the living room, and I did my best to try and act like a typical hostess. "Can I offer you something to drink, Father?"

"Yes, dear. A glass of water would be nice."

Father Archibald took a seat, and Ryker stood against the wall with his arms crossed, staring at Father Archibald.

"Relax," I said, kissing him on his cheek. "He's the closest thing I have to family."

"No, that would be me, mate, but I'll let that one slide."

I grabbed a few glasses of water and took that second to get a grip on myself. Ryker was acting over the top alpha male, and I'd just acted like a nymphomaniac. Maybe we were even? I don't know, does frantically fucking someone's brains out to the point where you draw blood and are no longer yourself trump dick-ism?

Walking back into the living room, I noticed not much had changed. The air in the room felt so thick, I could cut it.

"So, Ryker, do you want to sit down and chill out or leave?"

"It's my house."

"Oh yeah, what about anything that's mine is yours, huh?"

He let out a large puff of air and sat on the couch. I sat next to him, and I didn't miss how Ryker possessively placed his arm on the back of the sofa.

"Like I said in the email, my dad left me a note. There was a lot that he said that didn't quite make sense. I'm asking you to be totally honest with me here, and I've known you my entire life, so I'm hoping nothing has changed with our relationship. Do you know what's happening to me?"

"Yes and no. You mentioned the Rosi. What did he tell you about them?"

"That I come from a line of an ancient sect of Rosi, whose purpose is to protect the divine."

I watched as Father Archibald shoved his hand through the few remaining strands of hair he had left.

"This is true. You are a Rosi. Not just any Rosi. Your line of the Rosi is special. You may have great challenges ahead, and there is much for you to know. But now, with the two of you, as you are, I fear that the time is already upon us. You will not have the time to train, for I can see no other reason that you would be placed with such a monster unless it is your duty to destroy him."

I shot out of my seat quicker than humanly possible, unsheathed my father's dagger, and held it to Father Archibald's throat.

"You do not come into my home and seek harm against my mate." Shit, double shit, fuck. That didn't even sound like me.

"Did you say mate?" he asked as if he wasn't afraid of me at all. I pressed my blade closer to his throat, and I saw the smallest amount of blood pool against the blade.

"Elle, let me explain. I would never hurt him, but until you said mate, I feared that you would."

"Explain," Ryker ordered.

He wheezed, "It would be easier, Elle, if you would lower the knife."

I felt a hand on my shoulder, "Elle, put down the blade."

Realization of what I'd just done dawned on me, and I dropped the blade. It clanked against the wooden floors, and I wanted to run. I wasn't this violent, crazed woman. "I'm... I'm sorry," I said, embarrassed and ashamed. "I don't know why I did that."

My eyes searched for the best way out of the room and to the door. I needed to get out of there. That overwhelming fear of the unknown was resurfacing, and I wasn't sure I wanted to be a part of it. First, last night I became sex-crazed, and now today, holding a blade and drawing blood on a priest! Shame coursed through me, and I glanced at the door, wondering if I could flee faster than Ryker could restrain me.

Ryker placed his hands on my shoulders. "Oh, no, you don't. You look ready to bolt. It's okay. Something is happening to us, and this man might be the only answer we get. I was wrong to react the way I did when he got here. We need to hear what he has to say. Let's sit back down and do it. I promise I won't let you draw a blade again unless it's absolutely necessary. Trust me."

I momentarily closed my eyes, trying to calm my nerves. "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me."

"I do," Father Archibald said, then motioned to the sofa, "Please, Elle, let's chat."

I turned into Ryker's arms and hugged him. Since when did I seek comfort from him? Maybe I'd begun to feel closer to him than I wanted to admit.

After a few long moments of contentment in Ryker's arms, he released me, picked up my dagger, handed it to me, then led us to the couch.

The father didn't wait for me to prompt him this time. Instead, he finally started to give me some answers.

"The Rosi, as you may have already learned, are a seeker of truths, but your line is different. It's part of an ancient sect."

"Yep, got that part from the letter."

"Your father tried to keep this from you because, from what I understood, he believed there was something different about your mother. He questioned if your line of Rosi made you different. In truth, he was shocked that your mother was able to conceive. I didn't understand it at the time, but maybe there is something different about you.

"You must understand what the job of your sect of the Rosi has been over the centuries. Your line was tasked with protecting the Arc of the Covenant. They were in Ancient Egypt during the time of the pharaohs. They've protected things like Celtic ruins and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Your line, in particular, are the protectors of everything that is divine and unnatural. It has also protected humans from the unnatural that would seek to harm them, which is why I commented about Ryker. The way he was acting made me believe he was a threat to you. If a species is a threat to mankind, your kind has been tasked with destroying them."

I met Ryker's eyes, wondering what he thought of all of this, unsure how I felt about all of this. I suppose what he said made sense. However, his earlier words about Ryker sowed a seed of doubt. No one would ever hurt him. I'd make sure of it.

I didn't understand why my thought process was going there, but obviously, something in me felt protective. I tried to shrug that train of thought off because why should I doubt him? My father told me he could help me, and I trusted my dad, always, implicitly.

"How am I different from other Rosi?"

He sighed like this was the heavy part he was dreading.

"Your father only wanted to protect you." I let out a loud puff of air. This stalling was getting old quickly. "I must say, I disagreed with him. I thought there would come a time when you would resent him for what he had done. I believed that delaying your training would only make it harder for you in the long run. You see, up until you, the Katz line only produced male heirs. You were the first, and you were different. It could've been your mother. We didn't know."

"You keep saying I was different. How? How am I different?"

"Elle, those scars on your back," At the mention of my scars, my back stiffened as his voice gentled to remind me of the thing I was most self-conscious about.

Ryker sat forward, looking at me questioningly, "What scars? I've never seen any scars on your back."

"I don't know how you could've missed them, Ryker. They pretty much cover both sides of my back. Big, jagged scars on each side. I know men don't always notice details, but..."

"I can assure you, I've memorized every single inch of your flesh, and there is not a scar on your body."

"What are you talking about? They're right here." I lifted my shirt slightly to show him my scars. He bared his teeth, and I knew it was because some of my back was exposed to Father Archibald. He took a closer look blocking the father's view.

"I'm telling you, there are no scars on your back."

"There are."

"No, Ariel, your flesh is perfect. Not a scratch on you. Why do you think you have scars? What on earth scarred you, and why can't I see them?"

"Come with me to the bathroom real quick. I need to look."

Ryker and I stood while Father Archibald watched us. We walked into the downstairs half bath. It was a tight fit as Ryker closed us in. I stood facing him with my back to the mirror as he lifted my shirt. I hesitated to look over my shoulder. I didn't want to see them. I hated them, but why in God's name could Ryker not see them?

"It's okay, Honey. Look, I'm telling you there is nothing there."

Stealing my nerves, I looked over my shoulder. Ryker was telling the truth; there was nothing there. Tears sprang to my eyes. "Truly you've never seen them? They've been gone this entire time we've been together?"

Ryker wiped my tears with the pads of his thumbs. "It wouldn't matter if they were there. You've seen mine. Scars are just a tale of the past. Tell me what happened."

"I was in an accident."

He nodded his head and dropped my shirt. "Let's go find out if that's what really happened."

I nodded, then asked, "Can you ease up on being all growly?"

"I can't help it. I'm a wolf. It's what we do."

I shrugged it off, and we moved from the bathroom and back to the couch. Ryker, perhaps sensing that I needed him, pulled me onto his lap.

"Are there no longer any scars on your back?" Father Archibald questioned. This time Ryker, perhaps sensing that I needed him, pulled me onto his lap. I didn't even consider moving.

Ryker's chest rumbled, "Did you not hear me? There are no scars."

Father Archibald stuttered, "But that's... that's remarkable."

"Ariel thinks she was in some type of an accident," Ryker announced.

The father cleared his throat. "It wasn't an accident. They were from a surgery." are there no longer any scars on your back?" Father Archibald questioned.

Ryker's chest rumbled, and I could tell he was losing patience, "Did you not hear me the first time? There are no scars. What happened to my mate?" Ryker growled, and I knew if he didn't get answers soon, he would lose it.

Father Archibald tried to regain his composure, "She... she had these bones protruding. It almost looked like wings. The doctors didn't understand what they were. They weren't really attached to anything. Your dad thought that if the Rosi found out, they would want to study you, and they would also take you away to begin training, so he had them removed."

"It sounds like a birth defect. Why lie to me about it?" I asked and a sudden pang of longing coursed through me. It was as if I finally knew I was missing a part of myself, and a familiar pang of sadness coursed through me. Ryker's arms tightened around me. He sensed my longing.

"Once you lost them, you mourned and I never saw anything like it. Your father didn't want you to blame him. He thought you'd hate him. You would have these dreams, and you would wake, screaming. Sometimes you would be feverish. It was a frightening time for your father. I witnessed a spell once, that's what he would call them, and I was terrified for you. Then, one day, they just stopped."

Faint memories lingered in the recess of my mind. Not of my dreams but of the fear my dad felt as he clutched me against him when I'd wake. I remembered that feeling in the past but had just equated it to him holding me after waking from a nightmare.

"Any idea why they stopped?" Ryker asked.

"No, her dad just took it as a blessing from God."

"Did he ever completely figure out what they were?" I asked, needing answers.

"Not conclusively, but he had his suspicions."

"And those would be?" Ryker prompted.

"He never fully shared them with me."

"What did he tell you?" I questioned.

"He woke from a dream one day and knew he wanted to name you Ariel. He felt it prophesied."

"That's not weird at all," I mumbled into Ryker's neck.

Father Archibald gulped. "Here is the part that I have my suspicions about. In the bible, Ariel is an angel of nature. You've always had an affinity towards nature. Do you remember when you and your dad were on a whale tour? He told me he'd never seen so many whales approach. The captain said that never in his lifetime had he experienced something so awe-inspiring. It was as if an entire school surrounded the boat to sing to you."

I remembered it, but I never thought it was something unusual.

"Are you saying that you believe she is angelic?" Ryker questioned.

The father sighed again. "Your father didn't think my suspicions were correct. Or he didn't want to believe it. I don't know. It was just a theory. Other mythical creatures have wings. Maybe she has Fae in her. I'm simply not sure. I just always thought there was a coincidence between her name and her back. Again, I'm not sure your mother's part in what you are either."

I moved away from Ryker and leaned towards the father, asking, "What do you think she was?"

"That, I'm not sure, but there were times when her speed seemed too fast. She would retrieve something and how quickly she returned seemed unnatural. Your father was pulled in by her. He loved her in his own way. And I must admit, he never shared why or how she came to leave, but I saw a change in him after that. His curiosity seemed to dim. He wanted to protect you more from the Rosi lifestyle. He took fewer missions. He devoted his life to raising you."

"How can this be?" Ryker asked.

"Indeed, that is a question. How is she possible? I do not know the answer to that question. I'm a priest, and I was lucky enough to call her father a friend, but I'm not Rosi. If the Rosi knew you existed, they'd want to train you. You should know the ways of the Rosi. I think he feared that whatever your mother made you would turn them against you. But I never knew the Rosi to be dangerous. I think the best course of action would be for her to come with me so I could bring her to the Rosi."

"This is the first thing you have said to me that is not one hundred percent truthful," Ryker said, staring him down, "at least your perception of the truth."

Father Archibald opened his mouth to say something, then snapped his mouth shut again.

"I... That's quite the unique talent."

"She's not going anywhere, but I want your reason as to why you were unsure but still suggested she go."

"You can sense my level of truthfulness?" he stupidly asked.

Ryker emitted a low, unsatisfied with his answer, growl.

"That is remarkable."

"Father," I said, hoping to calm Ryker down and get an answer from him.

"Well, if you're mates."

"Fated mates." Ryker cut him off.

"Fated? Truly? You're a changeling, and she is possibly angelic, or who knows what else? How do you know that you're fated?"

I sighed. I was going to tell him what was happening. It seemed like he was the only person who might be able to help. "I... we've been changing. Not only that, there is an indescribable need, to um, *you know*, and then other things have been happening."

Ryker suddenly spoke in my head. "*Do you think this is wise, mate, to tell him everything?*"

I squinted my eyes at him because this was seriously cool and weird. "*Do you not? It seems he has more answers and knows a heck of a lot more than we do. Plus, you can tell if he's lying.*"

Ryker tilted his head toward me, "*Let me lead. I'll have a better gauge on his truthfulness.*"

"*Okay, this is really weird and really cool, but kind of strange. Can we explore this more later?*" I asked, liking that we could communicate with

each other, and others would have no idea.

The idea of later must've pleased Ryker because an image flashed of me bent over the bed and him pushing into me. "Indeed," he said mischievously.

Father Archibald watched us then asked, "Are you two communicating somehow? It's just you're making odd faces back and forth at one another."

We'd have to work on our poker face, that was for sure.

Ryker ignored that question. "She is fast. Faster than I am in my wolf."

"Ah, a wolf. Interesting. And fast how?"

"So fast, I can barely see her when she moves. She did nearly fifteen miles in a matter of minutes."

I did?

"You must know, I'm the alpha, and so, if she is faster than me, that should tell you a great deal."

"An alpha-wolf. I'd heard about pack orders, but I never knew if any of that was real. This is incredible. Our Elle and an alpha wolf fated by God himself.

"Stop looking at me all star-struck. Is this all beyond you? Should I stop telling you any of this?"

Father Archibald gulped, "I think since you are fated, then perhaps God's purpose was for you to be with each other to unlock your strengths. I cannot say for sure, as I am merely a priest. If you're not willing to go to the Rosi to be trained, might I suggest letting my contact come here? They have more knowledge about this than I do. If there is anyone who can help you, it would be them."

"Thank you, Father. Ariel and I need to think about this. I can trust your discretion until I tell you otherwise?"

In other words, keep your mouth closed, or else.

"Yes, of course. Is there somewhere to stay in town while I wait for you to make your decision?"

"You'll stay with my father."

Father Archibald looked at me questioningly. "He's very nice. Great guy. You'll like him." I hoped.

"Elle, darling. I know this was a lot. I'm happy to see that you've found love. Your father would be pleased. He was always worried about that for you."

I wasn't sure about the love part yet, and exactly how my dad would feel, but the sentiment was nice. "Thank you," I responded, feeling weird that he

thought I was part angel. "It was nice of you to come all this way. I know it was intense, but I want you to know that I appreciate you coming."

"Of course, dear."

"WHAT DID BROGAN SAY?" I asked as we pulled away, leaving Father Archibald with him.

"He's going to talk with him. See what other information he can garner. I don't think the Father will reach out to anyone before we say, but at least now we can keep our eyes on him with someone we trust."

Ryker squeezed my hand reassuringly.

"I don't have a reason not to trust Father Archibald."

"I know that, but until we know everything, I'm not sure we should trust him one-hundred percent either."

"That's fair. Speaking of trust... This whole silently communicating thing, can you hear my thoughts? I can't hear yours. I only hear them if you and I are trying."

"It's the same for me."

"Thank God. I was beginning to worry that whatever thoughts were going through my mind at any given moment, you'd hear. As much as it's cool when it happens, that would certainly be very uncool."

"Uncool indeed."

"I saw a sexy image, though, and that felt like it came from you."

Ryker grinned, "You saw that, did you? I was hoping you would. While we were talking like that, I thought of the image and thought that I wanted you to see it."

"How did you know that I would?"

"It's sort of like that in wolf form. I can think of images and push them towards my pack."

I wanted to try. "*Ryker*," I said in his head.

"*Mate*," he responded in kind.

Hearing him call me mate instantly made me wanton. I called up an image of me riding him while simultaneously biting his neck. Almost unconsciously, I pushed it towards him.

A low rumble came from his chest, and another image came back at me of my nails scraping down his back.

Instead of turning me on, I pulled my hand away, gasping. So much had happened. I forgot that I'd hurt him.

"What is it, Ariel?" he asked out loud.

"I hurt you last night. I don't know what happened when we were fucking. One minute I was me, then I almost felt possessed with my need for you. I'm sorry I drew your blood. It scared me, and I didn't mean to do that. Maybe we do need to cool it on the fucking. I think you were right."

"To hell with that. It was intense, but it was absolutely the best orgasm of my entire fucking life. I loved every second of it. I heal, Ariel. I thought I scared you because my wolf emerged."

"He doesn't scare me. He'd never hurt me. What scares me is that it didn't feel like me. I didn't feel like I was in control."

"When I changed, that scared me. I've never had him come out and merge like that. It was scary, but you're right. Neither my wolf nor I would ever hurt you. Is that important to you—to feel in control?"

"I'm not a control freak or anything, but to feel like things that are happening within my body, my own emotions, and have no control over them is too much. Sometimes, I'm not sure who I am when I'm with you, and that's scary."

He squeezed my hand again. "I have to believe we are who we are meant to be with each other. Don't fight it."

I nodded my head, "I'll try not to."

"We're almost home."

I took his hand squeeze, and the topic change as a signal that we would finish talking about it when we were inside.

He let my hand go as he turned down his road, "I need to feed my woman, then we need to talk about what we're going to do next."

"You've met them all already. I don't know why you're nervous."

I turned my head from the window to look at Ryker. "Really, you have no idea why I would be nervous to tell your council everything? I'm different, Ryker. We don't even know exactly what I am."

"I know that you're my mate. That's all that matters. Remember, we decided to tell them because they can help. You have to start to trust the pack. Like me, they will always take care of you."

I sighed. We'd been over everything at least a dozen times. I still thought their reaction wouldn't be as clear-cut as Ryker seemed to think. "Ryk, how exactly do you think I should tell them? It's unbelievable and what you all are is unbelievable, so I really think I'm an anomaly. Let's see how this would go... 'Hey, I know you're a werewolf and all, but guess what? I might've had wings, and who knows what else. So, trump that, bitches.'"

I heard a gasp behind me. "They're standing right there, aren't they?"

Ryker nodded his head.

I slapped my hand to my forehead. "Kill me now."

"Hey," It was Mindy. "You okay?" She put her hand on my shoulder, and I turned to look at her.

"Having a little bit of a freakout is all."

"If you didn't think all of this was weird, I would think something was off about you. I mean, from never knowing werewolves existed... to wings? You had wings? That's a lot."

Reece, Grey, and Micah shuffled in behind Mindy.

"Sup," Reece called.

"Explain about the wing thing," Micah said, grabbing a chair from the dining room table and flipping it around to straddle it.

"It smells like pancakes in here. Did you make pancakes without us? I'm starved." Grey looked longingly towards the kitchen.

"You're always hungry. I swear, Ryk, it's like he's going through a growth spurt."

Grey grinned, "She's not wrong." I watched, and my face gentled as he tucked Mindy into his side.

"Bar's covered," Reece told Ryker.

Ryker nodded, then led me to the couch and tucked me to his side. I'm not sure what it was about this gesture, but it felt so reassuring that I stretched up and touched my lips to his.

"Whoa, did you guys feel that?" Micah asked.

Mindy cocked her head to the side and studied me curiously.

"I felt it," Reece said.

"Felt what?" I questioned. They were all looney if you asked me.

"Bear with me, babe." Ryker leaned down and kissed me. It was nothing like the quick peck I just gave him. This was a full-on tongue, make my panties wet, kiss. I felt myself react, and our audience faded away. I reached my hand up to run my fingers through his hair. I felt that overwhelming need beginning to burn through me, and I didn't care who watched us. I needed him.

Want.

Need.

Those words began playing in my head all over again. I felt single-focused, and I was losing control.

"Holy shitballs," I heard Mindy say. It broke my concentration, and I tore my lips away.

Mortified, I wanted to dart upstairs and hide.

"Dude, check out her eyes," Reece said.

"Mins, you ever see anything like that?" Grey asked.

"Never."

"Forget seeing. Have you guys ever felt anything like that?" Micah asked.

"Cool it," Ryker ordered, then looked at me. "You okay? Your eyes are doing that thing."

"Oh, God." I placed the palms of my hands over my eyes and tried to scoot away from Ryker.

"Hey, it's okay." Ryker grabbed my knee and gave it a squeeze. "There's nothing to be embarrassed about here. They're family."

I understood his words, but I didn't feel them. They didn't feel like family to me. My mother was supposed to be family, and she left me, and who knows what... what species she even was. My dad died. And that was it. The sum of my family. I barely knew the people in this room.

"Ariel, look at me," Ryker commanded. There was a firmness in his voice that was hard to ignore. "It might not feel like it yet, that's okay, but I trust them with my life, and I trust them with yours. So even if you don't think of them like family yet, I can promise you, one day you will. Please trust me when I tell you there is no judgment from anyone here. We've all had so much time together, and it's new to you. There is not a single person in the room who would fault you for your feelings."

"He's right. We just want to help. When you two were kissing, it almost was like a surge of energy that went through all of us? I think your connection is making him stronger, and since he is the leader of our pack, it somehow makes all of us stronger. So trust me, there will be no judgment," Mindy said.

"You're like a power booster. I feel amazing," Reece added.

"And hungrier," Grey chuckled, then added, "Mindy is right. There is no judgment, and we are actually pretty good at figuring things out. There's a lot of old brainpower here, so why don't we get some food, start at the beginning, and go from there."

"Who are you calling old?" Micah asked, lightening the mood.

I looked up from my hands and met Ryker's eyes. "*Are they still blue?*" I asked in his head.

"Relax, your eyes are no longer blue," he said out loud.

"Holy fuck, did you two just talk telepathically?" Reece asked. "It was like I could feel it."

Ryker didn't answer. He just smirked.

"Damn, I better get on this mate thing," he replied.

"And break dozens of hearts?" Micah asked him.

"It's not dozens. It's two, maybe three."

I couldn't help but laugh, "You're a player, Reece? I never would've thought."

"I'm going to cook," Mindy offered.

"I'll help," Grey gently smiled at Mindy.

"*I promise, it's going to be all right,*" Ryker said in my head.

I nodded, feeling unsure about everything. Ryker linked our fingers together, and calmness settled over me. When we touched, it felt like everything made sense. It felt like I wasn't alone, and maybe it was high time I started to believe that.

"HEAR ME OUT," GREY spoke, and since he was speaking on a full stomach, everyone listened. We'd just finished going over everything that happened so far. Ryker even, albeit, embarrassingly shared what happened during intercourse.

Over the last several hours, they all joked around with me and did their best to make me feel like I was a part of their group, so it was easier to get

over the fact that everyone knew.

Ryker lifted his chin towards Grey, giving him the go-ahead.

"Why don't we work on physically training her?"

Ryker snarled, then growled.

Reece laughed and slapped his brother on the shoulder, "See, that shit is hysterical. You have to admit, in your wildest dreams, would you ever think you'd get all growly over a chick?"

"Watch it, Reece."

"Grey has a point. Why don't you two work on each other and strengthen your bond, and we can try to all work on pushing her physically in a different way?"

Mindy chimed in, "I can show you what I know about gems and the Earth. I know to some, it may seem like a bunch of new-age stuff, but there is actually a science that goes behind it. It is such an old practice. I'm sure it can help you."

God, I really liked Mindy.

Micah chimed in, "I actually think this is a perfect idea. You two should work on that non-verbal communication thing, too. We can also see how fast you can get and test you for anything else."

"What, like if I can fly?"

"Do you think you could fly?" Micah asked, "Last I heard, you didn't have wings."

"I don't know, okay? Who knows anything? I mean, we're really grasping at straws with everything. And what are we going to do about Father Archibald?"

"Is this the hysterical thing she does?" Reece asked Ryker.

Ryker smacked him upside the back of his head, "Cool it, Brother. I think we talk to dad and bring him in on this, too. While the Father is here, we get dad to learn as much about the Rosi as possible. I want Ariel safe, and knowledge is the biggest power we can have."

Mindy stood and paced. "We still have no idea what role the Valderes have in any of this, and honestly, there's not a single part of me that thinks Elle coming here was a coincidence. I'm not certain that they knew you two would be fated. However, we can't ignore her dreams. It sounds a heck of a lot like a premonition of war between the Valderes and us. Not only do I think we need to be training Elle, but I think our entire pack should be training."

"You're right," Grey said to Mindy, "However, I don't think everyone needs to know everything."

"That's for damn sure. Everything surrounding Ariel, besides the fact that she is my mate, stays within the council and Brogan."

"What if we sell it to the rest of the pack like games?" Micah asked.

"I think that can work, Micah. I want you and Reece heading that up. Grey, Mindy, and I will start with her individual training. Reece, I'll call you in for weapons, and Micah, I'll call you in for endurance, but in the meantime, I want it to be the two of you working with the rest of the pack."

"And the bar?" Reece questioned.

"We'll keep it open for now, but close early," Ryker responded.

"Okay, this sounds fun and all, but you guys aren't talking about the elephant in the room."

Everyone looked at me questioningly, and I felt embarrassment color my cheeks.

"I went all psycho-nymph on Ryker. What if I hurt him? I scratched him. I'm not sure I can trust myself around him like that."

The entire room burst out laughing.

"What? I don't see anything funny about this."

Ryker's hand squeezed my knee. "A little sex kitten scratch isn't going to hurt me. I heal, I told you this. You're my fated mate. It's literally impossible for you to hurt me during sex. I was more afraid of the reaction my wolf had to you. I'll be more prepared next time. I also told you I liked it, remember?"

"But..."

"No, do you not think that the Gods wouldn't be smart enough to only pair two people together who couldn't handle each other?"

"But..."

"Do you think me weak, Mate?"

"No, but..."

"I'm lucky is what I am. There is not a man alive who would not lay down his life and die a thousand deaths to experience only a smidgen of the beauty you've given to me."

I shut my mouth at that. What could I possibly say to argue that?

"Elle, I know this is scary," Mindy chimed in, "But the Gods would not pair you two if Ryker was unable to handle you."

I nodded my head and blew out a large puff of air. "I still think we need to research everything we can on the Rosi."

"We have the Father," Reece reminded the room.

"Don't say that like he's a prisoner. He's an old family friend. He came to help me."

"Then I'm sure he'll give Brogan as much information as possible," Grey added.

"I think that settles it," Ryker said, standing, "Ariel and I will continue tonight to bond and work on our link. Tomorrow, I want her to start with you, Mins."

"Got it," she responded.

"I'll head to the bar, make sure everything is running smoothly, and set up for your temporary absence," Grey said.

"And we'll work on pack training," Micah added while Reece nodded in agreement.

Reece clapped his brother on the back, "Have fun tonight, man. Training sounds real rough for you," he chuckled.

"Hey," I said defensively.

"I'm sure it will be filled with interesting challenges," Ryker responded cheekily.

I slapped my palm on my head. It was too much sometimes.

Everyone stood, and we said our goodbyes. Ryker and I were alone again, and it felt like the air in the room was somehow heavier with the knowledge of what was to come.

"I'M AFRAID," I ADMITTED.

"Stop. It's just the two of us. I'll take care of you." Ryker sat across from me and spoke to me in my head. *"I'm going to show you images, at least try to. My pack communicates this way in wolf form, so I want to see how you react to it."*

The first image he showed was of him running with me on his back. The image was so vivid I could smell the grass in the air and practically feel the heat on my back.

Another image flashed of us entering his cave. The cold stone that surrounded us gave me the same feeling as if I was actually there.

The image switched again to him running with his council. I wasn't with him, so this was different. My senses weren't as sharp, but there was a different feeling that emanated from Ryker, a togetherness that was there. I

could sense a link between his pack and him and this overwhelming feeling of unity.

Ryker grabbed my hands and linked our fingers, then mentally showed me the image of him in his wolf form when I first saw him and the rest of his pack. With him linking our fingers, I felt his emotions. He was scared for me. Protective of me. There was admiration and an overwhelming possessiveness he was emanating to the rest of his pack, telling them that I was his. He was filled with pride because of me...

I began to pull away because it was all too much. I'd never experienced someone caring for me in the way that Ryker automatically did, and I didn't know how to accept all of it.

"Don't," he said out loud. "I'll change what I show you."

I left my hands in his, and he showed me a quick succession of images. I saw decades flash from all different time periods. His clothes changed, reflective of the era, and he was always alone. Somehow, I felt his loneliness. And my heart ached for him. I had no idea what it was like to live that long and be all alone. He showed me a new image, and this time he was the Ryker I was used to. It was the first time he saw me. He felt confused by his reaction to me. Then another image flashed, and I felt his anger toward himself. We were in the apartment, and he was handing me the lease and being a jerk about it. He felt overwhelmingly attracted to me but held out for his mate, although he wanted to claim me.

"Ryk," I whispered.

"I struggled with how I felt from the moment we met."

I squeezed his fingers in response.

"I want you to try it. Push images towards me."

I wasn't sure what to choose. I thought about the first time I met him, the first time I saw him as a wolf, the first time I kissed him, then the frantic way I felt after we had sex, and I became a nymphomaniac. I didn't know how this whole pushing thoughts thing worked. I needed to pick one and send it to him?

Ryker gasped, and I met his eyes.

"Holy fuck."

"What? What happened?"

"I got all of that. It felt like a computer download or something. It all happened so fast. Give me more."

Wow, okay, I didn't expect him to get that all. Maybe I could just focus on one thing. With the way my mind raced, that was easier said than done, though. I tried to focus on riding him while he was in wolf form for the first time and what that felt like, but then my mind traveled to riding him in other ways and what that *felt* like. I immediately tried to think of something else. For some unknown reason, my mind flashed to the memory of Father Archibald and my dad talking. I didn't want to think of that, so I quickly thought about my whale watching journey with my dad, then it moved to how the whales reacted, but I changed my mind again. I tried to focus really hard and thought about seeing Ryker in the bar and how comfortable I felt working alongside him. Then, I thought about how his arms moved when he shook a mixed drink in the shaker and the easy way he was with his patrons. My mind quickly moved to the protective way he was with his siblings, and although it was over the top, it was also endearing. This led me to think about how his teeth sunk into my skin and how claimed I felt when he did that.

Ryker lunged, catching me off guard.

"Ryk," I questioned, but he didn't respond. Instead, his lips trailed down my neck then landed at the spot where I showed him in the link. He licked my sensitive skin while his hands groped my body. Somehow, strangely still linked with him, I could feel what he was feeling. The way he reacted to my body gave me a fullness that I'd never even known was possible to dream, let alone feel.

It was unreal.

It was spectacular.

I needed to do the same to him. I licked at his neck, then right as his teeth grazed my shoulder, I bit into him. The metallic taste filled my mouth, and I could feel my blood hit him as well. It was like an aphrodisiac. Two souls uniting in one perfect way.

I felt unimaginable bliss. We were so caught up in each other's thoughts and feeling, what the other felt as we moved past groping and became more physical. It was otherworldly. When he slipped inside of me, and we were connected, the way I felt was like breathing for the first time. Electric tingles shot out through my body, and I came immediately. Ryker didn't hold out much longer. Everything became one perfect, prolonged orgasm. I swear he didn't stop coming, and neither did I.

Eventually, the intensity began to dull. Ryker slipped out of me, carried me upstairs, and curled into me in bed. We were exhausted.

Still linked in our minds, I felt Ryker's prayer to the Gods, thanking them for me.

"I have to run out," Ryker bent low, kissing me. I was still in bed. The following morning, after the most intense experience of my entire life, I felt closer to Ryker in an indescribable way. We woke throughout the night, making love and linking ourselves to one another. We were solidified as mates. Don't ask me how I knew; I just did.

I felt completely connected to him.

"Where are you going?" I asked sleepily.

"*God, you're beautiful,*" he replied in my head. Then he flashed an image of me lying on his bed with my hair splayed all around me and a sheet haphazardly wrapped around my body. Seeing how he saw me felt profound.

He cleared his throat, feeling my appreciation for him leaving. "I want to stop and talk with my dad. Then, I need to make sure everything is handled at the bar, and I want to go over some last-minute details with Reece. Plus, I think I should check on Father Archibald. After seeing that image of your dad and him talking, I want to get a gauge of his truthfulness. I thought that another trip to the library for you might be helpful. I asked Micah if he could bring you while I ran around."

I groaned, "So, I take it that means I need to get up?"

"If you sleep any later, before long, it'll be dark."

I sat straight up. "Shit! How long have I been asleep?"

"It's a little after one in the afternoon."

Okay, so nowhere near dark. However, that was way longer than I usually slept.

"I'm not surprised you slept so long. There's been a lot of change these last few days."

"You could say that again."

He smiled at me and kissed me one more time. "I'll see you soon."

After he left, I reluctantly got out of bed. I couldn't believe I'd stayed in bed so long.

I showered and found it strange being alone in his house.

It'll be my home now. The thought skittered through my mind, and I didn't freak out. I was accepting the bond and everything it meant to have Ryker as my fated mate.

Downstairs, Ryker left a note over a bag from Prestie's, telling me Mindy dropped it off earlier and to enjoy. How thoughtful was that!

After eating more delicious baked goodies, there was a knock at the door. I looked and saw Micah at the screen door, so I waved him in.

"Have a good night last night?" He asked with a huge grin.

I responded with a coy smile.

"Fine, you don't have to answer that. I already know. We all feel like a million bucks today, thanks to you two."

"That's so weird. And a little cool."

"Not any weirder than the idea that you could've had wings."

"Touché."

"I think we should do some research on Ariel the Angel. It might help give us some insight. What do you think about that?" I asked.

"I can definitely see the benefits, but while we're there, let's search anything mythical that possibly had wings."

We drove to the library, and it was still hotter than hell outside. "How do you stand the heat?" I asked Micah.

"We swim a lot, that's for sure."

I peeled my leg from my car's leather interior, then we quickly moved into the library so we could bask in the AC.

"You again, I haven't had this much action since the sixties!" Mrs. Longwood hissed. "What are you kids up to anyway? If you're going to spend all day here, maybe I can find some books for you."

"We need your biblical books on angels," Micah explained. "They should have a lot. Ryker, and before him, his mom, added a lot to the library's collection," he added for my benefit.

"Also other mythical creatures. Think fables and fairytales, but not the Disney kind," I added.

She looked at us questioningly, so I lied, "It's for a Summer college course I'm taking remotely."

She led us down an aisle, pointed, then reminded us to keep our voices down. I giggled as she walked away.

"What's funny?" Micah whispered.

"She's a trip," I replied, not whispering.

"Shh, she's going to hear you."

I laughed again, then grabbed a book off the shelf, decided it wasn't right, and put it back.

Micah already had a pile of three different books.

"How do I even know where to look?" I asked.

"You don't. That's why it's called research."

I grabbed a few books, then wandered down the aisle and headed towards myths and legends, hoping that maybe I could get a different perspective from there.

I turned the corner and ran into Gabe. He put his finger to his lips then pointed up. In a flash, he was on the second level. I blinked, uncertain how he moved so quickly. I was fast, but not that fast. I looked to see if Micah was near. He was already across the library carrying his stack of books.

I didn't want Micah to know Gabe was here. It was strange, but I felt a pull to him completely different from my pull to the pack. It was separate, and I thought speaking to him would help provide me with answers. I silently moved up the stairs, hoping Micah wouldn't notice.

Once upstairs, Gabe continued to move to the furthest part of the library, and I followed.

"Hey," he said once I was far enough away. "Ew, what is that smell? You stink. You suddenly smell like a wet dog." I smelled my armpits. I could still smell deodorant.

"Rude much?" I asked.

"No, it's your scent. Holy shit," he eyed me up and down. "You're mated to the wolf."

I nodded in confirmation.

"Well, that's just rich," he chuckled, then added. "That's actually quite brilliant. Oh, the Gods do have a sense of humor."

"What do you mean by that?"

He smiled but didn't answer my question.

"I have questions."

"I bet you do," he responded.

"Why did the Valderes want me to work for them? Do you know who my mother is? Have you met her? Is she okay? Is she locked up somewhere on your estate? Does she need help? Can you help me?"

"Geeze, Louise. You talk fast. One question at a time."

"My mom then. Start with her."

"She's fine- pain in the ass- but fine. She's not locked up or anything. Why would you think we locked her up? You really are clueless about everything, aren't you?" His flippancy was irritating.

"I just learned vampires and wolves exist, so yeah, pretty much clueless here. How about you fill me in?"

"I'm sorry. I'm not trying to toy with you. It's just that I've always known who you are, and I always thought about what it would be like when we met."

I was taken aback, and my face must've registered my confusion because Gabe took a step closer to me and placed his hands on my arms to brace me for what he was about to say.

"I've always known who you are because I'm your twin, and Lillian is our mother."

What in the double what! I searched Gabe's eyes. That couldn't be the truth, could it? We had the same hair color. His was shinier and seemed more like Lillian's, but I felt a deep truth behind his words when I really looked at his eyes. He was my brother—not just my brother—my twin.

He smiled lazily as I looked over his features, trying to categorize our differences and similarities.

"Your watchdog is coming. Got to go!" Then, he was gone.

I stood in stunned silence, staring at the space my brother just occupied. I had no idea how to process his bombshell.

Ugh, and Lillian was my mom? I couldn't even wrap my head around that. Something felt off about her, and the way she talked down to me made me not like her. Ugh, but what if it was because she was an ancient vampire that had no idea how to talk to her long-lost daughter? Bronson and Lillian's conversations that I overheard ran through my head, and it made more sense now. He was trying to get her to take it slowly with me.

"Elle, you okay?" It was Micah. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

I shook my head, unsure of what I should say. I should tell him, shouldn't I? But the Valderes were their mortal enemies, and somehow, I'm one of them. What if they no longer considered me family? What if the knowledge that I was half of them made them turn their back on me? I had more questions now than I'd ever had before.

"I'm fine. Everything was just hitting me all at once, is all," I lied. "Did you find something?"

"A little. Come on, I want to show you."

We poured over the texts, but my heart wasn't in it. Staring at book after book, my eyes started to grow heavy. "You're exhausted. Let's get you home." Micah gathered our books, and we checked them out.

Once outside, I was immediately hit with the humid Ohio heat that was unlike anything I'd felt before. I was tying my hair off my neck as we walked to the car when several black SUVs pulled up. I stood there, feeling a vast range of emotions.

"Elle, let's go!" Micah said, ushering me to the car. I was frozen. I needed to know if *she* was behind the glass. A door opened, and Bronson stepped out, followed by Lillian. My heart thumped so loud in my chest, I wondered if all of these supernatural types could hear it.

"Miss Katz, may I have a word?" Bronson asked.

"Sorry, but that's a hard no," Micah answered for me, stepping in front of me. I'd never thought he seemed menacing before, but somehow, he suddenly was.

"We received your email," Bronson said, ignoring Micah.

Micah snapped. "She's under our protection."

Bronson sniffed the air.

"Do you smell that, Darling?" Lillian, my mother, who looked younger than me, asked Bronson.

"That I do, Dear."

"Elle, get in the car!" Micah ordered, but I felt rooted to the spot. Lillian didn't look at me with fond recognition. She didn't wrap her arms around me and explain why she left. She didn't tell me how much she loved me and wished she'd been there. She did none of that. She was cold and belittling. I wondered what my dad could've seen in her.

"Elle!" Micah shouted again.

My feet became unglued, and I turned to leave with Micah. She may have been my mother, but she was far from a mom. I didn't owe her anything.

"Miss Katz," Bronson started again.

I threw my hand up over my head, not wanting to look at them. I was angry but didn't want it to show. "Sorry, got to run. See you around." I waved them off flippantly, not wanting them to see how my hands shook, and threw Micah my keys. That small interaction felt so significant. I could see Lillian's resemblance now. A huge part of me wanted to stand there, stomp my feet, and demand answers, but what if I lost Ryker in the process? How could he ever care for me in the same way if he knew what I truly was?

The drive back to the farm was silent. I think Micah (who happened to be a terrible driver, by the way) thought I was upset because I was afraid of the Valderes. I guess, in some ways, he was right. What if I ended up like them? Was I a vampire? I had some of Ryker's blood, and it just felt natural, but would I one day wake up and want to suck him dry? Could I hurt him?

Plagued with racing thoughts, I barely registered the gravel's crunch under the tires as we pulled up to the farmhouse. Micah shut off the car.

"We're here."

I blinked a few times, staring at the farmhouse.

"If you don't get out of the car, you're going to cook in here." Micah got out and opened my door.

I shook off my uncertainty, grabbed the library books, and went inside.

"You want some lemonade?" I asked, trying to sound normal.

"*Ariel, I'm coming. What's wrong?*" I heard in my head, making me jump.

"I'm fine," I shouted back in my head. "*This is weird. Don't do that if I can't see you. You scared me.*"

Looking in the refrigerator, I found no lemonade. However, someone had been by to stock the fridge. I located lemons and sugar and decided to make it myself.

I could do that, right? How hard could it be to make lemonade?

I found a pitcher, cut a few lemons, squeezed them in, then just threw the lemons in the pitcher. I eyed the sugar and added water and ice. Voila!

Ryker appeared in the doorway to the kitchen, and my heart leapt at the sight of him. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"Oh, ya know, when life gives you lemons..."

He looked at me strangely.

"You want a glass?"

His eyes softened, "Sure."

I put the lemonade on a tray with some glasses and walked out to the front porch. Micah was sitting on the step. "Everything okay?" he asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

I didn't miss the way Ryker and Micah made eye contact. I poured each man a glass and handed it to them.

They both drank, made sour faces, then looked at me and took another sip. It couldn't be that bad, could it? I quirked an eyebrow, then poured myself a glass and took a sip. "This is horrible," I declared, making a scrunched-up face. "Why are you both drinking it?"

"Because you made it."

"Yeah, well, I'm a terrible cook, and apparently, I can't make lemonade either."

I think Ryker understood I was trying to distract myself with a task before I even understood that. He gave me a few minutes to collect myself before asking Micah, "What happened?"

"Valderes showed up at the library."

"I'll kill them. Every last one of those bloodsuckers," Ryker said.

I gasped. *I was one of those bloodsuckers.*

"Ariel," Ryker looked at me with concerned eyes, "Your feelings are all over the place. What's happening in that head of yours?"

"What? You're not just going to pop in and check?" I asked defensively. I still wasn't a fan of having his voice just show up unannounced in my head. It was one thing if we were communicating together; it was another altogether if he was just popping in whenever he wanted.

He wrapped his arms around me. "Relax. I'll try not to listen. It's just, I could feel your feelings calling to me."

"Well, that's not weird or anything."

"Bring your guard down. I'm not attacking you. I'm worried, is all."

"Well, this has been fun, but I think I'm going to dip out on this lovers' spat." Micah set down the glass of lemonade. "I'd say thanks for the lemonade, but..." he let his words trail off.

"Yeah, yeah... I'll stick to store-bought."

He smiled, then took off.

Ryker leaned against the porch pillar. "Want to tell me what that was all about?"

"What?" I asked, hoping to play dumb.

"All of it."

"You know I can tell when you're not truthful. Your emotions are all over the place, and they're littered with fear and dishonesty. You have to know that whatever is on your mind, whatever it is, I have your back. It's you and me. Always."

"I just need to sit with my thoughts for a while. Can you let me do that?"

"No."

"What do you mean, 'no?'"

"Honesty is what's going to make us stronger. We trust each other. We rely on one another. There's going to be times when I'll want to shield you. There'll be times when I'd rather you not know every ugly detail of things, but I know that sharing the burden will only make us stronger."

"That doesn't even make sense," I argued.

"You're arguing for the sake of arguing because you don't want to talk about what is really bothering you."

I was getting irritated. "You're right. I don't want to talk about it, so let it go."

He sighed. "I thought when we solidified the bond, you'd automatically trust me, but it seems like I have work to do. So, I'll start by telling you that when I went to my dad's, he said he also got the impression that Father Archibald wasn't honest."

"How so?"

"Parts of his story had small nuances."

"Maybe we should go talk to him together?"

"No, I think we need to continue to let Brogan do his thing."

"But..."

"Relax. Did you learn anything new at the library?"

You bet your ass I did, I thought.

I was about to tell him no when his eyes flashed. "I heard that, Ariel."

Well, fuck. What was a girl to do? I'd have to take the chance and hope he didn't want to kill me too.

"Fine, all right! Apparently, I have a twin brother, and Lillian's my mother," I rushed out like it was one giant word. Maybe if I pulled the band-aid off nice and fast, it wouldn't hurt.

"Say again?" His voice was stern with an edge I hadn't heard before.

"I know, right! I can't believe it myself."

Ryker pulled me into a hug. I felt his emotions. They ranged from trying to comfort me and wanting to break something. I watched his Adam's apple bob as he gulped back his fury.

"They told you this with Micah standing right there, and no one said anything to me?"

"No." I pulled back from his embrace. "When I ran from you after meeting your dad, I ran into a guy at the Valderes."

Ryker made his displeasure known, and I felt the rumble in my own chest.

"He told me we needed to talk, and there was an instant, easy feeling with him. He said he'd find me, so he did, today at the library."

"Where was Micah?"

"Reading. Anyway, he smelled our bond right away and seemed to think it was comical. I didn't know why he'd find that funny. Then I asked him about a dozen questions, and he told me he had always known who I was."

"Your brother's Gabriel."

"I take it you two have met?"

"Fuck, but I can see it. You look like each other. I guess we know why the Valderes wanted you here."

"If it was as cut and dry as that, why not just tell me?"

"Show me the images of your interactions with Lillian again," Ryker urged.

I linked my fingers with his, then pushed the images towards him. He withdrew with a gasp, "She watched you while you ate. I wonder if she did something to your food and was trying to see what your reaction would be."

"You know I thought that right after."

I felt another wave of fury roll off of him.

"We should meet. Can we sit down and talk with them?" That was the wrong thing to suggest.

"No!" he thundered.

"Stop!" I yelled at him in his head. I didn't like how it felt in my chest when he yelled like that.

That made him snap his eyes to me, then close them and reopen them with a barely contained, but contained nonetheless, calmer look about him.

He blew out a deep breath.

"I like Gabe. I want to get to know him." I sighed. "I don't know about Bronson or Lillian. But my gut tells me that Gabe is my family. The reason I was afraid to tell you is the Valderes are your mortal enemy, and now I'm one of them. How will your pack react? I'm not even sure how you're reacting right now. Are we...?"

He cut me off, "Open yourself to me." He squeezed my fingers.

"*Ryker*," I questioned telepathically.

He led us inside. "*I'm here*," he replied in my head.

I didn't question him as he walked us upstairs to his bedroom.

Nor did I question him as he pulled me into his arms with our fingers still linked.

"It seems I still have work to do with you. You just don't get the depth of what I feel for you," he spoke out loud, but at the same time, he sent me an outpouring of his feelings through the bond.

I felt it.

I felt his love.

It was overwhelming.

It was powerful.

There was a well of it that would never run dry.

Ryker loved me. He showed me how I made him smile when I said oddball things. He showed me how he felt when I was in his arms. He showed me his fear for me and not of me when it came to the Valderes.

I was vulnerable with him, showing him my fear of being alone and how empty I felt since my father passed away. I pushed the fears from my dreams

toward him. I let go of the fear of being a vampire and gave that to him, too. Then, I gave him my biggest fear: that he and his pack wouldn't accept me.

"No, Ariel. It will always be you and me. You will always be first. If, for any reason, a member of my pack didn't accept you, I'd turn my back on them, not you."

"But what if it was your family? What if it was your brother or your dad?"

"They'll deal."

"But?"

"They love me. I know it's probably difficult to imagine what hundreds of years of being a family is like. They want my happiness. You can't control what you are any more than I can. Love is about acceptance. I know without a shadow of a doubt that they love me, and in turn, would do whatever they could to ensure my happiness with you."

I looked up into his beautiful dark eyes. "You might have to keep reminding me of this."

"I can be patient."

"I can be impulsive."

"Really? I didn't notice," he teased.

"You're so sure about everything."

"Not everything. I have no idea what you're going to say or do next. I like that you keep me guessing." He brushed his lips against mine.

"I like that every look of yours is brand new." He kissed me again.

"I have no idea how you're going to react when I touch you, and I love that, too." He pulled my body flushed with his, and this time, he kissed me hard. His hands roamed over my body, and I found that as soon as he touched me, I went wild. My hands drifted under his shirt and over the hard ridges of his abs, then across his back.

"Stay linked with me," Ryker commanded.

I pulled his shirt over his head, broke our kiss, and began to kiss his chest. I rolled my tongue over his nipple, and within our bond, I felt his approval. I started to lower myself, knowing how much I enjoyed him in my mouth, but he placed his hands on my shoulders, halting me.

"You have too much clothing on."

Feeling our connection, I knew it pleased him deeply to see my naked body, which did something for me. I whipped my shirt over my head and

unclasped my bra, letting it fall to the ground. Pleasure roiled through him as he observed my naked breasts. My nipples pebbled under his stare.

"The rest," he commanded. It was a relief not to have to think about it, and there was a sexiness to his husky voice telling me what to do.

He approved of my thoughts and showed this by running his fingers across my nipple as I dropped my shorts.

"Beautiful," he whispered, then continued to trail his fingertips down even lower. I gasped as he barely brushed my clit. He pulled back, and I marveled at the way he slowly undid his button and dropped his jeans. My body felt wired at the anticipation of what was to come. I wondered if I'd ever get used to his magnificence.

"I'll *never get over your perfection*," he replied in my head.

I let those words wash over me, and I closed my eyes momentarily, feeling them. He had a way about him that made me feel both cherished and desired. I opened my eyes and saw he dropped his briefs, then licked my lips in anticipation.

My thoughts moved to wanting to feel his naked chest against my breasts and wanting him closer to me. He complied, pulling me flush against him, and I realized that maybe, I had more control than I thought.

Then, I realized that I was a lot shorter than he was, and we weren't chest to chest at all. His erection pressed against my stomach, and it spread the faintest amount of precum. The scent, which I could somehow smell, made me wild.

"You're scenting me. Now you know how your smell drives me wild. It makes me want you in ways that I've yet to show you. I'm going to fuck your mouth, then your pussy, and before the night's over, I'm going to take your ass, too. You'll love it all because you were made for me."

I wanted that. I wanted all of it.

"Yes," I said. The idea of him *there* should have scared me, but it didn't. I knew he wouldn't do anything that would hurt me. I was also starting to believe in the fates. Somehow, with each new sexual encounter we had, I thought more and more that maybe we were destined.

"We are," he answered my thoughts out loud, then he guided me to my knees. Some women might not like this, but the thought of this man's big silky skin in my mouth gave me power. I licked the tip at first, getting high off the salty taste of him, then took him in my mouth. He showed me an image of me playing with his sac with one hand and using my other to stroke

him while I took as much of him as I could. The image was so sexy. I did as he showed.

I was so beyond turned on. I didn't care that he wasn't inside of me. My ability to make him feel so much did it for me. Every thrust to the back of my throat made me feel as if I would orgasm.

"Enough," he commanded. "I'm going to come, and I need to do that inside of you."

He slid free from my mouth, lifted me up by my arms, then grabbed my ass and hauled me up even higher so that I was forced to wrap my legs around him, and he slammed inside.

"Yes," I called out as I immediately came.

He followed, and this time, instead of me seeing blue or going crazy with lust, it was perfect. He continued to fuck me, we both came again, then he tossed me on the bed and flipped me over. I wasn't nervous. Not at all. He worked my body in a way that made it all about lust and pleasure. His face went between my legs, and he licked from my clit all the way back. The feel of his tongue back there was unlike anything. He knew what I enjoyed, and if the slightest thing felt off, he stopped and did something else. Then his finger was there while another worked my clit. It was explosive, and I came again while he did this.

That was three times!

He brought me to my knees, and his large body was positioned over me. "I'm going to go slow, but you're ready for me, and I'll know if you're not."

I sent him the feelings of trust and told him in our bond that I wasn't afraid.

I felt him there, prodding and a bite of pain as he pushed in. The pain wasn't bad, though, because my body was so turned on already. He circled his fingers on my clit with one hand, and with his other, he lightly pinched my nipple. Then, he pushed in further, and I bucked against him, surprised at how good the sensation of it all was.

I heard a deep hum in his throat, and I made an unrecognizable sound back.

"You mewl like a kitty for me."

I bucked again as he pushed in and out. He was driving me wild. I had no idea that it would feel like this. His fingers stopped circling my clit, then he pushed them inside of me and was in both of my holes, filling me up.

"That's it, Ariel, ride me."

"Oh, my God!" I breathed.

"Are you close again? I want to be in your pussy when we come."

"Mmm." I liked the sound of that.

He played for another second, then pulled out of me, flipped me over again, and slid inside. His rhythm changed, though. He wasn't going fast and hard. It was like he wanted it to last. I did, too. I stared into those dark, captivating eyes with such awe. I never knew that anything like this could exist. He was right. The two of us together were utter perfection, and it kept getting better. When we both finally came, we were spent, and I lay in his arms thinking how lucky I was. After all of the loss life had brought me, fate gave me this man, and it was then that the depth of my feelings for him really hit me.

I was falling in love.

It was dark all around me. The air held an acrid smell of vomit and other bodily fluids. I was crouched against a wall, trying to reach the sliver of light with my foot. If I could only touch the light, then maybe I could be free. My foot couldn't reach, though, and the metal shackle on my ankle clanked as I stretched it forward.

I heard a low, hacking cough.

I wasn't alone.

"You're never going to reach it, Ariel."

Ryker was here. How long had we been here?

"I have to try," My voice came out scratchy. When was the last time I used it? When was the last time I had anything to drink?

Ryker coughed again, and it sounded strangled.

I tried to move to him, but the chains were heavy, and, like the cruel act it was, he, too, was just out of reach.

"It's getting worse," I told him something I was sure he knew.

"I'll live," he said, choking on another cough.

"Promise me that's true," I begged. "Promise me you won't give up."

He coughed again, and I used what little energy I had left to link with him. I needed to hear his thoughts. Hard to breathe. Lungs filling with fluid. I haven't had enough time with her. Gods, give me more. I don't want to die like this.

He was seriously sick and didn't want me to know how bad off he was. "Honey, I can't let you die. I have to give in. I have to go to him. If it's the only way you live, I'll do it."

"Ariel, don't you dare," Ryker pleaded.

"I can't lose you."

"If you go to him, you'll be lost to me anyway."

"I'd rather be lost to you and have you alive and breathing than live in a world where you're not in it. I love you. Forgive me."

Summoning up the last bit of strength I had, I called out, "Guards."

"Ariel, dammit, no."

"You'll have my heart forever. Remember that, okay?"

He went to speak but began a long coughing spell. Please, God, don't let me be too late. "Guards," I called again.

"ARIEL," RYKER GASPED beside me, rousing me from my sleep.

"Dammit, Honey, wake up."

I blinked my eyes open, and a calmness washed over me, erasing my dream.

"I was in your dream. I saw it all. Get up, Ariel. I need my council."

I snuggled into him. "I'm sleepy."

"Ariel, that wasn't a normal dream, more like a premonition. We need you up. We need the training to start, and we need my council."

I didn't want to get up. My body felt deliciously sore after last night.

Ryker's face gentled on me, and I knew he read my thoughts. "Last night, having every part of you was the greatest gift. I've never experienced anything like that, and I will cherish it every day for the rest of my life."

"Why do I feel a 'but' coming on?"

"There's no but. It was everything. You," He grabbed my chin and lifted my eyes to his, "are everything."

I had an overwhelming urge to cry. I felt so unbelievably loved and desired. I didn't feel like I could say those words yet, it was far too soon, but I could show him. I sent off those feelings to him through our link. Ryker squeezed me to him and kissed the top of my head in response. He held me for several long moments, then muttered, "Greatest gift ever."

I held on to him, loving the praise.

Then, his body stiffened, and I felt his mind flash to the dream. "How much of that dream do you remember?"

"Honestly, it's fading. I feel like we were being held captive, but I can't remember much else."

"I remember every detail of it. I can practically taste the air on my tongue still. I'm a bit freaked by it."

"You? You get freaked? It must've been really bad."

"Bad enough, I'm ready to leave this bed and begin your training even though the promise of you is enough to keep me in bed for eternity."

"Do you think you can show me through the link?"

He nodded once, then linked our fingers and sent me the dream in its entirety. I pulled away, gasping.

"Your eyes are blue."

I didn't care about my eyes. What went through me was overwhelming fear. Fear that something would happen to Ryker, that he would be chained, hurt, and sick because of me, overwhelmed me.

He felt my fear, then grabbed my chin. "We don't know what it means or why you're dreaming of it."

I pulled away. I was terrified, and he sent me as much calm energy as he could, but underneath it all, I felt his fear, too. I tried to pull back even farther, "I guess I better shower and get ready for training."

"That'd be wise," Ryker replied. "But first, let me ease your fears."

He pulled me to him and quickly joined our bodies. I felt like he was proving a point that he was confident in us and that he'd do whatever he could to protect me. It was him I was worried about, though. By the time we were close to climaxing, my mind had forgotten all of my worries.

"Time to shower," he said, loosening his grip on me, then he smacked me on my ass. I glared at him as he chuckled and climbed out of bed, heading to the bathroom to shower and get ready for the day.

"I WANT YOU TO FEEL the earth beneath you and the air around you. Listen to the soft rustle of the leaves on the trees. Smell the soil beneath your toes and the flowers on the wind." Mindy was giving me my first lesson on the "earth." We were sitting Indian-style in the woods, not far from Ryker's farmhouse.

When Mindy showed up, Ryker practically forced me out of the house with her. It was a change that I wasn't sure I was okay with. I had the feeling he wanted to talk about the dream, and he didn't want me there for it. Which bugged me since we just talked about trust.

What I was, was distracted. All I kept thinking about was how amazing last night was, and every time we got closer, then this morning, he seemed eager for me to leave, and that kind of sucked. I wish I could say I was beyond excited to sit in the dirt with Mindy, but I had a lot on my mind.

I knew she believed in all of this earthy hippy stuff. I just wasn't sure that I did. Then again, she was a freakin' werewolf, and if they were real, then who was I to question the rest of it? So, I went with it. I sat in the dirt, in a spot she picked. Various crystals were placed around us. Although, they didn't look like crystals to me. To me, they looked like a bunch of different black rocks. She went over what each one was, and I wished I'd brought a notebook to take notes. There was so much she was telling me that it seemed impossible to remember all of it.

"What's the stone in front of me again?" I asked, breaking the ambiance she was trying to set.

"That one is kyanite. It helps keep you grounded."

"Are we talking metaphorically grounded, or are you afraid I might float away?"

She rewarded that question with squinted eyes.

"What? I'm being serious. I mean, I might've had wings."

"Fine, fair point. I guess you can say both metaphorically speaking and physically grounded."

"Okay. Kyanite is for grounding," I said to myself to try and remember.

"Now, where were we? I want you to focus on the..."

"How about this one? What does this one do again?" I asked, plucking a crystal from her circle.

Mindy took it from me and placed it back in the circle. "That is the cross-stone. It's a very powerful, protective stone."

"At least that one actually looks like a crystal. I mean, why call it a crystal if it's just a rock?"

Mindy blew out a loud, irritated puff of air.

"Shutting up now. Sally forth, Mins," I said, closing my eyes.

"Clear your mind. Do not think of the crystals."

I opened an eye to look at her to challenge the crystal thing but quickly shut it again.

She sighed again. "When you master the crystals, you will have a deeper understanding of yourself and your surroundings. Now, keep your eyes closed and focus on my voice. You are a being. You are one with the earth. You feel the earth beneath you. You feel the sky above. You feel the gentle warm breeze on your skin..."

And just like that, something snapped inside of me. I felt everything. I felt the moisture in the air, and I knew it would rain in a few hours. I felt the beetle to my left and could hear its tiny legs moving up the leaf. I smelled the soil, but I also sensed something that didn't belong there. It was a fungus, and it would eventually kill the tree that was behind me. I smelled the fear the tree had of its impending doom. I couldn't let that happen. I thought of the fungus dying off and giving the tree more life. I thought of the grass close by that was starting to die from the drought, and I asked it to hang on just a little longer because the rain would be here. A bunny nearby could feel my energy,

and in turn, he moved closer. I felt birds perch high on the trees, and they called out to other birds to come and see.

"Elle!" Mindy shouted. Why on earth was she shouting? "Elle!"

My eyes shot open. "What? Did I do it wrong or something?"

That was when I noticed that we were surrounded by wildlife. Deers and bunnies surrounded us. A fox looked on curiously from behind a bush. A bush that had not been there before. I looked at the tree behind me, and it seemed to have doubled in width. As I looked up at it, I saw that it appeared taller too. That couldn't be. Maybe I just forgot what it looked like before. Then, I noticed the flowers. There were wildflowers everywhere, sprouting from places I wouldn't have thought a flower could sprout.

The snap of a twig had me turning to see what it was. A large black bear approached and sniffed the air. Mindy, without any thought, shifted suddenly into her wolf, snarling at the bear.

Oh no.

He did not mean harm. I don't know how I knew that or how I knew that Mindy shifted without thought, but I did. I closed my eyes and pushed calm to both Mindy and the bear. Then, I told the animals to go back to where they were meant to be. I opened my eyes, and the animals, all but Mindy, were slowly dispersing.

I took several long moments to look Mindy over. She was so much smaller than Ryker was, but her light coat resembled her. "*The animals are gone. You can change back now. But you should know, none of them would've hurt me, but it's nice to know you have my back,*" I spoke to her in my head, wondering if she could hear me.

She showed me an image of a bear attacking a fox.

I pushed calm toward her and hoped that would help.

Apparently, it helped a little too much. She curled up beside me and fell asleep. Yes! Asleep! I sat there for a while and enjoyed the beautiful, picturesque landscape. Then I started to get bored. I wondered what else I could do. I thought about the link with Ryker and how I needed to try to focus, then I thought about a rose bush with huge white blooms. I imagined their fragrant scent and pictured them surrounding the farmhouse, beautiful bushes lining the front porch.

I opened my eyes, smiling. That was too far away; I was sure of it. I needed to see if I could create something I could actually see in the making. Picturing a daisy right below the tree, one magically sprouted. *Poof*—just like

that. I thought about a butterfly and how it would be cool if it came to the flower. I waited several minutes, then suddenly, a butterfly appeared. This was seriously cool. I'd never had much of a green thumb before.

I decided playtime was over, and I gathered up the crystals and ordered, again in my mind, for Mindy to wake up. She immediately perked up, and I stood, walking out of the woods and toward the house. She walked beside me, and I wondered why she didn't change back. About fifteen minutes later, the house was in view. Ryker and several of the neighbors were standing around it curiously.

All around the house were dozens and dozens of huge white roses.

"Forget about the roses, Elle. I can't believe you made the forest grow in diameter another fifteen feet."

"Are you sure I really did that? I mean, how can you tell?"

Grey and I were in the forest, away from everyone else to work on physical training. I didn't feel like I could do much because I was so damn freaked out about what had just happened. It was more than a little fantastical that I made roses pop up, but then pack members began to arrive and share that they had seen the forest moving and growing. Yes, growing!

I couldn't share that I feared it was something I did, so I asked Ryker telepathically if Grey and I could start. Mindy, for some reason, was still hanging out in wolf form when we returned, and I tried to warn her that she should change because it was eventually going to rain. No one likes the smell of wet dogs. To that, Ryker told me not to let anyone hear me refer to them as dogs.

I then mumbled out loud, "Fine, but at least close the windows so it doesn't get soaked upstairs."

Ryker looked at the blue sky without a cloud in sight and eyed me curiously. Then, he announced to his pack members, who were all discussing the strange phenomenon, that there was a good chance the drought would finally be over and they should prepare for heavy rainfall.

There were a lot of murmurs about the roses, the forest, and now the rain, but Ryker told them all to go. A few stayed behind to get Ryker's ear. He kissed me and said to me in my head that the roses were incredible and to go with Grey, but get back before the rain. So, Grey and I were in the woods, where I was doing absolutely nothing. I felt like I had no powers whatsoever.

"Elle, it was obviously you, and I didn't have to see the forest to know that. Anyone who owns land around the woods came out to talk to Ryker about it."

"All right, you have a point."

"And, let's just be clear, I'm a wolf. Running through these woods is a favorite pastime of mine. The forest changed, and I, for one, can't wait to explore everything you've done."

"What do you mean?"

He let out an exasperated breath, "Can you not see how everything is greener, more alive? Can you not sense how many animals seem to be following us around? Or how about the fact there are flowers in places there shouldn't be because the trees block the sun and there is no way that flowers

should grow there? Elle, it's amazing, and I've never seen anything like it. Can you imagine how you can help change things with this gift? We'll never have a bad year of crops again."

With every sentence he spoke, I felt more and more insecure about it. I knew he was saying that I did all of *that*, but what the hell?

I did all of that?

I took a second to look at my surroundings and noticed how out of place the flowers were. There shouldn't be flowers under a tree. It really was beautiful, though, and I sort of felt like Thumper should come tumbling out at any moment. I heard a crunch, turned my head, and saw a deer. Now that was too freaking coincidental; think 'Thumper,' and Bambi automatically appears?

"Grey, I think maybe we should head back."

"Are you tired from the work you did with Mindy? No one would fault you if you were. You did somehow grow a forest!"

"It's just a lot, you know?"

"How about we just do some running to see how fast you are, then we can go back?"

"I don't know." I looked around the magical place I seemed to have created and felt overwhelmed by it. Everything was moving so fast.

He watched me look at the forest and made a snap decision. "Come on."

"Where are we headed?"

"You need to wrap your head around everything, and us being out in the woods doesn't seem to be helping."

"Where are you taking me then?"

"You'll see. Let's go."

I followed Grey to a large barn on Ryker's property.

My thoughts were heavy on our walk back. Something was bothering me, and I needed to know. "How come the first day we'd been intimate, Ryker was ready to eat everyone, and today he let me leave with you without a second thought?"

Grey shrugged, "My guess is you've solidified the bond in a way that he isn't compelled to act as possessive."

"I hope that's it. He almost ate Reece."

"He wouldn't have. Besides, he let you go to the library with Micah."

"Yeah, Micah pretty much said the same thing. It's just strange how fast he seemed to change."

"Go with it. All of this is new to us, too. None of us have experienced a fated bond before and especially not with an unknown creature such as yourself."

I lifted a brow questioningly at him, because... *creature*?

"Truth is, you're an anomaly. This fated mates thing isn't prevalent, and since we have no idea what exactly you are..." His sentence trailed off as he opened the barn door.

I followed him inside, wondering what Ryker told him about me. Doesn't he know that I am most likely half-vampire and some other mythical creature with wings? Honestly, I was sort of glad that he didn't know about the vamp ties. I didn't want him to look at me differently. Ryker would care about me unconditionally because of the bond and was so sure his family would accept me, but I wasn't convinced.

"Do you have any experience with fighting?" Grey asked, taking me out of my thoughts.

"I took a self-defense class, and I went through the police academy."

"No shit, you were a cop?"

"Not a very good one," I muttered, "Apparently, I didn't write enough tickets. I let people go too often with a warning. And one day, they let me go. It's okay. It wasn't my favorite job anyway."

Grey shook his head at me like he didn't know what to do with me. "So, if I just..." Out of nowhere, his fist came flying at my face. On instinct, I ducked to avoid him hitting me, then as if I had some crazy ninja skills that I wasn't aware of, I gave him a quick one-two jab right into his ribs.

"Fuck, but you can hit." Grey clutched his side.

He smirked, then put one hand on top of his head and the other under his chin, cracking his neck. I watched as he bounced on his heels like he was some ultimate fighter.

"What are you doing?" I chuckled.

Without warning, he turned with a quick sweep of his leg to knock me off balance. I jumped over his leg, stuck out mine, and landed a kick to his back. *Take that!*

Grey grinned, then he proceeded to try to hit me over and over again. Each strike failed, and it was becoming amusing. Finally, with Grey on his knees, I asked, "Had enough?"

Grey stood, then asked, "Want to play with weapons?"

I flashed him a giant grin, because heck yeah, that sounded like fun. But right as I was about to agree, Ryker entered the barn.

"How's she doing?" Ryker asked Grey.

"She's kicking my ass, so I'd say she's a natural at that, too. However, she couldn't run for shit while we were in the woods."

Ryker studied me for a moment, and I wondered what he was thinking, so I tried to listen in on his thoughts. It didn't work. I squinted my eyes again, trying to get in there.

"What's she doing?" Grey asked Ryker.

"I think she's trying to get in my head."

"Hmm, looks more like she's about to fart."

Ryker laughed, and I scowled. Then, in my head, I asked Ryker, "*Let me in, honey.*"

He smiled, "*I like it when you call me honey,*" he replied silently.

"Being around you two is odd," Grey remarked, "Anyway, she can fight. It's as if she can sense what I'm going to do before I do it, and she strikes on instinct. I couldn't land one blow."

Ryker nodded his head in silent approval, then his voice changed, and he solemnly said, "There's another reason I came here."

"What's up?" Grey asked.

"Mindy hasn't changed back yet. She's still a wolf."

"Why is that weird?" I asked, looking between the men.

"It's been about four hours that you've been at it, and Mindy is just hanging out in wolf form."

Grey began to briskly walk out of the barn.

"She's on the porch."

Just then, a huge crack of thunder shook the barn, and a lightning strike flashed through the sky. The sky grew darker, and heavy sheets of rain immediately began to pour. I could see Grey running towards the house.

Ryker and I were alone again in the barn.

"Do you think something is wrong with Mindy? Did I do something to her inadvertently?"

"I'm not sure. Can you go over what happened in the woods with her?"

"Sure," I lifted myself up onto a raised wooden loft area that was built up higher than the ground. There was some old hay there, and it looked like he might've stored more here one time but no longer did. He sat next to me and linked our fingers together while I recounted what happened in the woods. I

also explained how I told her to calm down, and she went to sleep, then told her to wake up, and she did before we left. Throughout this, I showed him images of Mindy and me in the woods.

"You did all that? Incredible."

I looked away, feeling shy. "Well, that doesn't help with Mindy's predicament."

"Try to send her an image of her changing back to a person."

"Like from here? Shouldn't I go near her or something?"

"It's only a few hundred yards. Go on. Try," he urged.

I did as he said and pictured her changing back and pushed that image toward her.

"How will we know if it worked?" I asked.

"We won't until we leave the barn, and I think I've been away from my mate for too long." He responded. Large pellets of rain beat against the barn, and I suddenly felt my breasts begin to swell, and that familiar desire began to stir.

Ryker's already dark eyes seemed to darken more as he noticed the slightest dip in my breathing.

"I missed you today. Do you know how hard it was for me to let you out of my sight after last night?"

I shrugged, "It's getting a little easier, though, isn't it?"

Ryker paused and seemed to think about this. "I guess so but knowing that the Valderes approached you at the library really made it hard. I kept thinking that if something happened and I wasn't there, I'd never forgive myself."

"What did you get done today?" I asked, changing the subject.

"I spoke with Brogan, Reece, and Micah. After that, I pretty much dealt with the fall out of a bunch of concerned wolves over a storm, a growing forest, and why I suddenly had roses sprout around the house."

"Were they really freaked? Sorry about that."

"Don't apologize. Never, not for that. You made life. You gave us something beautiful. What you did is not something you should feel bad about. What you did was amazing."

There I went, feeling all mushy on the inside again. I leaned into Ryker and grabbed his bicep, then put my head against his shoulder. The intimacy felt nice. I felt connected to him with an intimacy that wasn't that tearing your clothes off. It was simpler, easier, and natural.

He flashed an image in my mind of how he saw me and how he felt when I walked back from the woods and up to the house earlier with Mindy. I must've missed it then because of how many people were around. He was filled with pride and awe.

"You take my breath away," he spoke low as if we had an audience and his words were meant only for me. Too intimate for even the Gods to hear.

"You're pretty great yourself, Ryker."

He hummed deep in his throat in appreciation.

"Come here." His arm stretched over me, and he hooked my side, pulling me up onto his lap.

"Nice moves. You did that fast," I joked, giving levity to the mood.

"You like that, huh? I got moves you've never even heard of before."

"Like smooth moves," I teased all breathily because sitting astride him, I could feel that the positioning of our bodies was affecting him.

"Something like that." He moved an inch or so forward and pressed his lips to mine, kissing me softly. Kiss after kiss, he was ever so gentle. I wish I could say that was enough for me, but it wasn't, and I think he knew that.

I pulled back an inch and grabbed his jaw, "Stop playing with me."

He chuckled, then pushed his hips up so I could feel how much he wanted me.

"It's all a game, Baby. It just depends on what the rules are and how much you want to play."

I narrowed my eyes on him and decided two could play at this game. So, I arched my back and ground into him, grabbing his belt loops and leaning back. His hands moved behind my back to steady me, and apparently, that was all I got to do because Ryker stood, held me to him, then flipped us around so he was on top. "New rule. Tease me, and I take control."

Then, he licked my neck, no lie, his tongue started at the base and moved all the way up, and it turned me on like crazy. He was so big and masculine, and pressing his weight against me made me wild. He hiked my leg up and kissed me hard.

Thunder rolled in the distance, and just as things were starting to get interesting between us, Grey rushed through the barn doors.

"Ryk, come quick. It's Mindy."

Ryker released me, then stood and grabbed my hand. We raced out of the barn and through the heavy sheets of rain.

We reached Mindy, who was on the porch withering in pain.

"What the fuck?" I mumbled.

Ryker grabbed me harder than I would've expected. "What did you do, Ariel?"

I took another look at Mindy and gasped. She wasn't quite Mindy, and she wasn't quite wolf. She was some strange mix of the two. Her eyes were wider, more pronounced at the edges. Her nose was longer and broader, like the start of a snout, but not fully formed. And her leg, one of her legs was still a paw. And she was hurting.

"What did you do?" he repeated again and crouched low to Mindy.

"I... I just did what you told me to do. Maybe I was too far away?"

"Try again," he urged.

I closed my eyes and thought of her shifting and sent it to her.

Seconds passed.

"It's not working. Nothing is happening."

Mindy moaned in pain, and even though we were on the porch, the rain pelted in sideways, soaking us.

"Let's move her inside," Ryker shouted over the thunder.

He started to lift her, and she cried out in an agonizing yelp. I wasn't sure what to do. In my head, I screamed, "*Change back to Mindy!*"

Suddenly, Mindy began to change again. She shifted, her eyes grew smaller, her nose returned, and her paw became a foot.

I took a step back. I did that. I unintentionally caused her pain. I wanted to flee again and get as far away from everyone as I could.

I did that to her.

I didn't know what I was doing, and truth be told, they didn't either. My lack of knowledge had serious consequences.

Running hadn't gotten me anywhere thus far, though.

Mindy sat up and clutched her head. Ryker held his sister to him then handed her off to Grey.

"I'm okay," she said, still clutching her head.

Grey carried her inside, and he looked at me like he was unsure who he was looking at. I didn't blame him. I had no idea who I was either. Ryker followed the pair in the house, and I remained in the storm, sitting on the porch stairs and letting the rain wash over me. I had no idea what was happening to me. I felt untrained and dangerous.

Their way didn't work. It was fun and interesting, but I did that to Mindy. Ryker knew it, and I knew it. I had to figure this all out without them. I

couldn't put them in danger because they thought they could train me. They had no clue what they were doing with me, and neither did I. I needed outside help. I needed Father Archibald, and I needed to, albeit regrettably, keep my distance from Ryker. I didn't know what I was capable of, and I'd be damned if I hurt Ryker along the way.

I was a dead woman walking. Ryker was officially going to kill me when he woke up, and that was because right at this very moment, I was nearing Brogan's house.

The evening had been more than a little off. I sat on the porch for a bit longer. Eventually, Ryker came out to find me. He apologized for snapping at me, assured me it wasn't my fault, and asked me to come inside. I did.

We were all more quiet than usual. Grey fixed us all food, and Mindy took a nap on the couch, saying she was exhausted. After we ate, Grey and Mindy left, and Ryker and I sat close on the couch for a while. He was mostly silent, and I knew something had changed between us. I could see a war waging behind his eyes. He knew what I knew.

I was dangerous.

We made it upstairs and got ready for bed. It was the first time that we were in his room that it wasn't lust-filled.

"You doing okay? You've barely said two words to me," Ryker finally asked once we were spooned together in bed.

"It was just a lot to process."

"It's not your fault."

I nodded my head, too afraid that my voice would give away my doubt. I think we both knew that whether it was intentional or not, I was still responsible.

Ryker curled into me, holding me close against his body. I laid with him for as long as I could, memorizing his scent and the way his arms felt around me. He struggled to find sleep, and I knew his thoughts had to be heavy. For me to do what I needed to do, he needed to sleep. I showed an image of him sleeping in his mind, then I ordered him to sleep. At first, it seemed like he was fighting against the command, but then he was fast asleep, and I made my move.

I grabbed a bag and threw a change of clothes in it. I was sure to grab my dagger and medallion. Then, I changed out of my pajamas and into an athletic sports bra and tank, along with shorts and sneakers. The outfit was primarily black, but there were a few lines of grey along the seam of the shorts. I didn't scream badass, but I felt like I needed to be ready to train. I had no idea how long Ryker would stay asleep, and I needed to hurry.

I kissed him on his forehead and whispered, "Forgive me," then I went downstairs and grabbed a sheet of paper and wrote him a note.

Dear Ryker,

Please don't be angry with me, or if you are, please know that I did what I felt I had to do. You and your family are blindly attempting to train me. You have no idea what I am or what I'm capable of, and I refuse to be the reason any member of the pack is hurt. I hope Mindy can find it in her heart to forgive me, but I would completely understand if she didn't. She was only trying to help me, and I did that to her.

I saw the way you looked at me. I know you were thinking the same thing. I'm a liability. I don't blame you for that because it's true.

I feel like a monster.

I must look outside of the pack to be trained. If there is someone who knows what I am and what I can do, I must go to them. I must learn how to be who I'm supposed to be without putting you and your pack in jeopardy.

I'm sorry, my mate. I know separation at this point will be hard for both of us. I know you will likely want to come after me, but please don't. I need this. I need to figure out who I'm meant to be, and I need to do it in a way that is safe for everyone. Right about now, you probably think I could face dangers away from you, but I'm stronger than both of us realize. If today is any indication of that, then I think we both know that leaving is best.

I promise you I will return. I will be stronger when I do.

I was afraid to say the words to you. I was afraid for you to know. It all felt too soon, but you should know that I am completely in love with you, and it is because of that love that I must do what I can to protect you. Please forgive me.

With Love,

Your mate, Ariel

I laid the note beside Ryker, kissed him one last time, and left, grateful that the rain had subsided because I was going to run.

Now, I was in front of Brogan's house. I also planned to tell him to go to sleep, but he was sitting out on the front stoop as if he was waiting for me as I approached. I feared he knew what I'd done to his daughter and that he'd be angry with me.

"You shouldn't be here," Brogan said.

"I think I should," I responded solemnly.

"He has no idea you're here, does he?"

"No, not yet, at least. Do you know why I'm here?"

"You're going to leave. It's going to destroy him."

"No, don't say that. Don't let it. Promise me, you won't let it destroy him. I'll be back. You have my word. He means too much to me."

"If he meant that much to you, you would see you're making the wrong decision."

I shook my head, "No, no, I'm not. Do you know what happened to Mindy? I told her to calm, and it kept her trapped as a wolf. Then Ryker suggested I command her to change, but she only partially changed. She was in so much pain. I did that! You guys don't know what you're doing when it comes to me. I need to be around people who do. I need to find out who I am. So, I need you to make sure he doesn't fall apart." I was panting and beyond ticked. Perhaps, my anger was displaced, but I'd hurt his daughter.

Then, the front door opened, and Father Archibald stepped out.

"Brogan, you know what she says is right. It was only an hour ago we were discussing the same thing."

"That was before I took a look at her and remembered how enamored my son already is. I can smell him on her. I can smell how much more they have solidified the bond. This will not only crush him, but it will physically hurt him."

That information felt like a blow. "How badly will he hurt? Will it be permanent? What can I do?"

"You can *not* go," he said quietly, knowing that wasn't going to be my decision.

I sighed.

"Don't get hurt. Come back as quickly as you can. Keep lines of communication open. It will start as a pain in his gut, and it will spread. It will eventually recede, but he will lose strength. When he is weak, someone from the pack will undoubtedly challenge him, and he could lose. You leaving could change the pack completely."

"What if staying also changes it? What if half your wolves become a half-wolf, half-human, and they are all in pain. What if I become a liability for him and destroy the pack? I wouldn't do it on purpose, but don't you think it will disrupt the balance when the wolves find out what I can do? He'd already spent the afternoon trying to quiet them. There is also the Valderes. With me being untrained, what if they somehow use that to their advantage? No. Staying here is not what's best. I hope, no, I pray that Ryker will understand that."

"I think she has made up her mind, Brogan," Father Archibald said, "You promised you would not stand in her way."

"And I'll keep that promise," Brogan replied. "Be safe, Elle."

I hugged Brogan and turned to the Father. "Do you want to get your stuff?"

"There's nothing I need where we're going."

I looked at him curiously as he took a cross off from around his neck and placed it in the palm of his hand. Brogan didn't look entirely surprised by this, but I was. I had no idea what he was doing.

His other hand swirled over the cross, and he said a bunch of words I didn't understand. The cross began to move in circles, then it lifted off of his hand and floated. I'd seen some seriously crazy stuff today, but this was the topper.

Suddenly, the cross moved about a foot away from Father Archibald, and a black swirly circle began to form. With each word the Father chanted, it grew larger and larger.

"Are you ready, Elle?"

I looked at Brogan, who just shrugged, then I responded, "Um... I guess. Is this like a portal or something?"

"Yes, that's exactly what this is. Come, child. Your future awaits."

I wanted to argue that my future was right here, but I ignored his comment and decided to trust my dad's oldest friend, then walked straight into the portal.

At that exact moment, two things happened: first, my ring turned dark, and second, I heard in my mind Ryker scream, "No!"

I know... I left you with the infamous dreaded cliffy! Not to worry. I have been waiting to release this book until I was much further along in book two. Look for Intended by The Rose Book Two in the Destined by the Fates Series.

Thank you, a million times over, for reading and giving my paranormal romance a chance. It's different from what I normally write, and it's been a passion project for sure. I've thought about writing a PNR for years. It's my favorite genre to read. I hope you got lost in these characters. If you have enjoyed this book, the nicest thing you can do for an author is to leave a review.

Books never come to life singularly. It's a process that takes help. I'll start with saying thank you to my sisters, Melissa and Katie. You read this book twice, with a whole lot of changes. You two are my cheerleaders. I love you. Thank you, Jessica, Shana, Mindy and Misty. Thank you to my kids for being patient when I tell you Mommy's working and you need to give me a second. Thank you Hang Le for making these beautifully designed covers. Thank you Kyleigh Poultney for editing. Thank you Nicole Reid for working through my blurbs with me. Thank you Louisa Brandenburger for beta reading. Thank you Dawn Costeria, Mart Tatar, Erin Mikolic, and Cheryl Wilkins for either beta reading or being an early reader. Thank you Babes, from Blushing Babes are Up All Night. Thank you Jo Anette, a reader I recently met who found a few last minute comma's. Thank you Kevin Smith for making me laugh and inspiring my movie binge scenes. Lastly, to my author friends who have always helped support me, thank you.

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About the Author

Abby McCarthy has published both contemporary romance and motorcycle club romances. This is the first in a brand-new paranormal romance series.

She resides in Northeast Ohio with her husband, three kids, and three dogs. In her spare time, she enjoys a fabulous happy hour, good times with friends, camping, reading, and writing.

Read more at [Abby McCarthy's site](#).