


EVERNIGHT PUBLISHING®



TRUE LOVE IS
FATE REUNITING TWO SOULS
IN PERFECT HARMONY.

REUNITED

OTHERWORLDLY:
TALES OF WERES AND METEORANS

CLAUDIA LANDRES

EVERNIGHT PUBLISHING®



TRUE LOVE IS
FATE REUNITING TWO SOULS
IN PERFECT HARMONY.

REUNITED

OTHERWORLDLY:
TALES OF WERES AND METEORANS

CLAUDIA LANDRES



Published by **EVERNIGHT PUBLISHING** ® at
Smashwords

www.evernightpublishing.com

Copyright© 2023 Claudia Landres

ISBN: 978-0-3695-0917-8

Cover Artist: Jay Aheer

Editor: Melissa Hosack

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

WARNING: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be used or reproduced electronically or in print without written

permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews.

This is a work of fiction. All names, characters, and places are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

DEDICATION

To Brett and Aidan

REUNITED

Otherworldly: Tales of Weres and Meterans, 1

Claudia Landres

Copyright © 2023



PART ONE

Chapter One

Vosges

Jade

It's almost the end of my shift, and the small diner is quiet. I wait behind the counter as our former high school star quarterback's gaze flickers between the diner's once-white display above my head and me. When his three obnoxious friends settle loudly at the largest table by the window I cleaned this morning, I exhale slowly. Crap. They're eating in.

I don't like him. I don't think anyone does, nor should, but Andy Macron is the very spoiled son of Vosges' mayor. A bully shark in a small fishbowl.

"Three burgers with cheese fries, one onion rings, and four chocolate milkshakes."

His cocky grin still in place, he turns toward one of his friends whose thick fingers fly over the cell holding his attention. Hey, Mo, wanna try a burger?"

Glancing over my shoulder, I grin at Flo who leans against the wall of the narrow kitchen. She's the only other employee of the Star Diner. She's also our very good line cook and the manager of everything—except for the money handling which she happily leaves to Bernie, the owner of the L-shaped eatery.

Mo, the brutishly large—or is it wide?—receiver shakes his head without lifting his eyes from his device.

The tall, in-love-with-himself asshole scoffs as he pivots back to me. "And a salad for the vegetarian pussy." He says the word with his usual entitled glee I've always found detestable.

"What dressing would you like?"

The asshole everyone calls 'Cute Andy'—God knows why—braces his elbows on the beaten counter and flashes the

smile that won him the graces of Leah Donald, the head cheerleader, as well as the biased affections of every teacher and administrators at Vosges' high school. He rakes his big hand through the mop of his salon-sun kissed hair and shrugs. "Whatever's good."

The antiquated POS clangs open in the near empty diner. "Twenty-one dollars ninety-three, please."

He winks, and his voice lowers. "Come on, Jane. I don't have my wallet with me. Maybe this can be on the house. What do you say?"

First my name's Jade and ... screw you?

When I lean over the counter, his bulging gaze drops to my breasts pushing against the thin, striped shirt Bernie insists on me wearing even though I'm the only server here. The loud noise of the cash drawer I slam shut brings back his weasel-like eyes to my face. "Then, I guess you and your friends will have to go hungry."

Andy's face turns red, his nostrils flare, and I can almost hear his teeth grind before he stomps to his table with his fists clenched by his sides—I presume to get money from his friends.

Flo grunts, and I turn to her. Watching the group of jocks with narrowed eyes, she whispers, "Do you want me to stay?" When I shake my head, she grins. "I'll be back in an hour to help you close. Will you be okay with the grill?"

"Yes, I'll see you later. "

She removes her apron and puts one of the flower-scented, rolled-up cigarettes in her mouth before stepping toward the back door. As the heavy door jangles shut, Andy returns to the counter wearing a cruel grin, and I roll my shoulders back.

Maybe I should have asked Flo to stay.

He tosses a couple of bills that land beside the cash register. "Here."

When I reach for the money, he grabs my forearm and jerks it hard toward him, crushing my ribs against the edge of the counter.

“Ow! What are you d—?”

His ugly rictus is close enough for me to smell the beer on his breath. “Not so brave now that your friend’s gone.”

Gritting my teeth at the pain radiating up my arm, I plant my heels on the floor and pull my arm back. “Let go, you psycho.” I speak loud enough for everyone in the diner to hear, but like at school, his clique does nothing, and no-one helps. When I angle my teary eyes back to Andy’s, he squeezes harder.

“Who the fuck do you think you are? You and your mother are fucking whores.”

I can’t help the shame burning my face. I’ve heard versions of these words so many times, and yet it still hurts.

The bully’s knuckles turn white around my forearm. I scan the diner again, but the customers—including my ex-tenth-grade English teacher, Ms. Graves, who liked me until she met my mother, Sylvia—are suddenly busy not looking at me.

My skin chafes under Andy’s fingers. Pain shoots up my shoulder. “Andy ... stop—”

I’m about to call for Bernie when several things happen at once.

The door of the diner slams open. Someone big and very fast is at the counter. The cash register whines. I stumble back as Andy releases my arm.

A huge hand clutches the quarterback’s throat from behind. Then, Andy’s body takes flight in slow motion.

The jock’s big body hits the linoleum in a thud that makes me wince. He skids on his back across the floor all the way to their table while his friends jump out of the way with their cellphones raised high.

Unable to look away, I pull my head in at the muted crunch of his flailing limbs hitting chairs and tables.

On his back, Andy braces himself on one hand while he wraps his other around his throat.

When the man stands over him and bends at the waist, putting his face close to his, my arm-grabber whimpers. I'm too far to hear what's being said, but the defeated bully's hair flops wildly over his forehead as he nods several times.

The stranger hauls Andy up by the collar of his designer t-shirt—and wow—he dwarfs Andy.

His deep-brown hair contrasts against the bottle green of his t-shirt that molds over his wide shoulders and tapered waist. His jeans-covered strong legs are braced apart as he shifts his attention to the three pallid boys plastered into the front window who gawk at him.

I hope those are tears on Andy's face.

The man's voice is low but somehow echoes throughout the diner. "Take your pisshead friends and get the fuck out of here."

The four of them including elephant-steps-Mo scatter so fast, they tip over a chair that my rescuer picks up and slides under the rectangle rickety table.

The muscled back of the Andy-thrower shifts as he pivots, and I hold my breath. His back is sexy, but his front is *oh-My-Lord*. His gait is fluid and powerful as he prowls to the counter, sending my heartbeat into a frenzy.

"Are you all right?"

The rolling rumble of his voice grazes my skin and sets low in my belly. Up close, he's... I exhale a trembling breath and hook my eyes onto his incredible clear grey ones framed by strong arched brows. He's not pretty or even classically handsome—too much strength in his angular jaw—but his lips are full as if to soften the almost brutal masculinity emanating from him. He's gloriously beautiful.

My body sways toward his, and I have to lock my knees to stop myself from climbing over the counter to... I lick my dry lips.

What's wrong with me?

He opens his wide palm over the counter. "Let me see."

I eagerly place my wrist into his warm hand and gasp at the heated shiver his touch triggers.

My savior yanks his hand from underneath mine.

Did he feel it too?

Yes, he probably did because his frown screams that he didn't like it.

What man would want to touch the daughter of the town's whore with that much care?

As I steel myself against the sudden flow of tears pressing behind my eyes, the door's little bell jingles. A stunning blonde woman dressed in tiny denim shorts paired with a white tank top cocks her hip and crosses her tanned arms under her generous breasts.

"Sax?"

My savior doesn't move fast enough for her liking because her tone sharpens. "Saxton, we're late." She slides her sunglasses up and browses the diner with her lips pinched in disgust. "This place's a dump."

When Ms. Graves cranes her wrinkly neck up and humphs loudly, the blonde just stares at her until the teacher hunches back over her half-eaten salad.

Without another word, my savior strides out of the diner and opens the passenger door of his shiny black truck for the nameless woman. Then he climbs behind the wheel and drives away.

Saxton. His name's Saxton.

Saxton

Breanne, my sister—humans would call her my stepsister—lowers her sunglasses and turns to me. “What was that, back there?”

I keep my eyes on the road. “That little asswipe was hurting the girl.”

As I drive us back home, she sighs.

“Seriously, Sax, why do you even bother? Humans aren’t worth nor deserving of our time. Let them kill each other. They’ll do us all a favor.”

I’ve heard this all my life, and I’m usually of the same mind, but when I heard the girl’s distress and saw that little asshole who was easily three times her size hurting her, I had to act. When the fucker was down, I showed him my wolf’s eyes until the stench of his fear filled my nostrils.

Beneath the smell of grease permeating the dingy diner, I honed in onto the heady scent of honeysuckle radiating from the beautiful girl behind the counter. When I got close, her scent sweetened with pheromones, and I got hard. Which has never happened around a human.

As we drive past the town limits, Bree shifts to face me.

“Sax, you’ve been gone for too long. I’ve missed you, but more importantly, our pack missed you. The other packs are sending more and more of their lieutenants to challenge your father every year, and the Prestwood pack is gunning for war over our territory. Samwell’s strong, but—”

“Bree, I don’t want to lead the pack. I—”

She yanks her glasses off. “Sax, this isn’t about you. Do you know how rare it is for an alpha to birth another natural alpha and not force him out to build his own pack? Sam wants you to take over. And I know you’re younger than most alphas, but it’s your destiny.”

I clench my jaw. Being the alpha’s son and a natural born alpha set me on a path I never had control over.

Before I can answer, she says, “It’s not the olden days anymore when the defeated alpha had to die. But our pack is one of the richest ones, and unlike the two southern packs, we’re not getting hunted down by humans because we know not to mix with them. We’re tight, we’re strong, but one day, one of those young power-hungry assholes will get the upper hand in the dominance fight, and they will kill him because of who we are. Or just to prove a point.”

Bree’s unfortunately right. Without the destiny bullshit, it’s my duty to care for and preserve my pack as well as our very existence as Werens.

She takes a deep breath. “I don’t want to lose my family again.”

The plea in her voice and the fear in her scent make me clench my fingers around the wheel.

“Mom and Carson are worried,” she says.

Fuck. Carson, my father’s beta, and Roselyn have always had a quiet dislike of each other. Nothing was ever said, but there’s always been an unwavering, veiled animosity between them. So, if both are concerned, things are worse than I was led to believe when my father called two weeks ago to demand my return.

Bree’s mother, Roselyn, the woman my father mated after my mother died, came to us after her whole pack, the Forrester pack, was massacred. Grant Forrester, the alpha of the pack was Carson’s young brother who was mated to Roselyn’s sister. At the time of the devastating attack, Carson, who had been my father’s beta for years, vouched for the inclusion of the only family he had left.

I glance at the she-wolf seated beside me. When Rose and Bree came to live with us, she was a pup, and I was in my late teenage years. She used to sit at the bottom of the stairs of our old house and wait. I’d come back home and find her half-asleep, clutching her teddy bear.

It took the wild teenager I was a few weeks to understand she was acting out of fear, but when I did, I made it a habit to reassure her I would be coming back. She's my baby sister, one of the only people I can fully trust, and while I was in Europe, she was the only person I kept regularly in touch with.

I veer into the driveway of our family house. The imposing mansion with its twelve bedrooms doesn't exactly scream home, but it's the only one I've known.

As soon as we climb out of the car, a wolf approaches. My father wants to instigate a dominance fight and has been relentless since I've returned home. But that's not his scent. I lift my chin at my best friend, Ris, as he rounds the corner of the house.

"Hey, Sax," he says, but his eyes are on Bree. His tone is hungry as he greets her. "Breanne."

There's a breathiness in my sister's voice. "Harris."

She strolls past him, and I chuckle silently when his gaze stays glued on the she-wolf's ass until she closes the door behind her. Even his wolf growls.

When I slap his shoulder, he whips his head toward me. "Ris, just claim her already. You like her; your folks like her."

His shoulder bunches under my hand. "Nah. She's Luna material." He rolls his shoulders back. "And you know how Rose is."

The whole pack does. My father's mate has made it very clear that her daughter deserves no less than an alpha as a mate, which keeps most unmated males away from Bree, and in turn, pisses my sister off to no end.

Falling in step with Harris, I glance at my brother-in-arms. "If Bree's—"

When both he and his wolf snarl, I shake my head. "Understood. I'll drop it."

He dips his chin as we resume our walk. “How was the tour of our territory? Not as exotic as the Farina’s territory, but not bad, huh?” He leans in, which won’t stop anyone within a twenty-meter earshot from hearing what he says. “Heard you happily obliged to many of their women.”

No apologies there. I love a hard fuck, and I love women who love fucking. “Let’s catch rabbits.”

My best friend nods at our childhood code for ‘I need to keep whatever I’m about to say from the pack.

We morph into our wolves and run toward the thick forest.

When we reach the river, we head for the old oak tree with a cache at the base of its trunk and dig out the change of clothes we stashed there. After we get dressed, we walk upstream in silence for a few minutes. I can’t sense anyone around, but I still pitch my voice low.

“I want you to look into someone for me. She works at the Star Diner, and some fuckwit attacked her earlier.”

Harris’s scowl matches the anger bristling through me. There’s never any fucking reason to lay a hand on a woman. Never. Whatever her species is.

“Are Prestwoods breaking our laws?”

One of our sacred laws forbids us to take human life unless we’re under direct attack. I shake my head. “It was one of her own kind.”

His brows hit his hairline. “Why the fuck do you care what humans do to each other? When I clench my jaw, he sighs. “Was it in Mordsen or Vartan?”

“In Vosges, she—”

“That little shithole?”

My people haven’t changed.

Our pack territory expands over two large counties, Vartan, and Mordsen, across which the largest forest of the

state runs through. Vosges is a little town—or a big village, as my pack sees it. It's a little stunted in time and doesn't have much to offer in terms of natural resources or business opportunities, but it's patched on the eastern border of Mordsen making it, de facto, part of Cavendish territory.

I bury my hands in my pockets. “Yes, the shithole that's part of our territory.”

We resume our walk.

“What do you want with her?”

Lick away the pain that little turd inflicted on her. Then taste every inch of her soft skin until she's screaming my name.

“I just want to make sure she's okay.”

“Sax, you've had more lupine pussy than I can count. You just decided to go human? You know how your dad feels about fraternizing with them.”

I can almost taste the honeysuckle.

“Will you do it?” When he nods, I add, “She's young, brunette, long curly hair.”

Golden eyes, round, high tits, plump biteable lips, and the most mouth-watering honeysuckle scent.

Chapter Two

Jade

“Jadey-Jay, where’s my money?”

I clench my fingers around the plastic handle of the mop. Sylvia, my mother, calls me that when she’s drunk or in the mood for a fight. One often leads to the other, so I step away from her to finish sweeping the kitchenette floor of our small apartment.

Keeping my head down, I wedge the mop against the wall in the little gap by the stove. “Mom, I don’t have any.”

Sylvia staggers toward the corner of the square room and bends over the small side table I found in a dumpster. When she snatches the overstretched backpack containing everything I own, I curl my fingers into fists and wait as she shakes the content of my bag on the floor: my bus pass, my cell, my books, and some tissues.

“Filthy little liar,” she half slurs half hisses.

There’s no point in fighting with her when she’s like this. She pulls two twenty-dollar bills hidden in my phone case that she brandishes in my face before sliding it in the back pocket of her glued-on jeans.

In two steps, she’s in my face, and I focus my gaze on the freckles on the tip of her nose she hasn’t buried underneath her thick make-up. Her bright red lipstick bleeds in the right corner of her lips. Her eyes are heavily circled in black kohl, and her lashes have tripled in weight and length.

She grabs my jaw so hard that tears clog my throat. “Not even born and you were already a sneaky little bitch.” Her grip tightens, and I dig my short nails in my palms.

Here it goes again.

After having her periods for the first four months, Sylvia realized too late she was pregnant, and gave birth to me on her

eighteenth birthday. So, unlike the kids around me who treated that day like a second Christmas, I've spent every birthday making myself as small as possible to avoid the specific brand of rage she unleashes on that day.

She shoves me back, and I wince as blood floods back to my face. "Whatever you own is mine. You ungrateful little bitch, and while you're under my roof—"

"Sylvia, I've been paying the rent and bills for more than a year, so technically you're und—"

Whack. She slaps me. Right across the face. My ears pop, and my cheek sets on fire while pain wets my eyes. The woman has a mean right hook she loves practicing on me. Always in the face.

But today, I won't give her the satisfaction of begging her to stop. With my eyes on hers, I tuck my hair behind my ear and cross my arms on my chest. She leans in, slightly taller than me in her heels, and I clench my jaw when the stale wafts of tobacco on her breath hit my nose.

"You're not better than me, Jadey-Jay."

Well, I'm not throwing myself at married men because I'm so desperate to be loved I sleep with whoever shows me a little attention.

As if she read my mind, she inches closer until we're nose to nose. "You wait and see. You'll meet someone who makes you wet, and you'll fall for him. But they're all liars. They'll take what they want and leave. Enjoy it while your body looks like that."

Something flits in her eyes. Something that pulls me to her and tightens my chest.

"Mommy..."

She steps back and narrows bloodshot eyes on mine. "You and me are the same. You'll see."

You and I, I automatically correct—not out loud because I value my teeth—while she teeters across the room. When the

door shuts behind her, I rub my face and kneel on the damp floor to pick up my things.

Just another Tuesday.

Half an hour later, as I step off the bus, I readjust the weight of my backpack and look to the clear blue sky. Exhaling Sylvia out of my mind, I stroll through the soft ground of the small path. The quiet park at the edge of town is my favorite place in the whole wide world. Tammy, my only friend in high school, took me here the first time Sylvia hit me.

I lost Tammy when Sylvia slept with her dad. Her mom moved them out to San Diego or San Francisco—I'm not sure anymore—but I kept coming here when I needed to dream a little.

The whisper of the breeze dancing through tree leaves and lush grass soothes me as I arrive at my little haven. Clutching the straps of my bag tighter, I cross the stone bridge over a small creek and smile at the majestic Brewer's willow. This is my secret place, my personal paradise.

Once under the heavy curtain of its sheltering hanging leaves, I spread out my small blanket in the little niche between the roots where the soil is flat. After placing my water bottle and the apple I took from the diner on the edge of the frayed coverlet, I set my back against the wide trunk and open my book.

Much later, my cell buzzes. It's time to go. I pack up quickly and make my way back in time to catch the last bus to Vosges. After dining on the other half of the sandwich I had for lunch and a can of soup, I eventually fall asleep on the mattress in my corner of the bedroom I share with my mother.

The muffled sound of Sylvia stumbling into the apartment wakes me up. and I reach for my phone. It's 3:21 AM. I rub my eyes to clear the fuzziness out of my brain. "Sylvia?"

When I hear a crashing noise, I sit up. She's not alone. "Mom?"

Rushing into the lit main room, I freeze.

My mother is on her knees, and I stare at her forehead bumping on the stranger's protruding belly.

Bile churns in my stomach. "M-mom?"

Without releasing the man's genitals, she twists her head toward me. Her lipstick has spilled around her lips, and her smile looks demonic. "Jade, go back to bed. Ted and I are nearly finished here—"

The fat man grunts. "That your daughter? I'll pay double if she—"

I slap my hand on my mouth and run to the sink of the bathroom just in time to regurgitate my dinner.

Chapter Three

Jade

Two weeks later, and fourteen minutes late for my shift, I hurry through the perpetually dark alley leading to the back door of the diner and pull my hair into a ponytail. The smell of fried bacon welcomes me in the long, narrow kitchen.

“Hey, Flo.”

Floralis is her full name. She whispered it to me as one whispers a secret, three days after I started working here. When I asked why everyone called her ‘Flo,’ she said one should only give their full name to the people they love or are about to fight because names have power. It was a little strange, but also really cool. Flo is beautiful, I mean top-tier-supermodel type of beautiful, and the kindest woman I know.

“Hi, sweetie.”

She lifts a thirty-pound bag of potatoes in one hand and effortlessly places it into the sink.

Flo, the Amazon warrior.

I grin, still amazed at how she manages to move so gracefully within the tiled wall and the cooking area built a meter apart.

She grins back. “Bernie wants to see you in the dungeon.”

Bern’s always been kind and fair, but I can’t help my heartbeats from jogging.

He hates tardiness, but it’s only the second time I’ve been late for work in three years. So, what...?

Clamping on my swirling mind, I tuck my uniform shirt in my jeans. “Why?”

“Don’t know, but get your tush back here quick. I need some help before the after-school crowd.”

She barely finishes her sentence when Bernie's accented voice fills the back of the diner. "Is she here yet?"

Flo rolls her eyes, and I rush toward his office.

After a short knock, I step into the small room that looks more like a messy Ali Baba's cave. Behind his desk, there're two tables heaving under boxes and paperwork. Metal shelves full of jars of funny shaped pickles—I think that's what they are—dig into the little space left while red linen tablecloths we never used hang on hooks attached to the shelves. The space looks more crammed than last time I was here.

Seated in the old black leather chair which has been there forever, my slender boss peers over his tortoise framed glasses with an expression that sends my heartbeat into a frenzy.

What did Sylvia do? Is gentle Bernie caving under the pressure the good citizens of Vosges have been putting on him since he hired me when no one would?

He sets his bony elbows on the wooden desk in between the smaller mountains of stuff, and I step closer. "Bern, I'm sorry I'm late. I had to—"

When Bernie lifts his palm up and gets to his feet, I clasp my hands behind my back.

Please, don't fire me. Please...

He steps around the desk and hands me a white sealed envelope.

My last paycheck?

"Here, kid."

Something heavy inside it hits its corner, and my heart races.

"It's all yours if you still want it," he says.

I rip apart the piece of stationary and cover my open mouth. It's a key.

After finding Sylvia on her knees that night, I asked Bernie if he'd rent me the small apartment two blocks away from the diner he uses for storage. He grunted a nonresponse, and it took me three days before I realized he was too nice to say no to my face.

My lips move to thank him, but the words get stuck in my closed off throat, so I grin at my gruffly boss who's always treated me with kindness when the rest of Vosges' elite regarded my mother and I as parasites.

Swiping off my tears with trembling fingers, I inhale deeply. "Thank you, Bern. Thank you so much."

He nods and his thin lips stretch into a smile. "I've cleaned the place out for you, but it needs some painting. I talked to Todd at the hardware store. He'll give you a discount on whatever you need. You can have the place for free until you leave for university."

I clear my throat. "Bern, I can pay rent."

The best boss in the world shakes his head. "No rent, just utilities. I don't pay you much, and even with a full scholarship, you'll need every penny to make it through. Life in the city is expensive."

When my breath hitches, Bernie sits back at his desk and waves his bony hand at me. "Go back to work. The she-dragon needs you in the kitchen."

Clutching my key tight against my racing heart, I pinch my lips and nod. I don't want to blabber like an idiot and embarrass us both, so I exit the office.

The day is a blur, but I don't care. I even grin as I take the order from a group of cheerleaders and jocks seated in the back booth.

No Andy. Not since the day my savior gave him wings.

When my shift finally ends, I race past the two blocks from the diner and stop before the narrow black door of my castle.

With shaking hands and my heart dancing hard, I unlock the first door and climb the seven steps to the small abode. On top of the carpeted landing there's another door, this one a dirty yellow. After easing it open, I inspect the emptied space, its grey walls, naked light bulb on the greyer ceiling, and its hardwood floors. I graze my fingers on the small counter, open the little fridge, and turn on the barely used stove.

Everything's working.

I twirl with my arms spread wide in the studio.

My place. Mine.

Over the next month, while Sylvia has once again disappeared into her latest hook-up, I go to class, work at the diner until closing, then rush to my apartment. When I told her I was moving out, she just sneered. She didn't ask where, and I didn't volunteer the information.

The sheer volume of work it takes to paint walls is astounding. But Flo comes to help every day. We paint the front door purple, the studio white, and splash some bright red on the wall near the kitchenette to brighten up my palace. We also treat the hardwood floors. Well, Flo does, because I had no idea floors needed treatment. The main window is wide and lets the light flood the room, while a smaller window in the other corner is perfect to air out the smells of the cooking I'm not planning to do.

I spend most of my savings on a new mattress and the nicest bed linen I can afford.

Flo gives me a small couch she never used while Bernie gifts me with a round bistro table and two chairs he acquired from one of the companies hoping to turn *Bernie's diner* — their idea—into a franchise.

The end of May brings in the tourist season, longer hours, and better tips. As a graduation gift, Bernie gives me a bonus I spend on cheap but new essentials for my studio: lots

of vibrant colored cushions, a side table, a dinner set, matching glassware, and metal cutlery.

It's Friday, and the diner has been exceptionally busy. After my shift, I wave goodbye to Flo and Cam, the surly student Bernie hired to help in the kitchen.

"Night, see you tomorrow."

The evening is warm, and my tips were good. In the mood for ice cream, I make my way to the convenience store. Standing with my nose right up against the locked door, my sigh steams the dirty glass. *Shoot, they're closed.* Maybe tomorrow. I walk back to my studio... *My studio.* I grin to myself, and I would whistle if I knew how.

After a quick shower, I crack open both windows of my tiny apartment, hoping the evening temperatures will cool it down. Then, I go for a stroll to the town center. Summer is my favorite season in Vosges, the town doubles its population with new, smiling faces of families enjoying their vacation. People who don't know me nor my mother.

As I amble past the busy town's square, jeering noises loud enough to cover the din of the evening passers-by spill out through the open windows of the only bar in Vosges. When I peek through the window, my heart drops. Sylvia's in there.

Treading through the crowd, I crab walk between bodies until I reach the pool tables at the back of the stuffy bar. Sylvia has her back to me, and both her hands clutched tight around a bearded man's arm. He jerks his arm out, sending her floundering backward.

I reach for her. "Sylvia—"

My mother's teary face is flushed as her red nails claw back into the man's arm. "I love you. Please don't go—"

A small circle of onlookers has formed around us while some patrons lean against the bar, fully enjoying the spectacle that is my mother clinging to a man who doesn't want her.

Again. I step back, dive my hands into my pockets, and wait. The last time I tried to stop her, I sported a black eye she bragged about for days.

The balding, middle-aged stranger yanks his arm out of her grip and aims his repulsive expression at me. “Take your fucking mom out of here.”

I’ve never met him, but I’m the spitting image of my mother. We share an identical oval shaped face, longish straight nose, wide mouth, and almond shaped eyes—mine brown and hers a pale blue. I’m taller than her which I guess came from the father I’ve never met.

For a second, I want to flee, but my loyalty to her keeps me in this hellhole. I block my senses and move into my bubble, the space in my mind I go into to not see the stares, the mocking smiles, and the pity.

I grab Sylvia’s hand. “Sylvia, let’s go.” When she bucks, I pull harder. “Mom, let’s go.”

Her arms swing out of my grasp, and the move twists her top and exposes her breast.

Mom, please.

After yanking the material back over her chest, I walk her out of the pub, ignoring the crude whispers.

Once we’re out on the pavement, I step away from her flailing fists and nails while she blames me for her loneliness and her desperate need for company.

I’ve been in that dark and punishing place she throws us both in too often. I wipe my tears off while she spits insults in my face. I can’t save her, but the little girl in me wants to beg for a hug and a little tenderness. When she runs out of hurtful things to say, I slide my shoulder under her arm and wrap my arm across her back while scanning the streets for a taxi. Her place is too far, and I’m not taking her to mine.

“Come on, Mom. Let’s get you home.”

She trips and nearly drags me in her fall before steadying herself.

“Do you need a ride?”

I whip my gaze to the black truck as shivers course through me at the sound of Saxton’s voice.

Great. Just great.

I dip my burning face. “No, we’re okay, thank you.” I hoist Sylvia upright and half carry her for a couple of meters before Saxton-the-glorious steps in front of us. God, he moves fast.

“Let me help.”

Before I have time to reply, he scoops my mother up like she weighs nothing and carries her to the back seat of his truck.

Sylvia giggles and grips the collar of his t-shirt as he places her on the seat. “Ooh, baby, you and I could have a lot of fun.”

Oh God. Kill me. Kill me now.

I fist my hands in my pockets while heat engulfs my face.

His chuckle is low. “I’m good, thanks.”

Was he in the bar? Did he see her? Or me?

I stare at my feet while my heart drums in my ears.

He tilts my chin up with gentle fingers and I inhale sharply. “Get in. I’ll drive you home.”

After he opens the passenger door for me, I settle in the comfortable cabin filled with the smell of cheap perfume and alcohol. I push on the small button to open the window and clasp my fingers in my lap. Within seconds, a small snore rises from the backseat of the car, and I wince, but he says nothing.

I should say something. I should...

When he shifts toward me, I hold my breath while my heartbeat speeds up.

“I’m Saxton. Sax. Nice to meet you again.”

“S-sorry, I’m ... Jade, and this is my m-mother, Sylvia.”

After giving him her address, we ride in silence for a few minutes before I clear my throat. “Do you live ... around here?” When he glances at me, heat crawls up my cheeks. “I mean, I’ve never seen you in Vosges before.”

I listen to his deep voice as he tells me his family has been settled in the state for generations, and that he’s just come back from Europe. But we arrive at Sylvia’s apartment complex before I can ask more.

As I unbuckle my seatbelt, he says, “Get the door, I’ll get her inside.”

“Okay.”

Saxton carries Sylvia to the door while I rummage through my bag. After I unlatch the lock and switch the light on, he sets a mumbling Sylvia on her feet.

In a burst of drunken energy, she staggers to the couch where she passes out again.

Squeezing the door handle tight, I put the door between us and lift my gaze to his.

“Thank you again, Saxton. This was very kind of you.”

His expression makes the butterflies in my belly do summersaults. “Will you be okay?”

Please, go. Please.

“Yes, we’ll be fine. Thanks again. G’night.”

I close the door and sigh. After pulling a blanket over my mother, I wash the pile of dirty dishes in the sink before I settle in the plastic lounge chair set near the window.

Will I ever see...? No. After tonight, there’s no point in wondering about him. *Who would come near me after*

witnessing Sylvia being Sylvia?

I wrap my arms around my knees and finally fall asleep.

The next morning, I empty my wallet of all my tips on the coffee table and go catch my bus.

For the next week or so, every time I hear the bell of the diner's door, my heart beats faster. A month passes, and eventually, I give up hope of seeing him again.

I so should know better.

Bent over one of the booth tables, I rub the cloth hard over the smooth surface.

Chapter Four

Saxton

“Son.”

Fuck. I clench my jaw as I stride in the dining room. Him calling me son can only mean one thing. As I settle across from my father, seated at the head the massive—even to Weres standards—rectangle table, Samwell Cavendish leans in.

“Sax, the pack needs a leader.”

My wolf bristles at the challenge in his tone, but before I can reply, Roselyn walks in, looking like she stepped out of a magazine shoot.

She doesn't look a day over thirty even though she's nearly three hundred human years. It's one of the benefits of our nature—something to do with being able to morph and heal. We're not eternal, but once we reach adulthood, our aging process slows down to a near standstill. And we can be killed but our life span spreads over centuries.

“Good morning, Sax,” she says and sits in my father's lap.

“Hey, Rose.”

Seconds later, Rachel, the young she-wolf working in the mansion's kitchen, pushes a cart into the room. When she sets a plate of bacon and waffles—Roselyn's breakfast of choice—before my father, he slides it to the empty seat adjacent to his. My father's mate pushes on her knees and settles beside him while Rachel places a mug of coffee before me.

“What can I get you, Sax?”

Her flirtatious smile and the pheromones she flings my way are clearly offering more than breakfast. But after a few too many overly dramatic break-ups, I steer clear of she-wolves in my pack.

“I’m good, Rachel, thanks.”

Bowing her head slightly, she pivots to my father. “Alpha, can I get you anything else?”

After my father’s slight shake of head, she turns to Rose. “Roselyn?”

My father’s mate glowers. “No.”

As Rachel exits the room swiftly, Rose angles her glare at my father. “I’m your mate. Pack members should address me as such.”

Is that same old tired shit still going on?

Samwell’s tone is firm. “Rose, I won’t demand they call you Luna. It’s their prerogative, and theirs only.”

Roselyn’s expression belies the quiet of her scent. Her ability to conceal the scent of her emotions makes her an oddity within the pack and amongst werewolves in general. Which is probably why most of the pack is wary of her.

We don’t trust what we can’t scent.

“Sam, I’m the female alpha of the pack. It’s my right—”

Samwell’s tone is hard. “Rosie, it’s not a right, it’s a privilege. Has someone disrespected you?”

When my father’s mate says no one has, Samwell cuts his focus back to me, but Rose gets in first. “Your father and I think it’s time for you to take the helm. I—”

My appetite lost, I get to my feet and watch my father. “When’s good for you?”

As the alpha steps to me, my wolf growls in warning but no threat comes from him, so I unclench my fists as we stand eye to eye. My father’s hand shoots out to take hold of the back of my neck.

“Thank you, Sax.”

This is more sentiment than he’s ever displayed toward me, and shock stuns me into place before I shift back.

“When?”

“Full moon before Fall solstice.”

That’s three months from now. As I make my way to the double doors, his tone is almost amused. “I won’t make it easier on you just because you’re my son.”

No, he’ll probably make it harder.

Jade

Today’s my birthday. The only one that counts. I am, at last, legally free from the shackles of my mother’s non-existent guardianship. As planned, I went to the family clinic to ask for the pill because I won’t become Sylvia. Yesterday, Bernie and Flo spoiled me with a chocolate cake and two days off. I’ve been saving my tips and have enough for a shopping spree to my favorite bookstore chain.

After a quick shower, I slip into a tank top and flowy skirt I splurged on at Target when I received my scholarship. Then I hurry to catch the bus to Mordsen, the biggest neighboring town.

Once there, I treat myself to a lovely chicken sandwich for lunch, as well as a trim at the hairdresser who shows me how to turn my unruly ringlets into sophisticated, soft curls.

Seated at the bus stop, I stroke my bag full of books, already enjoying the titillation of the first page of each of them.

“Going home?”

Snapping out of my reverie, I gape for a few seconds at the black truck parked in front of the bus shelter, and grin at Saxton. *Happy birthday to me.* It’s as if for once, the universe likes me. I strut to his car with my hands clutched around the heavy plastic bag containing my treasure.

“Yes, the bus should be here in...” I check my cell. “Six minutes.”

When he smiles, my heart flutters. “Hop in. I’ll take you home.”

There’s no chance I’d refuse him. “All right, thanks.”

I place my books on the back seat and tuck the top of the plastic bag underneath them to secure them before climbing on the passenger’s seat.

Being eighteen gives me unsuspected courage, so I turn to him and fall into the stormy grey of his eyes. “Hi, Saxton.”

“Hi, Jade.”

God, the way he says my name...

He points his chin at my bounty. “What’s in the bags?”

My voice is helium-pitched, but I’m way too happy to care. “Books and stuff for my place.”

We drive through the light traffic getting out of Mordsen in quasi silence. I lean back on the seat and revel in the quiet beauty of the peaceful countryside.

“If you want some music, put on any stations you’d like.”

“I’m okay with silence,” I say to his profile.

The side glance he casts my way makes me all shivery. “Yeah? How come?”

Because I grew up in chaos, so silence feels like a luxury.

I shrug and clear my throat. “I just like the quiet.”

When we pass the town sign welcoming us to Vosges, he steers toward Sylvia’s address, and I turn to him. “Take the third left after Main Street.”

He parks at the front of my building, and I’m about to thank him when he places his arm on my headrest and slants his handsome face close to mine.

His voice is low. “How old are you, Jade?”

My heart somersaults and I blink several times. “Uh... I’m... Sevent— eighteen.”

Lord, what a sexy smile.

“Are you sure?”

Biting my lower lip, I nod. “Today. My birthday’s today.”

Saxton’s gaze dips to my mouth, and he leans closer as if...

Is he going to kiss me?

“Happy birthday, Jade.”

“Th-thank you.”

A little disappointed, I unlatch the passenger door, and after grabbing my books, I wave with a smile and walk to my door.

The next second, his breath tickles my temple. “Jade—”

I jump. “How do you move so fast?”

When he chuckles, I grin, utterly pleased I created a reaction that makes him look even sexier.

“You probably have plans tonight, but I want to take you to dinner for your birthday. When—?”

“I have no plans tonight.” I’m too keen, but I don’t want to lose my chance at him.

More of his sexy side smile. “I’ll pick you up at seven.”

Staring at his lips, I nod. “I’ll be ready.”

His deep and somehow muted grunt pulls me in closer, and I step into him until I crane my neck up to keep his gaze.

“Jade, don’t look at me like that.”

Heat swallows my face, and I bow my head.

Idiot.

He curls his fingers under my chin, and the light touch sends a shiver through me while his thumb strokes the corner of my mouth. “You’re so damn beautiful.”

Everything inside me melts, and I let out a shuddering breath.

No, you’re the beautiful one.

His hand falls by his side. “Seven.”

Yes.

I nod to his back as he strides to his truck.

At 7:00 PM sharp, I check myself in the mirror near the foot of my bed. I love the black, bodycon, off shoulder dress Sylvia tossed at me one day grumbling it was more suitable to me since I dressed like a nun. Feeling all grown up, I fluff my hair and slide into the only pair of heels I have. My mom didn’t give me much I’m proud of, except for lots of fine hair, satiny, clear skin that barely needs makeup, and long thick lashes. Mascara and lip-gloss are all I need. And all I own.

At the knock, I yank the door open and gape.

Saxton’s wide shoulders are wrapped in a grey T-shirt and his long legs encased in dark blue jeans. He looks... He’s big, powerful, and filling out the doorjamb. He sets his eyes on me, and I lock my knees while the drum of my heart deafens me.

He strokes my cheek with his thumb. “Hi, Jade.”

“Hi, Saxton.”

When he steps back onto the landing, I grin at him while I crush my cell between my sweaty palms.

He grins back. “Ready?”

A few minutes later, we’re on our way to the restaurant. In the car, my heart stammers as I glance at his profile. I want a kiss. I want to kiss him. I want my first kiss to be with him. As if he heard me, he takes my hand and holds it on his muscled thigh, and I shiver.

“What are your plans after summer?”

Still shaken by my reaction to him, it takes me a couple of seconds before I tell him about my dream of becoming a psychologist, and the part-time receptionist job I secured a couple of months ago.

“What about you?”

“Nothing as exciting. I’ll be taking over for my father.”

When his jaw clenches, I shift closer. “You don’t want to?”

His tone sharpens, but there’s a kind of sadness in his voice. “It’s not about me. My family needs me, and my duty to them supersedes any personal want.”

I really don’t know what to say to that, so I nestle back into my seat.

We drive the rest of the way in a comfortable enough silence until he says, “We’re here.”

Saxton parks in the paved driveway of a small mansion with a perfect lawn and elegantly lined outdoor lights. Vaguely registering the smooth clap of the door on Saxton’s side, I stare at the restaurant. Although I’m wearing the best outfit I’ve ever owned, my clear skin and good hair will never be anywhere near good enough for a place like this.

The cool wind on my frozen body hauls part of my terrified brain to Saxton as he opens my door. I unbuckle my seatbelt and step out of the car. When he takes my hand, I focus on his fingers tightening on mine as we walk between red velvet drapes cinched by golden ropes sheathing the restaurant’s entrance.

The place is full of richly dressed people. God, even the mayor is there—sans Andy—as well as a few people I’ve seen on TV. The light from the modern chandelier shimmers softly on the dark wooden floor as a woman who should be on a catwalk approaches us. Her smile, directed solely at Saxton, brightens up her already beautiful face.

“Sax, it’s been a while. Welcome back.” She tilts her head to the side, looking past my shoulders. “Is Breanne coming? She—?”

Saxton’s hand tightens around mine while he turns toward her, and I hold my breath as the walls seem to be closing in. I’m not the only one feeling it, because the hostess-model-whatever pales and dips her chin before taking two leather-covered menus.

A male voice calls out Saxton’s name from inside the restaurant.

“Sax. Good to see you back, man.”

The two men meet halfway in the middle of the wide hallway and slap each other’s backs while two other men approach him.

People seem to genuinely like him.

While I wait slightly behind, the hostess edges closer, and her voice is barely above a whisper.

“Have you been here before?”

I straighten my shoulders while crushing my cell to death. “N-no. Never.”

The woman narrows her slanted blue-ish eyes while her long, ebony, straight hair moves like silk as she examines me from head to toe. She does contempt really well. “Are you sure? Because your dress is the exact replica of the uniforms which were stolen three years ago.”

She inches closer and points at the dropped collar of the dress. “See? All our uniforms are embroidered with the initials of the owners. ‘S.C.’ for Samwell and Saxton Cavendish.” She turns her fingertip to the V-neck of her red, fitted dress. “Right here.”

I grit my teeth as tears pool behind my eyes. All my life, I’ve been keeping out of Vosges’ devouring gossip mill, but even I have heard of the Cavendishes, the richest landowners

in the state. So rich they have a helipad at the back of their property.

My blood freezes as her perfectly arched brow lifts.

“I don’t know where you ... got it from, but it sure is a bold choice to come here in a dress bearing Sax’s initials.”

Buzzing cotton wool fills my head while a cold shudder shakes my body. Sylvia stole the dress from...?

I’ve been humiliated before. But this ... this is... Oh God.

Spinning around, I hurry toward the door. The driveway is full of luxurious cars gleaming under the fading daylight.

I need to get away from here.

I check my cell and pull out the fifty dollars—my last week’s tips minus my electricity bill—stashed in my phone’s case.

Will that be enough for a taxi back to Vosges? I don’t know where I am...

A strong hand curls around my upper arm from behind, and I come face to face with Saxton’s frown.

“Jade, what’s wrong?”

The words won’t come out, and all I can do is shake my head.

His fingers wrap around my nape. “What happened?”

My throat is clogged.

His eyes lock onto mine. “Jade, I was gone for a minute, and when I turn back, you’re gone.” He pulls me in closer. “Tell me what happened.”

“I want to go home. Please, take me home.”

Saxton’s frown turns into a scowl before he nods. “Let’s go.”

On the journey back, strangled by the tight dress, I sit completely still. From time to time, I can feel Saxton's gaze on my heated face, but I keep staring straight. When the car stops in front of my studio, I unbuckle my seatbelt with shaking hands.

He curls gentle fingers under my chin. "Jade, what happened back there?" His slightly calloused thumb brushes my cheekbone. "Baby, talk to me."

The tenderness of the endearment thaws a bit of the sheet of ice paralyzing me, and I take a deep breath. "You're Saxton Cavendish. Your family owns a helicopter." It's a stupid statement. I know it is, but it says everything of the worlds separating us.

When he nods, I shift away from his touch and press my back against the door. "And you know who I am."

Another nod. "I've asked around about you—"

Sharp pain cuts through my chest. "Oh, you did, uh? And what did people say about me?"

"Jade—"

There's a warning in his tone, but I can't stop myself. "Let me guess. The richest man in the county wants a bit of fun, so he picks the daughter of the woman who's known for sleeping around. Like mother like daughter, right?" I lean in. "What was the plan for tonight? You take me to the expensive restaurant you own, and I would be so grateful that I'd fellate you in your car or sleep with you?" Tears stream down my cheeks, and I inch closer. "How much money were you planning to leave on the side t—?"

"Enough."

Although low, the force of his voice lashes in my head while his blazing silver eyes set on me.

He slants closer, and I hold my breath. "I've wanted you since I saw that fuckwit grab your arm. But, baby, you're so young. I had to get away from you."

Stunned into silence, I gawk at him. Then, warmth spreads in my chest. “W-what?”

After raking his fingers through his dark mane, he says, “Jade, I don’t want to pull you into anything you don’t want or are not ready for, but I can’t fucking stop thinking about you.”

He waited.

Which is more than any of the men—the married men—of Vosges did before making sexual advances when I was barely in my teens.

My heart smiles.

He waited for me.

I edge closer. Why? How old are you?”

He clenches his jaw. “Twenty ... six.”

A bubble of joy pops in my voice. “Are you sure?”

Saxton’s lips twitch as he cups my nape, and I drown into his eyes.

“Jade, make no mistake. I want to fuck you until neither of us can move.” He pulls me closer, and I grip his thigh while my heartbeat takes flight. “I want you.”

Again, he waits. For me. And right there, I know. He’s going to matter. He already matters more than anyone ever has. “Come upstairs with me.”

Once in my apartment, he reaches in the pocket of his jeans and hands me a velvet box as we sit on the couch. “Happy birthday, Jade.”

I beam at him. “Thank you.”

As I stare at the box, he chuckles. “Open it.”

I do and... Oh my God. It’s a thick silver bracelet with a flat, oval pendant dangling from the clasp. “It’s beautiful,” I whisper as I graze trembling fingertips on the piece of jewelry.

He lifts the bangle from its case. “Let me.”

After Saxton clasps it around my wrist, he kisses the back of my hand, the inside of my wrist, and my palm, sending threads of heat all over my body. When he catches my waist to sit me across his lap, I gasp while my hateful dress rides high on my legs.

Every part of him is hard, and my heart's beating so fast I'm sure he can hear it.

His warm hand travels up my back, slides under my hair to curl around my nape, and he grazes his mouth on mine. My lips tingle, and I press my mouth against his.

He touches the tip of his tongue to my bottom lip. "Let me in, baby."

At the growly command, I open my mouth. The wet warmth of his tongue touches mine and ignites my skin. Shivering, I loop my arms around his neck and lick at his tongue. The kiss deepens and heats up, melting my body around his.

He trails his open mouth down the side of my throat, and I grip the hair on the back of his neck to hold him to me. "Oh..."

The sound of Saxton's groan while he slides his hands under my dress turn my voice into a needy whimper.

"Saxton..."

My whisper drowns in my scattered breath. The slow glide of his fingers toward the juncture of my thighs is... I roll my hips back and forth. I want more of ... everything. When his fingers finally reach the edge of my cotton panties, he circles the pad of his thumb over the apex of my sex.

"Fuck, baby. You're gorgeous."

I open my eyes to find his on my panties, and it's so sexy, another shiver runs through me. He kisses me and the strokes of his tongue pull at my nipples. Still kissing me, he lies me on my back. His heavy penis pressing against my sex makes me tremble. Breathless, I cup his face.

“Saxton. Wait ... wait.”

As he slants back, I stammer. “I’ve never.... This is my first time.”

His gaze hardens, and his jaw clenches while his body goes rigid.

I shouldn't have said anything.

I swallow the lump in my throat and grip the back of his neck. “I’m on the pill. And I want this. I want you. I just wanted you to—”

I don’t get to finish my sentence because in a seamless move, he gets to his feet with his back to me. I jerk up, yank my dress down, and touch his back with a shaking hand. “Saxton?”

When he pivots to face me, his expression is hard.

“Thanks for telling me.” Before I can think or say anything, he’s gone.

“Please, come back,” I beg the door. “Please.”

The roar of his car leaving in the quiet night pushes tears to my eyes, and I drop on my couch.

Happy birthday to me.

Chapter Five

Saxton

A fucking virgin.

Untouched. Mine to take and to pleasure.

Human.

I clench my fingers around the wheel. She's on the pill, but it would make no difference. Unless I claim her, I won't produce pups—perks of the alpha bloodline—and certainly not with a human. Even one whose honeysuckle scent makes me hard enough to pound nails.

After parking the truck in front of one of the cabins the pack owns on the edge of our territory, I morph. The pain and ecstasy as my bones crack and reshape themselves last for a few seconds. My wolf whines, restless to run off the electrifying tension coursing through us.

The wind whips around my body as I speed through the forest. The smell of low bushes mingles with the sweetness of berries, the earthy moss, and sap. Small preys scurry away as soon as they sense the vibrations of my footsteps. I won't hunt tonight. I just need to run the honeysuckle off my tongue.

A couple of hours later, after morphing back, I wash the forest off my skin, and not bothering with the lights, I step to the bay window and stare at the forest.

A virgin.

Fuck no.

Jade

Bernie lowers his lanky frame into the booth across from me while I twist the top of the ketchup container. “Hey, kid. Is everything okay?”

“Yes, everything's fine, Bern.”

When he touches my hand, his expression is concerned. So, I smile. “I’m okay. Pinky-swear.”

The sweet diner’s owner sits back against the red leather. “On Friday, Vosges’ big wigs are throwing their annual la-di-dah party at city hall. The maître D is a friend of mine, and she needs serving staff. They pay three hundred dollars for the day. Are you interested?”

The money will be welcome, and maybe I’ll stop obsessing over Saxton for a few hours. *Saxton*. My chest tightens, like every time I think of him.

Bern taps the back of my hand fisted around the cleaning cloth. “You don’t have to do it. It’s—”

“Yes.” I clear my throat. “Yes, I’m interested. Thanks, Bern. But what about the diner? I can’t leave you and Flo—”

Bern pushes up to his feet and winks. “We’ll manage. Go make some real money.”

Lining up with the other servers, I roll my shoulders back as the mayor’s wife, a soft spoken, immaculate woman stops before me.

We were asked to dress in black, shirt and skirt for the girls and pants for the boys.

When her arched brows knit, I hold my breath. “You look familiar.”

I’m about to reply when a man’s voice booms in the vast kitchen. “Elaine, we need you at the front. The flowers—”

As she exits the kitchen, I exhale slowly. *Saved by flowers*.

The maître D claps her hands. “All right, people. Here are your sections...”

Two hours later, I glide between well-dressed guests who pretend to ignore the mini beef Wellington that make me salivate. Once my tray is empty, I head toward the kitchen and

slow down as I cross through the wide hallway, grateful for the AC.

“Jade.”

Saxton.

I wheel around, and my heart thunders in my ears as he strides toward me. I smile, or at least I try to, as he closes in, wrapping me in his woodsy cologne. “Hi.”

His bass voice sheaths us. “What are you doing here?”

“W-working. I’m working. What are *you* doing here?”

His lips twitch, and he drives his hands in the pockets of his black slacks. “I’m the guest of honor.”

I roll my eyes. “Of course, you are.” When his brow lifts, I grin. “You should try the mini beef Wellington. They look really good.”

When he chuckles, the warm sound makes me shiver. “Do you like them?”

My face heats up as I shrug. “They’re for the guests only, but maybe there’ll be some left over.”

He takes my hand, and the next second, I’m running to keep up with his long steps. He stops so abruptly that I crash into his side. The tray clatters on the wooden floor of the stuffy room which looks like a library of sorts. Saxton wraps his warm hand around my nape and pulls me up flush against him.

Gripping his waist, I roll on my toes. “Saxton...”

His lips descend on mine.

When his tongue sweeps over mine in languid strokes, I curl my arms around his shoulders while my body sets on fire. My lower belly throbs almost painfully while my sex slickens.

I need more.

The kiss ends too soon. I touch my mouth, dazed and shaking.

“W-what’s wrong?”

He cups my face and touches his head to mine. “Baby, have mercy on me and go home.”

I don’t want to.

As he steps back, I fist his shirt. “Saxton—”

“Where’s the new girl?” someone bellows.

I turn toward the approaching heavy steps coming at me, and when I pivot back, Saxton’s gone. After picking up my tray from the floor, I return to the party where I look for him everywhere, but he’s nowhere to be found.

At the end of the reception, I thank the maître D as she hands me an envelope, then I run to catch the last bus home. Once in my studio, I kick my shoes off, and groan in relief.

Saxton

She’s home.

Standing in the street directly across from her studio, I melt into the tourist crowd. My pack won’t look for me here. I didn’t want her to get on that bus after being on her feet for so long, but if I had driven her home, I would have touched her.

When the delivery guy I sent walks out of her building, before I can think, I’m at her front door. I push my back against the wall of the hallway and listen to the patter of her feet as she moves around the small space of her studio. She hums while the waft of mini beef Wellington floats to my nose.

“Saxton,” she whispers, and I get hard.

I close my eyes, visualizing her through the noises coming from her tiny place. I stay until the faint soft humph of her mattress tells me she’s in bed. Then, when her breathing deepens, I head to my truck.

A couple of hours later, Ris and I morph into our human forms. After getting dressed, we walk to one of the cabins. My best friend grunts. “Is it your father?”

“What?”

Harris frowns. “You came back from the human party, and we’ve been running for the last two hours. So, what’s up?”

I exhale slowly. Jade was there. Beautiful. Breakable. And all I could think of was to bury myself deep inside her. To get lost in honeysuckle and soft curves.

Misinterpreting the reason for my silence, he clasps his hand on my shoulder. “Sax, the pack is rooting for your alphas.”

That gives me pause. My pack depends on me, and I have no business salivating for a deliciously scented human who has no place in my world.

Jade

After getting ready for the day, I grab the last two mini beef Wellington from the fridge and slide them in the microwave. After the reception, someone delivered sixteen yummy bites. There was no card, but I know Saxton sent them. I had two every day, and today are my last two, so I savor them slowly and to the last crumb. I don’t know how to forget him. He wants me. I’m a virgin, but I’m not a nun nor an idiot. My chest tightens as I wash my plate.

Maybe it’s for the best. Saying we’re not from the same world doesn’t even begin to cover it. Our suns are not from the same orbit. I wipe off my tears, splash cold water on my face, and take a deep breath.

It’s my day off, so I do what I usually do and head to the library. As I step inside the old building, the AC makes me shiver.

I wave at the willowy woman behind the counter. “Hi, Mrs. Green.”

She grins. “Hi, Jade.” She peeks at her watch. “I’m closing in a couple of hours, but...” Her smile widens as she grabs three thick books from under the counter and slides them toward me. “... I’ve got you these. I think you’ll like them.”

The librarian is one of my favorite people. She’s kind, funny in a nerdy way, and we both share a love of reading. The library—deserted as usual—is one of the few places where I can breathe, diving in stories and worlds where I can be someone else.

My steps are muffled by the carpet as I stroll to the back of the old building. I head straight to the hidden nook where a well-used armchair stands under the window most people don’t know exist.

After kicking my tennis shoes off, I curl into the comfortable armchair, set the alarm on my cell, and open my book, ready for my next adventure.

Page ninety-one. My skin breaks into goosebumps. Someone’s here. I whip my eyes up, expecting Mrs. Green. And my heart stops for a second before charging against my ribs. *Saxton*.

He stalks toward me, and my heartbeat is so fast, it’s all I can hear. He kneels before the armchair and strokes his fingertips from the top of my cheek to the corner of my mouth, leaving a heated trail that makes me shiver.

His voice rolls between us. “Jade, baby.”

“H-hi...”

My whole being crashes against the magnetism of his, and I lose my breath. I’ve missed him. So much, my heart hurts. I jerk forward and mash my mouth on his.

When he shifts back, and cups my cheek, tears press behind my eyes.

“Saxton, please...” I don’t know what I’m asking for. I just want him. Need him.

“Baby, fuck.”

His hand wraps around my nape, and I barely register the thump of the book hitting the carpet. Scooting to the edge of the armchair, I curl my legs around him. He thrusts his tongue in my mouth and licks mine in slow, deep motions while I cling to him, quivering as my skin burns.

When he pulls out of the kiss, I claw into his shoulders. *No. Please.*

His breathing is as rough as mine as he cups my face, and his voice fans on my lips. “Baby, I can’t. I fucking can’t.”

As he leans back, I fist his t-shirt and shake my head. “Why not? Saxton, stay...”

The next second, he’s on his feet and walks away from me.

I leap from the armchair. “Saxton. Wait.”

When he stops, desperate to keep him with me, I throw my arms around his waist. “Tell me why we can’t be together. Is it because I’m poor?”

He shakes his head while his jaw clenches, but he doesn’t push me off, so I tighten my arms and try to smile.

“All right. My name’s Jade Channings, I graduated top of my class. I’m a Gemini and my Moon’s in Scorpio. My favorite dessert is anything chocolate. My favorite color is orange, and I love that it doesn’t rhyme with any other words. I’m not really into sports, I prefer reading. I have no artistic talent, but I love singing badly. And dancing.”

Saxton’s lips twitch a tiny little bit, so I take a breath.

“You have the most amazing eyes I’ve ever seen. Your turn.”

His gaze drills into mine, and my heartbeat takes flight. “Jade—”

I grin. “Yes, that’s me. But *your* name’s Saxton Cavendish. You’re twenty-six and you drive a black truck.” The small smile curving his sexy mouth makes me brave. “I

like you. I really do. And you must like me a little, because you're here."

His warm hands frame my face, and as he leans in, I hold my breath.

"Baby, this can't happen. You and I—"

No. I smash my mouth on his and pour everything I feel into the kiss.

He groans, plasters me against him, and the salt of my tears mixes in our kiss. He rips me off him. Again.

As he strides away, I wait until my heart stops breaking, then pack my books, and put my shoes back on. Numb, I make my way out and wave goodbye at Mrs. Green.

Once home, I burrow under my thin duvet and cry myself to sleep.

It's been nearly a month since the library, and I still stupidly expect large shoulders, long, strong legs, rich brown hair, and silver eyes to appear in between the doorjamb of the diner. The few times Flo asked me what was wrong, I told her I was tired. I know she didn't believe me, but how could I explain something I never felt before for someone I barely know has taken over my heart and my thoughts?

At the end of my shift, Bernie calls out from his office. I turn to Flo, who always knows everything, but she just shakes her head. "This man."

In the basement office, I drop in the armchair across from him.

"You've been working double shifts without a day off for a month. Is it your mom? Do you need money?"

I force a smile. "One can never have enough money, right?"

The kind old man exhales slowly before getting on his feet. "Take a week off."

The armchair creaks under the sudden jerk of my chest. “What? No. Bern, I can’t—”

My gentle boss winks at me. “I’ll pay you, but don’t tell the she-dragon.”

I giggle. “Thanks, Bern.”

I have no idea why he calls Flo that, but I’m positive he’s in love with her. Back upstairs, I settle at the booth closer to the kitchen and finish rolling cutlery into napkins.

What am I going to do for a week? I have no friends. Sylvia’s antics have shut me out of any social activities the town has to offer, and the man I... Never mind.

There’s a nightclub in Mordsen... *Nope.*

At the end of my shift, I stop in the kitchen where Flo rolls some sweet-scented tobacco into thin paper. Her auburn hair is down, reaching her waist. Without the thick, dirty pinafore of her uniform, she looks... Wow.

She holds her cigarette between her long fingers and slants her hip against the tiled wall.

“So, what are you going to do during your week of paid vacation?”

A short giggle escapes my throat. I shouldn’t be surprised she already knows. “I don’t know.”

Flo’s eyes get soft. “Do whatever you want, sweetie. Enjoy yourself before that asshole you call your mother spoils it for you. Where is she now?”

Away. And that’s all that matters. “With the new love of her life.”

“That woman,” she mutters as she shakes the silky curtain of her hair.

She’s right. I have time for myself.

The next morning, after sleeping until midday—*I so can get used to that*—I make myself a picnic, grab a couple of

novels, and then head to the bus stop. Destination: my little haven.

After the half hour walk under an unforgiving sun, I cross the little wooden bridge over the trickling stream and smile. I step under the cool shelter of the hanging branches shading the mossy soft ground and settle happily against my tree with my book.

I go back to my tree every day for three days. On day four, I retrieve a small cushion from my bag, lay down on my back, and sigh.

“Jade... Jade, wake up.”

As I jolt upright, my head nearly hits Saxton’s nose. He shifts back while I blink fast.

“Saxton? What—?”

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

His tone slaps off the last cobwebs of sleep, and I clear my throat. “I’m on vacation and ... I was reading and ... I must... I fell asleep.”

He unfolds onto his feet and crosses his arms over his very wide chest. “Are you following me?”

Arrogant much?

I stand up—not as gracefully as him—and sweep my palms on my jeans. “Sure. Then I got tired of stalking you, so I thought I’d take a break and read my book.” Ignoring the slight twitch of his lips, I step to him... The ground tilts forward.

Saxton catches my upper arm to steady me before I face plant the mossy soil. Once I’m upright before him, he yanks his hands off, and the quick gesture slices through my heart.

Fretting under his perusal, I straighten my back as he sets his molten silver gaze on my heated face. “I was here first, so if anyone’s following—”

“You’re on Cavendish land.”

Oh. My shoulders drop, and something crumbles inside me while tears pool behind my eyes. *Of course he’d own my happy place. And of course, I’m not wanted here either.*

“I’m sorry. I thought this was a ... public park,” I whisper.

As quickly as my frozen limbs will allow, I kneel to my backpack and toss my things in. After slinging my bag on my shoulder, I spring up but keep my eyes down. *I’m not going to cry.*

“Sorry again,” I say to his feet.

As I brush past him, he catches my arm from behind. My bag thumps on the ground as Saxton pulls me to him. Both his hands cup my face, and his expression sends my breaking heart into a frenzied race.

“Saxton—”

His words graze my dry lips. “What are you doing here?”

“I—”

He hauls me closer, and I grip his t-shirt, shivering at the warmth of his body against mine.

“I’ve tried to fuck you out of my mind. I stayed away. But nothing works. Fucking nothing.” The man I’ve been dreaming of, touches his forehead to mine. “Baby, what are you doing to me?”

Rolling on my toes while my heart trembles, I curl my arms around his neck. “N-nothing ... I want ... please, let me be with you.”

His arms tighten around me, and when his tongue dives between my lips in a possessive kiss, my whole body sighs. Every stroke draws me in, and I hold him tighter while my need for him sharpens until I’m shaking. He burrows his face

in my neck, and as his choppy breath scorches my skin, I can't tell where I end, and he begins.

His stormy gaze locks onto mine. "Baby, I want you—"

"Yes." I murmur against his lips. "Yes."

Saxton takes my mouth in a kiss so deep my toes curl, and I moan against his tongue. When he tilts his head back, I open my eyes, and a delicious tremor runs from the top of my head to my feet.

He pecks my nose. "Not here. Not for your first time."

My first time. Before I can think, he picks up my bag, takes my hand, and strides in the opposite direction from the bus stop.

Running to keep up with his quick pace, I stumble on a tree root.

Saxton stops. "Sorry, baby. I'm walking too fast."

He places my bag in my hands. "Take this."

I slip my arms through one strap, and... *Eek!*

Saxton grabs the back of my thighs to haul me up against his chest, and I instinctively wrap my arms around his strong neck and my legs around his waist.

He folds a supporting arm under my buttocks, and off we go. I don't care where. All I want is to be with him.

But we can't be going very far if he's carrying me, because I'm nowhere near overweight, but I'm not thin either. After a few minutes through the woods, his cadence doesn't wane. So, safe and warm in his arms, I nuzzle his neck, filling myself with the scent of male and strength.

When he finally sets me on my feet, we're near his truck. Faster than I can think, Saxton opens the door and sets me on the passenger seat.

All buckled up, I can't help but grin at Saxton who smiles back as he starts the car. He links his fingers to mine

and places both our hands on his thigh. When we veer onto the road, I turn to his profile.

“Where are we going?”

“I’m taking you home.”

Oh. I thought...

“How long do you need to pack for a couple of days?”

No time at all. But I hope it’s not going to be like the restaurant. I must have tensed, because Saxton brings my hand to his lips.

“I have a small cabin not too far from here. It’ll be just us, and I’ll cook for us. What do you want to eat?”

My face hurts from smiling. “Uh ... food?” *I’m an idiot.*

But he doesn’t seem to mind, and his lips stretch into a smile. “Okay, food it is. Do you have any allergies or things you don’t like?”

Squeezing his hand, I shake my head. “I like everything, and I’m not allergic to anything. I mean, I haven’t tasted or eaten everything, so maybe I’m allergic to some things. But I like ice cream, so I’m not lactose intolerant. And also peanuts. All nuts really. I’m not too sure... I eat eggs all the time and it’s fine. I know some people can’t have shellfish, but I’ve never had ... no wait. Shrimps are shellfish, right?”

Even though the car stops smoothly, I still jerk against my seatbelt.

Out of breath, I gape at Saxton who cups my cheek and strokes his thumb on my burning skin. “Baby, breathe.” When I do, he grazes his mouth on mine in a gentle kiss. “We’ll go slow.”

I suck in a breath and nod. “All right.”

His expression softens as he smiles.

God, he’s beautiful.

Ten minutes later, we park in front of my building. He turns to me and tucks my hair behind my ear. “I’m picking you up in an hour.”

I can’t help my grin. “Okay.”

Chapter Six

Jade

Packing is fast. I shove half of my wardrobe in my backpack, as well as a brush, toothbrush, and my lip gloss. I take a long shower, scrub, moisturize, and put on my best panties and bra. They don't match, but they fit.

Two hours and forty-eight minutes later, Saxton swerves onto a dirt road deep in the woods and stops the car in front of a cabin. The Hansel and Gretel looking fairy tale house—albeit on a much grander scale—blends seamlessly into the chattering forest. I follow him down the path leading to the wide door, and I almost expect the birds to tweet me welcome. After he pushes the unlocked front door open, Saxton's warm hand folds around mine and we step inside.

Oh wow.

It looks like the huge ski chalets I've only seen in movies. A wall-to-wall bay window catches our reflections moving past a comfortable gigantic leather couch under the high ceiling supported by wide beams. It even has a fireplace. It's breathtaking and can easily hold three of my studios in this room only.

I push my nose against the bay windows opening onto a wide terrace leading to lush woods.

“Saxton Cavendish, you and I do not have the same definition of small.”

Saxton enfolds me in his arms from behind, and when I lift my smile to him, his expression sends my heart hurtling.

“You're beautiful.”

At this moment, I *feel* beautiful. I loop my arms around his waist and shiver as he brushes his knuckles on my cheek.

“Do you want something to drink?”

No, it's not what I want.

I keep my gaze hooked onto his and shake my head.

Pulling me flush against him, his hand snakes up around my nape. God, he's so hard. Everywhere. "Do you want something to eat?"

My heartbeat speeds up, and I rise on my toes. "I'm not hungry."

His gaze dips to my mouth before returning to my eyes. "What do you want, baby?"

I curl my arms around his neck and touch the tip of my tongue to his bottom lip. "This."

Saxton seals his mouth on mine, and the guttural noise he makes vibrates through me. The slow caress of his tongue while his erection pushes against my clenching belly triggers a full-body shiver.

When the kiss ends, I grin. "I don't mean to rush you because it's your first time with me, but my body feels all ... funny and hot, and I think you should do something about it."

His brows shoot up for a split second, his lips split wide while the corners of his eyes crinkle. Then, a deep rumble shakes his chest, rattling mine, and I stare.

I'm going to make him laugh every day.

Still chuckling, he grips the back of my thighs and I link my legs around his waist. "Is that right, mia bella?"

I brush off a thick strand of his hair from his forehead. "Mia bella?"

He nips on my bottom lip. "It means my beautiful, in Italian. And this is what you are."

Still buzzing from the little bite, I tilt my head to the side. "Cavendish doesn't sound very Italian."

Saxton strides through the vast room, and his low chuckle brings up my smile. "I spent some time in Italy and Spain."

“Oh, what were you doing out there?”

When he slows down, I tense.

Nosy me.

“Studying to be a chef.”

“Saxton, that’s amazing! Are you going to take over your family’s restaurant?”

His jaw clenches while something resembling pain flits through his eyes, and I remember that he has to take over for his father. I curve my hands around his face and kiss him soft. “You’ll be wonderful at whatever you do.”

Saxton lays me on a bed and settles on top of me while keeping his weight on his forearms. He takes my mouth, and the world fades out.

He kisses me long, wet. So deeply I’m panting when it stops. I shut my eyes as his lips open on my neck, and when he sucks on my nipple through my t-shirt, my whole body zeroes in on the pull of his mouth.

“Saxton...”

He kneels up between my legs and reaches over his shoulder to remove his t-shirt in one sexy swoop.

Oh. My. God. He doesn’t have an ounce of body fat. His tanned skin molds over hard, corded muscles. A dark sprinkle of hairs on his chest arrows down to the waistband of his jeans. He’s spectacular.

And I’m so not. The woman he was with at the diner, the hostess at the restaurant. He’s surrounded by perfect women, and I’m...

“Jade.”

I open my eyes, and his scowl sends my heartbeat into a frenzy.

Saxton lowers himself over me, curls his hands around my shoulders while his expression softens. “Do you know how beautiful you are?”

Tears pool behind my eyes, and I shake my head.

He brushes his nose against mine. “Your big hazel eyes.” Peck on my nose. “Your nose you keep scrunching.” His lips on mine. “Your gorgeous mouth I want on me.” He slides his hand under my shoulder and tugs on my hair. “Those curls I want in my fist when you suck me off...” *Oh, God.* “... and when you’re on your hands and knees, taking my cock.”

Fevered, I arch up to kiss him, but he denies me his mouth.

“Baby, I’m going to have you, and you’re going to take me. As little or as much as you can, until you take all of me. Because I fucking want all of you.”

Something warm washes over me. I should be nervous, but a soft quietude settles inside me, and I know deep in my soul I’m exactly where I belong. My throat knots, and it must be written on my face because Saxton possesses my mouth while I whimper in his.

In seconds, he undresses me. Then he shifts onto his haunches between my parted legs, and I hold my breath. His slow, heated perusal of my body is a physical touch that sets my skin afire.

I reach for him, but he pins my arms over my head. “Keep them here for me, baby.”

Shivering, I nod slowly.

Saxton’s mouth touches every part of me, and when he sucks on my painfully tight nipple, the sensation burns straight to my clit.

I arch into his touch and moan his name into my fist.

A strand of hair sweeps over his forehead as he lifts his eyes to mine. He pulls my clenched fist from my mouth. “No, *mia bella.* What I do feels good, I want to hear it.”

Good thing the cabin is isolated.

I shut my eyes as his lips trail down my belly.

“Fuck,” he whispers, and I curl my neck up as he stares between my legs.

The thrill of his focused gaze on me births a shiver so violent, I moan.

He loops his hand around the back of my thighs and spreads my legs wide open. “Fucking gorgeous.” Then, he French-kisses my sex.

The glide of his tongue shoots rivulets of heat through me. He does it again and again. Slow then fast. Sucking, licking, penetrating until my body tightens to snapping point.

“Oh, God!”

He lashes the tip of his tongue on my clit before drawing it deep into his mouth. Pleasure crests. Tightening. Binding. Electrifying. When he pinches my nipples, my orgasm detonates, lighting up every cell of my body.

“Saxton!”

I’m still catching my breath when the warmth of his skin blankets mine.

After a deep, languid kiss, Saxton loops his palms around my shoulders, and I curl my arms around his neck. His gaze locks onto mine as he slides his heavy penis back and forth in my wetness. My heartbeat, once again, takes flight.

“Baby, it’s going to hurt. But only for a short while, and I’ll make it good after.”

I nod with a trembling smile. “Okay.”

He rubs the thick mushroom head along my sex, and the drag of his hot flesh against mine makes me moan.

He thrusts. The sharp pain brings tears to my eyes I keep shut tight. Then, as he promised, it fades quickly. The pressure

of his heavy sex anchoring me to him is ... odd. And I don't dare breathe.

“Jade? Look at me, baby.”

Breathing through the burning stretch, I look into his eyes which have an almost reflective quality. There's tension in every muscle of his large body while his skin pulls tight around his clenched jaw. He's being careful. Careful with me. Of me. I frame his handsome face, loving the slight prickle of his stubble against my palms.

I want to tell him how cherished I feel by his self-restraint. How I'm his. Heart, body, and soul. But all that comes out is, “You're not even halfway in, are you?”

A chuckle escapes him, and he sets his forehead on mine. “That's enough for now.”

No.

As he pushes on his arms, I clasp my legs on the small of his back, which drives him deeper.

“Baby—”

“Now. I want all of you, now.”

Saxton surges deep inside me, and I bite on his shoulder.

He waits, unmoving while he kisses me. Gentle. Long and deep until I get fevered again.

When I moan in his mouth, he moves slow with his mesmerizing gaze deep into mine

A new kind of pleasure, hotter than before laps under my skin, and I claw at his back.

“Saxton!”

My whole-body clenches before I fragment around him.

“Jade. Fuck.”

“Saxton...”

“More, baby?”

“Yes. Yes...”

His thrusts, although slow, become more forceful, and I hold onto him while rolling waves of sensations throw me into a whirlpool of intense pleasure.

He pins my arms over my head and thrusts heavier. When he roots himself deep and shouts his pleasure in my neck, another orgasm makes me lose my breath.

Chapter Seven

Jade

Saxton is the universe's gift to me.

A week after the cabin, he bought a bigger and thicker mattress that takes up a third of the studio. But I don't mind, because after that, he stayed over most nights. My studio is our personal fort, and we spend a lot of time there. Just the two of us. When I told him the little—less ugly parts—of my childhood with Sylvia, his eyes filled with fury, but he held me close, and his touch soothed the heartache my mother had become.

At the diner, Flo and Bernie often exchange quick, worried glances they think I don't notice. But it's my life. My life with Saxton.

We're being discreet, hiding from the curious and disapproving stares of Vosges' residents. And also, because although he never said it, I'm pretty sure his family wouldn't approve of me. But I'm planning on changing that. I'll go to university, get an education and a good job, and eventually they'll see how much I love him and know I'll do anything to make him happy.

I glance at my cell on the counter. It's late. Since his father has announced his retirement, Saxton's been busy taking over his family business. I don't know the specifics of what that entails because he doesn't tell me, but, at times, the tension in his body worries me.

The first time it happened, I thought he was mad at me, when he said he wasn't, I asked him what I could do to help. He just kissed me, and we made love.

Tomorrow will mark our second month anniversary. I found garlands of fairy lights on sale I'll use to decorate the studio. Every time I think of him, which is very often, butterflies crowd my stomach. The sex is oh-my-God amazing, and I love how commanding his bass voice gets

when he tells me how to pleasure him. Naughty, exciting things that make me hot and shivery. He likes my body, and his hungry eyes on me make me feel like the most beautiful woman in the world. I love being naked around him. For him. Only him. Forever him.

At the rap on the door, I yank it open. “Saxton.”

“Fuck, baby, you’re a sight for sore eyes. Come here.”

The growl in his voice and his eyes undressing me make me tremble. The door slams behind him, and the next second, I’m pinned against it while Saxton’s mouth makes love to mine.

After dining on mushroom and pine nut ravioli—he’s an amazing chef—I hook the kitchen towel over the oven doorhandle. Saxton pulls my back into his body. I close my eyes and press the back of my head on his chest while he grazes his lips on my temple. In these precious moments, he’s my home. My whole world.

His words feather across my cheek. “I’m going out of town for a few days.”

Oh, no.

I turn and wrap my arms around his waist. “When will you be back?”

“Next Thursday.”

That’s more than a week.

The tenseness around the lines of his eyes tightens my chest.

I roll on my toes to curl my arms around his neck. “Is everything okay?”

He touches his forehead to mine. “Family stuff.”

Please, talk to me.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I touch his neck and smile. “I’m a good listener.”

In response, he plops me on the counter, kisses me, and sends me into flames.

Saxton

I howl as the blood of the older wolf coats my muzzle and my jowls as I stand over him. My progenitor’s beaten body lays on the ground, and when he lifts his head, I growl in warning. The defeated wolf jerks back, so I close my jaw on the back of his neck and push my forelegs in the wound of the torn flesh of his broken shoulder.

The gurgling rasp of his breath both hurts and satisfies me as he bows his muzzle into the soft ground of the clearing, exposing his throat for me to take. I step away from his body, waiting for the next wolf to challenge me. None of them do. Surrounded by the males of my pack, I howl my victory.

I am Alpha.

As my father crawls his way into the forest to lick his wounds, I shake the gore off my fur and turn to my beta. “Ris.”

He chuffs as he stands by my side and lowers his muzzle.

The entire pack howls in unison while the night breeze cools my body heated by the adrenaline rush of victory and power.

I race through our territory followed by my pack.

Back at the house, I morph and grit my teeth. This was supposed to be a hunting trip, but my sneaky asshole of a father instigated the dominance fight weeks before what we agreed on.

By the time I step in the shower stall, my bones have reset, and my ripped skin is knitting itself back.

A few minutes later, I stride across the marble floor of the foyer and past the grand hall. In one of her fits of grandeur, Roselyn was clever and had two houses built under one roof adjoined by a vast kitchen and living room. On one side is the communal typical pack house which includes my office and a soundproofed war room. On the other is a personal five-bedroom residence.

When I arrive in what will be my side, two men dip their chins. “Alpha.”

Fuck.

Tonight’s Mooncall, the last rite of my ascension to alpha, a communion with nature that will bring in my full alpha powers. In my case, it will exacerbate and multiply what was mine at birth. Like my father, I will detect deception in others’ scents whilst the power of my alpha voice will make people submit to my will.

Centuries ago, it was also the night unmated she-wolves would vie for the new alpha’s attention in order to produce the strongest breed of pups. Although those customs have long been abrogated, latent sexual tension pervades the atmosphere of this evening’s celebratory banquet.

As I reach for the door of my office, the scent of a young she-wolf floats through the wide hallway separating the living quarters from the soundproof room. Lisa, one of our three omegas, smiles. It’s a young woman who walks slowly toward me, but I still see the goofy pup who used to follow Ris and I everywhere.

“Hey, Sax.”

“Hey, Lisa.”

She licks her bottom lip. “Do you want to maybe... talk after your meeting?” She edges close enough for her breast to brush against my arm. “The law says the alpha is entitled to his omega.” The pretty brunette’s face colors while the scent

of her arousal floods at me. “Alpha, I’ll be honored to be your bedmate and your playmate.”

Omegas are the keepers of our history and essential to the balance of packs. They’re trained librarians and keen scholars whose duty is to preserve our traditions. Our pack has three unmated omegas. None of them I want to fuck. Surprised she’d mention the tradition Samwell revoked after he killed his father during the dominance fight, I dive my hands in my pockets.

“Lisa, our pack has evolved past this.”

Her lips pinch as she bows her head. “My apologies, Alpha. I didn’t mean any offense.”

The subservient gesture bothers me, but I keep my impatience out of my voice. “Lisa?” She lifts her eyes to mine. “My name hasn’t changed. Have a good evening, okay?”

As she nods with a smile, Harris opens the door and darts his eyes toward the retreating young woman.

Once in the empty room, my beta grins.

“Mooncall’s fucking insane. Do you remember how she and her sister used to follow us everywhere? They had a massive crush on you.”

“Didn’t you date Penny before she moved to Alaska?”

Ris chuckles. “I’m not too proud to reap your unwanted spoils, Alpha. Not if they’re as pretty as the Lancaster she-wolves.” His expression sober. “Seriously though, sex with one of our own will be wise.”

“It’s a fucking backward tradition.” When my friend raises a brow, I groan. “Ris, she’s a pup.”

He throws me a pointed look. “She’s twenty human years.”

Older than Jade.

“The pack will lose their shit if they hear of their alpha fucking a human girl.”

I'm not fucking her.

Before I can reply, he scoffs. "How is it to fuck a human anyway? They're so ... frail. Give me a she-wolf who can take a real fucking over any glass-made human. What's the point if you have to hold off and can never let yourself go?"

It's not like that. Not with her.

Jade gives back as good as she gets, and when she goes all soft and tender, all I want is to hold her and bask in her scent.

"Sax, you have to end it."

I stride to the wall-to-wall bay window and pull my cell out of my pocket. She's been texting non-stop. Asking if I'm okay, asking me when I'm coming back into her arms.

I turn my cell off. "I know."

A few minutes later, my father walks in, followed by Roselyn and Carson. I dip my chin at a still bruised Samwell Cavendish. As he sits between his mate and his beta, the old bastard can't stop smiling.

Seconds later, Bree saunters in and sits next to her mother.

As soon as I take my seat beside Harris and across from them, my father starts.

"After Mooncall, Rose and I are going on a world tour for a few months. Marco invited us to stay with his pack in Sardinia, so we'll start from there, but if you don't want us to go, we won't."

Marco, the alpha of the Farina Pack, was my mentor during my stint in Europe.

"We're good here. You can go."

When my stepmother emits a disgruntled chuff, I turn my attention to her. "Rose?"

My father and Carson have kept Harris and I apprised of pack business. And we've got it under control, so why can't she let her mate take some fucking rest after he dedicated his life to the pack?

"Your father wouldn't listen. The pack needs to rally. Six months ago, the Prestwood pack tried to buy businesses on our territory. They're taking in violent mongrels to increase their numbers. They're taunting us. I think—"

"Roselyn," my father snaps.

His alpha voice, although not as powerful as mine, still holds enough power to shut her up. But the reprieve is brief as my father's mate is on a roll.

She flashes a quick look at Bree before smiling at me. "And you're about to take a mate."

That's fucking news to me.

Ris clenches his jaw while Bree whips her frown at her mother. "Mom, for God's sake!"

Read the room, lady.

"Rose, I said you could go, so you're going." Ignoring her flushed face and my dad's stony expression, I lean in. "I will lead the pack and my private life how I see fit. Stay out of it."

Roselyn frowns while the others' wolves ruffle. She bows her head. "Apologies, Alpha."

I turn to Samwell. "Anything else?"

"The only thing worth noting is the Bourdain and Eriksen packs have reported a surge in human sightings of Others, mostly witches."

Bree shakes her head slowly. "They're safer in Europe anyway. The only constant in humans is their urge to kill whatever they don't understand. Those long pigs have very small brains."

Silence befalls the table.

On this, we all agree.

Jade

He was supposed to be back three days ago. I pace my studio with my cell clutched in my hand. I dial his number again, which goes straight to voicemail.

My heart, strangled in my chest, races.

Something's wrong. I need to find him.

I open my front door and shriek.

He's here.

I hurl myself against him and squeeze him in my arms.
Thank God. Thank God.

I cup his freshly shaven jaw. "My God, Saxton. I was so worried." Needing his kiss, I wrap my arms around his neck and roll up on my toes.

But he unhooks my arms, holding my wrists between us.

His expression is a frightening mix of distance and anger. Sharp pain chokes me, and I swallow hard while my heart jackhammers out of my chest. "Saxton? What's wrong?"

He lets go of my hands, so I clutch them in front of me. "Jade, this has to stop."

No mia bella, no baby. What did I do?

Every fiber of my body freezes. "W-What?"

The man I love waves a hand between us before shoving it in his pocket. "This."

A surge of blood crashes violently against my eardrums. "W-why?" I clear my throat. "What did I do?"

He rakes his fingers through his disheveled hair and paces between the bed and the door. All five of his long steps. Back and forth. Back and...

Dizzy, I grip his arm. “Can we please talk?” When he stills, my breath rushes out, and I curl my arms around his shoulders. He doesn’t hold me, but he doesn’t shift away either. “What happened? Tell me.”

Once again, he breaks from my arms, leaving me bereft. That’s when I notice he’s in a black suit and a deep-green shirt open at the collar.

Was he out somewhere while I’ve been going crazy, thinking he was...?

“I need to go back to my real life. We’re done.”

The fear that has been gripping me spreads like a tsunami that shakes me so hard, I fall into him and clutch his shirt with both hands.

“Saxton, this is real. *We’re* real.” I cup his face. “I love you. More than anything in the world. And this is real. You know it is.”

Saxton

Truth. The love in her eyes hits me straight in the plexus. Hard.

I clench my fists in my pockets. Her scent is sweeter, and draws me in, but there’s also pain woven in there. Because I’m hurting her.

She speaks fast. “If it’s about your family ... it’s okay if they don’t like me... I... We can keep it a secret. As long as I’m with you, I don’t care. I don’t care.”

So fucking brave. She’s laying herself bare. Throat exposed. I step back and lock my body into place. Even if she could get past what I am, she wouldn’t last a day before the pack eats her alive. Both figuratively and literally.

Tears coat her voice as she edges closer. “I can wait. I’ll wait. I’ll stay close. I’ll go to Mordsen college—”

“For fuck’s sake, Jade. This love story is just in your mind. We just fucked. It’s over. Done. Go and live your life.”

Incomprehension widens her eyes and her jaw quivers.

I need to get the fuck out of here.

I pivot toward the door.

“Saxton. No... No.” Clawing at my arm, she somehow wedges herself between me and the cheap door. She’s too damn close, so I move back to the middle of the tiny room where she follows me.

“Saxton ... please.” Her hand on my chest digs right through. “Don’t go. I love you. I love you. Tell me what to do. Just—” Her voice breaks. “Just tell me what to do.”

She has to fucking let go.

“Saxton?”

Her clear hazel eyes, filled with love, nearly bring my fingers to the flushed skin of her cheek.

I exhale slowly and call on the merciless nature of my wolf. I lean in until her panting breath fans on my chin.

“What you can do is show some goddamn dignity. You’re turning into your fucking mother.”

Jade yanks her hands off me as if she’s been burnt. Blood drains from her face and her breath catches in her throat. Then, pain, deep and cutting, chokes her scent and she staggers backward. Her heel hits the mattress on the floor where she crumbles in a heap.

Clenching my fists, I force myself to walk away.

I stop at the end of the corridor and listen.

Baby, breathe.

When her strangled breath rushes out, I head to my truck, but I don’t get there fast enough, and her ear-splitting sobs reach me over the blast of the engine.

Back at the mansion, I barely shut the front door before Harris hurries toward me.

“The Prestwoods have declared war.”

Just what I need to assuage my need for blood. Cold rage comes out in my voice. “Let’s annihilate those motherfuckers.”

Chapter Eight

Jade

Oh God, please, no.

Kneeling in my emptied studio where my bed used to be, I stare at the four pregnancy tests I've bought under the judgmental glare of Mr. Arnold, the pharmacist. My heart hollows, then beats in my throat.

Two lines. Two. On all of them. I'm pregnant.

My classes start next week. I can't be pregnant. I can't.

I forage through my bag for my pills and check the small packets. I didn't miss a single day. So, how...?

It's been a month since Saxton dumped me. Twenty-nine days, exactly. As I stare at the mocking small foil package surrounded by the white sticks, an unstoppable giggle bursts out of my chest. They were right. Saxton and my mother were right. I've turned into Sylvia.

I laugh until my ribs hurt. Until I hiccup and choke on my breath. When the laughter sputters out, it leaves behind scalding pain tearing through my chest, so I hug my knees and sob.

Minutes, maybe hours later, I take a deep breath. And another.

I'm not Sylvia.

I jump on my feet and throw the life-changing sticks in the lonely garbage bin. I'm not my mother, and I'm going to love this baby. Which means Saxton needs to know because even if I was just a... fling, I'll give him a chance to do right by her. Or him. I place my hand on my belly. No, he's a 'him'. Mine and Saxton's child. *My child to love and protect.*

I grab my backpack and run to Flo's house. Twenty minutes later, faster than I have ever been and not as out of breath as I thought I would be, I knock on the green door.

It opens, and I gawk. A beautiful woman wearing a ruby slip of a dress with long, pink, flowing long locks adorned by yellow flowers stands before me.

Only when she brings a cinnamon-scented cigarette to her mouth do I blink and snap my mouth shut. She's the epitome of femininity. "Flo?"

Her smile turns into a frown. "What's wrong, sweetie? Come in."

I hate asking for favors. Hate it. But...

I shake my head. "Can I please borrow your car for a couple of hours? Maybe a little longer. I'm a safe driver, I'll —"

Her soft hand on my arm stops me. "I'll get the key."

When she hands me the key, I fist my fingers around the bubble shaped keyring and smile to stop the trembling of my chin. "Thank you, Flo. Thank you."

Flo cups my cheek. "Floralis."

"I ... Sorry. Thank you ... Floralis."

"Sweetie, where are you going? Let me come with you."

Again, I shake my head. "I'll be fine." I lift the key in my fist. "Thank you. I'll take care of your car."

"It's just a piece of metal." She pulls me into a strong hug and whispers, "You deserve to be cherished, Jade Channings. Take care of yourself, okay?"

My breath hitches, and I break from her embrace. If I speak, I'll dissolve into tears, so I nod and race to her car.

Five minutes later, I'm on the road heading to the Cavendish house.

Ignoring the '*Private Property and Keep out*' signs, I drive past the open gates. It's nearly another hour before the sprawling mansion comes to view. I slow down and clench my

hands around the steering wheel as my heart races. *This is his real life.*

After quelling the flood of tears rising from the back of my throat, I step out of the car a few meters from the meticulously hedged pathway leading to the front door.

What if he asks that I get rid of him? No, Saxton wouldn't. But maybe—

The heavy dark wood door opens, and I jump back.

A slim, elegant woman sporting a blunt bob that brushes her shoulders and a polite smile, frowns. “Yes?”

Dressed in a burgundy designer wrap-dress, she tilts her head to the side, and her silver hair—not grey but pure shiny silver—catches the light. She looks thirty and yet she *feels* older.

“How can I help you, dear?”

I clear my throat. “Good afternoon, ma’am. I’m sorry for disturbing you. I’d like to speak with Saxton, please.”

Her frown deepens. “May I ask what’s this concerning?”

He kicked me out of his life like I was garbage, and now, I’m pregnant with his child.

I straighten my shoulders. “It’s... personal. Can I speak with him, please?”

The super stylish woman steps back and smiles. “Where are my manners? Come in. Ms...?”

“Channings. Jade Channings,” I say as I enter the biggest hallway, I’ve ever been in.

As she lowers her manicured hand, I notice a diamond wedding ring on her finger. *Jesus. She looks so young. Is she Saxton’s mother?*

“Channings?”

Has she heard of Sylvia?

Tongue-tied, I dig the nail of my thumb into the side of my index finger and nod.

When her lips curve up, I exhale slowly. “Did you know Channings means little wolf?”

I feel more like a skunk, but whatever.

Before I can answer, she adds, “I’m Roselyn Cavendish, and I’m afraid Sax is on a business trip with his father. They should be back tomorrow. Shall I give him a message on your behalf?”

The tears I’ve been suppressing threaten to crash behind my eyes, but I won’t cry in front of her.

When I raise my head back, she makes a soft sound at the back of her throat. “Are you all right?”

No.

“Can you please ask Saxton to meet me by our tree at one?”

That’s two hours before my train’s departure, which is more than enough time for Saxton to decide whether he wants to be part of our child’s life.

Her eyes widen. “Your tree?”

My face catches fire. *God, I feel stupid.* “Yes, he’ll know what I mean.”

Roselyn Cavendish’s expression softens into one of pity I’ve seen too often. “Does he know how to get in touch with you?”

I clear my throat. “Yes, he does.”

When Saxton’s mother touches my shoulder, I clench my fists in my pockets.

She studies me for a couple of seconds and gives me a gentle squeeze. “Don’t worry, I’m sure everything will be all right. I’ll give him the message.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Cavendish.”

She gives me a closed mouth smile as she opens the door. “You’re welcome.”

I rearrange the strap of my bag, cutting into my skin as the bus leaves in a nauseating smell of fumes. Looking to the rolling clouds for courage, I make my way through the quiet path. I can’t help it, the idea of seeing him again renders me breathless. Between my classes and my impending motherhood—God, I need to find a second job—I’ll hopefully learn how to get over him. From now on, the only person that matters is my little boy.

Once I arrive at the tree, I check my cell. 12:54 PM. I wonder what his mother told him. I imagine it’d be something like. *‘Saxton, the poor, stupid girl you used for fun while she gave you all of herself was here sullyng the pure air we breathe.’* And he’ll probably kiss her smooth cheek and smile at her. *‘Do not worry, Mother dear, she was insignificant. I’m already dating a charming woman of perfect breeding.’*

Deep breath. I shut my eyes and hook my thumb at the bottom of my backpack straps.

It’s 12:58 PM.

Will he come?

A twig crackles behind me, and I spin around. “Saxton...”

I gawk at the woman who silenced Ms. Graves with one look as she glides toward me. She’s dressed in all white, silky pants with a matching blouse. The sun behind her hits her cascading blonde hair in a halo.

Even the sun loves her.

As she stops before me, I swallow hard, feeling a little sympathy for my old teacher.

I straighten my back. “Where’s Saxton?”

And how do you know about our tree?

The woman's voice snaps under the draping leaves. "Sax asked me to give you this."

She lobs a small white bag I didn't notice at my feet and slides her hands in her pockets.

I step around the bag and toward her. "Where's Saxton? I really need to talk to *him*."

When she leans in, I hold my breath. The woman is freaking scary.

"You're talking to me now. And let me be really clear, Sax has more important things to do than deal with the little fantasy you built in your head."

He told her?

Pain hits my chest. "Who... who are you?"

She grabs my wrist in a grip that will leave a bruise while her mouth twists in anger. "I'm Breanne. Sax's done with you, and I suggest you leave my fiancé alone."

Her fiancé?

Bile rises in my throat as she releases me. I clear my throat. "I don't want... Saxton, I just need him to know—"

"He knows."

Can nothing stay private in this town? He knows. And he sent her.

I won't cry in front of this horrible woman. "H-how?"

"You people are so damn predictable." Her expression turns downright terrifying. "We know everything that happens in that shitty pit of a town."

Mr. Arnold. The pharmacist.

She points her chin at the bag. "Use this. Buy yourself a new life. Do whatever the hell you want as long as you crawl back under the rock you came from." When she inches closer, I step back. "I'm not the patient type, Jade Channings. If I

catch you sniffing around Sax, you won't like what I'll do to you. Do you understand?"

I must have nodded because her lips curve in a smile that gives me the chills. "Good. Now, get the fuck off my property. And, girl, take a damn shower. You reek."

While I'm recovering from the lashing insult, Saxton's fiancée turns and strolls toward the forest. When her slim silhouette disappears behind a tree, I kneel by the bag and unzip it with shaking hands. *Maybe he left me a message.* I open the satchel and slap my palm over my silent scream while my heart shreds open.

It's full of money. Lots of new bills tightly packed together. There are thousands of dollars. I dig through the bag to find something that would be ... not this. After grabbing the bottom of the bag, I tilt its entire content on the mossy ground, rummage through it, and slump on my haunches. There's only money.

Screw him. Screw her. Screw all of them.

Unfolding on my feet, I place my palm on my belly. "It's you and me, my love. We don't need him. I'm going to love you for the both of us. For the whole universe. We'll be fine. I promise."

As I bend under the hanging branches, a loud rustling noise behind me makes me jump.

Crap. Saxton's fiancée's back.

I hurry toward the creek. When a loud thump shakes the ground, I wheel around and my heart lodges in my throat.

A tall and hulking shape forms out of nowhere before my eyes.

The man... *That's not a man.* The arms are too long, hanging to his knees and his whole body is as dark as night. I whip my eyes up to where his eyes should be, and terror chokes me. His round, glowing pupils flick in his onyx face while long fangs descend from his snout.

While I strangle the scream erupting from my chest, another one—bigger and more deformed—appears beside him. Then another one.

“Lookie, lookie here,” one says.

They speak.

The voice is a chafing sound that freezes my blood.

Another one lisps, “It’s going to piss itself.”

“I like it when they piss themselves.”

A screeching rumble pierces through my skull. Terror swamps every fiber of my being. My skin is burning, but my insides are cold. My teeth chatter. I want to run, but my legs are stuck. My heart jumps in my throat. I have to... My baby. I must protect my baby. My body jolts. As tears burn my cheeks, realization punches into my brain, and I know.

The world will never be the same.

So, I run.

PART TWO

Chapter Nine

Fourteen Years Later

Jade

In fourteen years, barely a breath in the history of mankind, the world has embraced Others. Magic weavers, supernatural beings who've been living amongst us for centuries. They revealed themselves when the planet suffered a series of cataclysmic weather disasters that killed millions. We were lost, overwhelmed by the amount of destruction. They helped us restore and rebuild, and with their assistance, work that would have taken decades was achieved in a few months. And during that time, they became an integral part of society.

As daylight sieves through the French windows of the large office of the mansion I call home, I stand still in the airy room, the nerve center of the house the press dubbed the manor.

I peruse the walls covered with the press articles and photos I've been framing for the last decade. Pictures and words that changed the very fabric of our reality and the world as we know it.

The world embraces magic and a new kind of (Super?) Humans.

Magic weavers save our planet.

World top neologists create a name for the new heroes amongst us. Meet the Meterans. Other than man.

I'm not a fan of the name because it separates us. Also, it's an umbrella term for a group of very different people: witches and Fae from both the Seelie and Unseelie courts. And I suspect the harshness of the moniker stems from the unconscious wariness the governing elite felt toward beings who could destroy them with a flick of their fingers.

Maybe I'm naïve—I've been called worse—but I believe we needed a little magic in this brutal world to help us hope.

I amble to the other side of the room where one of the most meaningful moments of my life has been immortalized. It's a picture of Vaughn and I smiling at each other after he unveiled himself to the world. Grazing my fingertips over the glass, my breath hitches.

The Bureau of Meterans Affairs declares Vaughn Thyonian the most powerful Meteran in the world.

Vaughn Thyonian introduces his partner to POTUS. Meet Jade Channings, the human woman who caught the heart of The Great Sorcerer.

The day that picture was taken, Vaughn and I had been living together for nearly three years. After we agreed the world wasn't ready to welcome his true nature, I came up with his title. Sorcerer was the closest to explain some of his powers.

Soon after we met, Vaughn told me about the Werenation, the term Werens, half-beast, half-human beings, all over the world, use to identify themselves. Sadly, too many of them were killed either by hunters or used for horrific experimentation. After the destruction of the so-called research laboratories in Switzerland, Moscow, and Tanzania, the Werenation went underground and remains the biggest secret of the new world. Most witches and Fae know of them, but very few humans do.

Then, I nearly fell off our bed the day he told me the uber wealthy Cavendish family was, in fact, the Cavendish pack. They are the last Direwolf pack in existence, and one of the oldest bloodlines of wolves who also happens to be the most powerful pack on this side of the planet.

The Cavendish pack is the most secretive group of Werens. We, including the rest of the Werenation, know so little about them, they're bordering on urban myth. It helped me

understand why Saxton would disclose so little about his family, but him sending the woman he'd cheated on with a bag of money is unforgivable.

I breathe out the sharp pinch in my chest. In the end, as always, Saxton Cavendish got what he wanted. The baby he callously discarded died before being born.

The buzz of my vibrating cell startles me. It's a reply to the request I sent to Cavendish Security, the company Saxton co-owns with Cole Hatfield, a werejaguar. Even though no one's privy to the inner workings of the Cavendish Pack, most of the Werenation is well acquainted with the investigation firm which has an excellent reputation and is dedicated solely to Weres.

I hold my breath as I swipe the screen.

Cavendish Security: **Dear Ms. Channings, we are pleased to confirm your meeting with Saxton Cavendish and Cole Hatfield at 8:00 PM on...**

I close my eyes and exhale slowly. Now, I just need to convince them to make an exception for Vaughn.

Four days ago, Vaughn disappeared. In the fourteen years we've been together, we've never been apart. Even when we're not physically together, I always know he's safe through our bond, the spark of life that links us to each other. Since he's been gone, it has dulled, muffled, so I *know* something bad happened.

On the second day Vaughn didn't come home, I rushed to the kitchen and threw my arms around Atilda, a Fae Sprite who's also our chef, house manager, and the only permanent resident of the manor. Then, I called the rest of our eclectic family: Dana and Dex.

Dana, my best friend, is a powerful witch with whom I partnered to create *Whole of Us*, the first mixed species—in both staff and clients—women-centric, health center. And Dex, a werebear, and one of the only Weres who knows of

Vaughn's true nature. Dex immediately moved into the manor and serves as my bodyguard during my public appearances.

I jump at the slight knock on the door.

Dex's head peeks in between the doorjamb. "Peanut, you're ready?"

My throat clogs. "Not really."

When he pulls me in his arms, I push my face into his wide chest to purge the fear that strangles me since Vaughn's been gone.

After taking a deep breath, I step back. "Let's get this day over with. Then we can focus on finding Vaughn."

Dex curls his hands around my shoulders, and his gaze is soft. "I'll get the car."

Ten years ago, Vaughn and I used our semi-celebrity status to set up the UnityFest, a three-day long, annual convention which promotes and celebrates diversity and unification. For the last four years, the festival has been managed by a non-governmental organization, but Vaughn and I attend together every year.

Walking slowly past several more titles introducing the new world order, I head to the waiting car.

Standing under the gigantic purple and yellow banner that says: ***Humans-Meterans Alliance Festival. Knowledge for Tolerance. Tolerance for Peace***, I stretch my lips wide and pose.

Flashbulbs blind me while I set my hand on my slanted hip.

"Jade! Over here! Jade!"

I shift to this side. Then the other. Studied hair flick. Smile some more.

I sidestep slowly toward the entrance of the venue while the wall of journalists throws their usual volley of questions I won't answer.

“Congratulations on the tenth anniversary of the Alliance. How do you feel about the growing success of the festival?”

“Is it true Vaughn and you got secretly erousiaed?”

I've been asked this question thousands of times. Erousia is the equivalent of marriage between a Meteran and a human. It's a ceremony filled with magic, during which Meterans share their much longer lifespan with their partner.

“The fest is your and Vaughn's child. Are you two planning...?”

My only child was ripped from me.

My smile falters for a split second, and I flick my gaze to Dex waiting for me at the end of the red carpet. He nods slowly, and I roll my shoulders back while I stretch my smile.

Wave. Smile. Turn. Pose.

“Where's Vaughn?”

“Where's the Great Sorcerer?”

I don't know.

I keep smiling while my chest tightens.

“Jade, you're wearing purple again. Is it your favorite color?”

No, it's Vaughn's.

“What's it like to be in an open relationship with the most powerful Meteran known to humankind? Are you polyamorous?”

I blink fast, wave, and walk slowly toward the backstage entrance of the stadium.

“Jade, why are you solo this year?”

Because someone took Vaughn.

“You and Vaughn are the poster couple for Human-Meteran relationships. A word for your fans?”

I’m nearly at the end of the tortuous carpet when a male voice erupts. “You’re a fucking disgrace to your species! Human dick not good enough for ya? You f—”

A cacophony of boos and growls drowns the diatribe of insults while the crowd wavers around the vociferating voice.

There’s always one.

He’s one of the Pures—the irony of the obnoxious self-titled name isn’t lost on me—the group of bigoted human fanatics who emerged in the wake of the creation of the OMR—Office of Meteran Rights. They’ve come to the three-day festival every year, trying to entice, corrupt, or just create chaos.

I’ll never get used to the hatred. It always hurts. Always.

As I crane my neck up to scan the heavy assembly, Dex tugs on my hand to lead me toward the green rooms backstage.

We’re almost at the heavy metal door when my right instep meets the back of my left ankle and my knees buckle. I yelp, and as I’m bracing for impact, Dex yanks me up with one arm while he catches my flying clutch purse with the other.

Every freaking time.

I can’t even blame the high heels. Big crowds do that to me. My legs seem to catch on my anxiety and needle instead of stepping forward. After sweeping my fingers over the skirt of my dress to hide my burning face, I tilt my eyes up. And up. He’s close to seven feet tall, the average size for a werebear in human form. I clear my throat. “I’m okay.”

His thick brows knit over his chestnut eyes.

“I’m fine.” When Dex lifts a brow, I mirror him. “I’m perfect. Let’s go.”

After we climb the stairs to the wide stage of the stadium, Dex steps back into the shadows while a swarm of staff comes at me. Someone puts an earpiece in my palm and while I tuck it around my ear, another someone fluffs my hair. I force my body still as another faceless person hooks a microphone in the V-neck of my dress.

One of the organizers smiles. “Ready?”

I reply with a nod.

There’s a panel discussion about the new labor laws for Meterans, followed by a Q and A, after which I’ll meet up-close with a vetted number of members of the public.

Once settled at the table, I greet the rest of the panel. There’s the enthusiastic government envoy—the only male at the table—who’s seated beside Atlaiis Samson, the first witch elected mayor. Then Clara Morgan, the Fae who owns a very popular chain of jewelry, completes our lineup.

As I tilt the metal bottle to my lips, I peer up at the huge monitor screens on the sides of the stage that will project my face in enlarged, excruciating details.

Time flies, and soon we’re taking questions from the public.

“This is a question for Jade...”

On one of the big screens, a man in his twenties with cropped black hair and a cocky grin, levels his mouth to the microphone. “Hi, Jade. My name’s Emmett.” His smile widens. “You and Vaughn are in an open relationship. Vaughn’s been dating a lot of people, but you haven’t.” The crowd emits a few ‘woot, woot’ amongst dispersed applause. “So, if you’d let me, I’d love to take you out on a date.”

The coordinator grumbles in my earpiece. “Sorry, Jade. We expressly asked for no personal questions.”

I pull the small gizmo out of my ear. “Thank you, Emmett.” I force a smile. “Was there a question?” When he

winks, I add, "... but no thank you for the date. I'm happy with Vaughn."

An hour later, my panel companions and I thank the crowd under thunderous applause as the bright stage light dims. Break time.

After closing the door of the small green room, I check my cell and my chest tightens. Still nothing.

I jump at the short knock on my door.

"Jade. Five minutes."

"Thank you."

Six minutes later, I sit down at the panel table, now composed of only women.

"We're sending members of the public," the coordinator says in my earpiece.

I lace my fingers on the table as two young women almost skip to our table. They're both wearing the same tight short dress, one in white, the other one in black. The one on my right is sporting long, straight, blood-red hair while her friend has waist-length, pink, curly hair.

Seconds before the young women stop before us, Clara points her chin up. "Those ones are yours."

"Jade, hi!" They speak at the same time.

I can't help but smile. "Hi. What are your names?"

"Mel!" They both reply in tandem.

They giggle and the one on the right points at her friend. "Her for Melissa." Her finger moves to her chest. "And me for Melanie."

Clara and I chuckle. Before I can utter another word, they babble at the same time. The late teens girls even have similar voices and speech patterns. They remind me of another set of twins I love.

“We love you so much. We’re half-human, half-Seelie and you’re, like, a star.”

“We follow you and Vaughn, and we tried to see you last year but...”

“We’ve been following you for like ... ever. You and Vaughn are the freaking best.” Mel- One glances over my head to backstage. “Is he here today?”

“Thank you. That’s a very nice thing to say. Vaughn had other engagements.”

Mel-Two pouts. “But he’s always with you during the festival.”

I clear my throat. “He’ll be here next year.”

The vivacious, curly one leans in. “My last boyfriend was a witch. I mean ... he’s still a witch, but he’s no longer my boyfriend.”

I tilt my head to the side. “I’m sorry. Are you okay?”

The shy Mel edges closer to her friend. “She’s fine, and better off without him, and her new boyfriend’s great.” She grins at her friend. “Isn’t he?”

They both giggle. They’re very cute.

That’s what I want. It’s what Vaughn, Dana, Atilda, Dex, and I are fighting for, the normalcy of people from every species, co-existing and living united.

I point at their cell phones. “Selfie?”

Once at the manor I’ve always found ridiculously big, I ease the door of Vaughn’s quarters closed and touch my forehead to the cool wooden panel while tears pool behind my eyes.

Where are you?

The thick runner carpet muffles my steps on the large balcony between the double grand stairs while the two modern

chandeliers cast a soft glow in the open hallway. I enter the cream and pale blue walls of my quarters, crawl on my bed, and drop my buzzing head in my hands while the hole in my chest deepens.

The next morning, after too little sleep, I drag my bare feet on the thick grey carpet to my crisp white bathroom where I grip the edges of the sink and take a deep breath.

Once I'm ready for the day, I follow the fast-tapping sound coming from the homey kitchen where Atilda is busy chopping things.

At the bottom of the grand stairs, I smile at Dex, who lifts his steaming mug. "Mornin', Peanut."

"Hi, Dex."

After entering the kitchen, I peck Atilda's cheek and settle at the country style table by the French windows. Since Vaughn's been gone, I can't bring myself to use the comfortable seating area in the nook under the archway which screams of his absence.

My stomach's knotted, so instead of the usual ham and eggs on toast, Atilda slides a bowl of fresh berries and an apple juice before me.

Sprite Fae can read primary needs and what we hunger for, which make them in-demand professionals in the service industry and, according to Tilda, sought-after lovers.

"Here, honey." She sits beside me, and her soulful eyes dip in mine.

"Thanks, Tilda."

I still remember the day she knocked on the door of the manor a few days after Vaughn and I moved in. She looked the same as she does today, in her late twenties and gorgeously pretty. Except for her hair which was pink. She took one look at me and pulled me into a hug. At first, I didn't respond, but there was so much love in that embrace that I started crying

and hugged her back for the longest time. And she has been mothering me ever since.

Shaking her green curly hair tied in a high ponytail, she sighs. “Are you going to Whole of Us?”

“No, Dana said she’ll cover for me while Dex and I are searching for Vaughn.”

She tilts her head to the side and sets her soft eyes on me. “Has Cavendish Security gotten back to us?”

When I nod, she takes my hand. “How are you feeling?”

My stomach churns at the idea of asking Saxton for help. But if that’s the price to pay to bring Vaughn home, then so be it. I squeeze Tilda’s fingers. “I hope he’ll help us.”

Tilda pecks my temple and gets to her feet. “We’ll get Vaughn back.”

As she struts toward the pantry in the far-right corner of the kitchen, I message Dana.

Jade: Meeting Cavendish Security at 8 PM tomorrow.

My friend’s reply comes in seconds.

Dana: Good luck with alphawanker. I’ll call you after.

She’s got the best insults. I type fast.

Jade: Will do. LY.

Dana: LY2.

Love you, too.

Chapter Ten

Saxton

Cole, my all-around pain in the ass partner, enters my office brandishing a folded magazine. After sitting casually on the corner of my desk, he grins. “What does the human poster child for tolerance want with us?”

I lean back against my armchair. *Fuck knows*. When I saw her name on my list of meetings, I did a double take.

“No idea.”

Cole smirks. “Alice said she’s coming alone.” He shakes his head. “Thyonian’s an interesting guy.”

“You met him?”

Cole chuffs in that feline way that gets on my nerves. “He asked, but I declined because I voluntarily left my leap.” He leans in. “But I thought you hadn’t because of your pack’s thing.”

I were-growl, using a frequency audible only to Weres. “What pack thing?”

“The ‘Only wolves allowed’ motto of the Cavendish pack.”

That’s what kept us alive. “My pack is safe.”

He scoffs. “Yeah, from the rest of the world. Including the Werenation. Everyone knows wolves are secretive and don’t play well with others, but you guys are taking this shit to a whole new level. You’re almost a sect.”

I’m not having this conversation again. My pack—like many Weres—interact daily with uninformed humans. And it’s not that we isolate ourselves, but when we do mix with the rest of the world, we do it on our terms.

Cole flicks through the gossip rag everyone in the building seems to have bought a copy of. On the cover, Jade

poses next to the Sorcerer who has his hand on the deep indent of her waist. They're smiling at each other, and their genuine connection jumps out of the page under the bait-title: ***Trouble in Paradise? Jade Channings attends UnityFest alone. The most powerful Meteran...***

Maybe for once, the press got it right.

Most powerful Met, my ass. The guy's just a glorified magician.

As I stride across the thick rug to the cabinet on the other side of the office to grab some water, Cole clears his throat. He does that shit every time he's about to say something that'll piss me off. Which is often.

I turn to face him. "Hairball caught in your throat?"

After tossing the magazine on the desk, Cole cuts his eyes to me. "Says in there she's from Vosges. Isn't that Cavendish territory?"

He knows it is. "It is."

He nods slowly, waiting for an explanation I won't give. "Have you met her before?"

The cat won't let go, so I might as well tell him. "I know her."

Cole slants forward. "You don't *know* humans, so what kind of knowledge are we talking about?"

When I clench my back teeth, my friend's brows hit his hairline. He whistles low and gets to his feet.

"You fucked her? So, this is personal." An annoying-shit stirrer grin splits his face. "Is that why you never met with the Great Sorcerer?"

I never met him because he never asked.

Cole flashes a smile. "I've got to deal with a coyote situation, but, hermano, Jade Channings has just become a lot more interesting."

I step toward my partner. “Cat—”

As the scent of honeysuckle and woman floats in, we both turn toward the door. The next second, Alice, our office coordinator, peeks her head through the doorjamb of the office.

The usually blasé werebadger’s voice pitches high as she grins. “Jade Channings is here.”

The door opens, and the wide-eyed, innocent sex kitten Jade is no more. In her stead, a poised, sensual woman perched on high heels in a fitted dress that cinches her small waist and caresses her curved hips, glides toward Cole.

She extends her hand to my partner. “Hi, I’m Jade Channings. Pleased to meet you.”

He lifts her hand to his mouth, and her smile widens.

“The pleasure’s all mine, Ms. Channings.” He almost purrs. “May I say, you smell delightful.”

Jade giggles, and I lock my body in place. “Thank you. Jade, please.”

Same bedroom voice. And she does smell good. I edge to my desk and clench my teeth, waiting for the cat to end his charm offensive.

“Jade, I’m Cole. I have to go, but I leave you in the very capable hands of my partner.”

When Cole makes his way to the door, Jade pivots to face me. She was beautiful at seventeen, but she’s an absolute knockout now. Her curls undulate down to her waist, and her only jewelry is a wide watch and diamond ear studs. Shacking up with a Met who gives in to her every whim suits her well.

She was still warm from my bed when she fell into his.

Her scent has a new, spicy afterbite that makes me clench my jaw, and I cross my arms over my chest.

“What do you want, Jade?”

Standing between the couch and the long coffee table, she squares her shoulders, and anxiety seeps through her scent. “I need your word that everything I tell you will stay confidential.”

The Jade I used to know was never prone to drama, so what has her so worried?

“You have my word.”

The pulse at the base of her neck beats fast, but her slightly raspy voice is collected. “Vaughn’s gone, and I need your help finding him.”

“What do you mean gone?”

She rubs her thumb on the nail of her index, something she does when she’s anxious. “I lost track of him four days ago, and we’ve never been without contact for this long.”

Four fucking days? My wolf pushes against my skin as I step toward her. “Are you’re fucking kidding me?”

Her brows shoot up. “What? No. I wouldn’t—”

“Houdini disappears for less than a week, and out of the hundreds of security firms, you come here to ask *me* to find him?”

When her face flushes, my wolf stirs. She clears her throat. “Saxton, everyone says you’re the best at these kinds of things and I’m here *because* of who and what you are. Vaughn’s—”

She’s probably known for years, and the only time she shows up here is for her magician? Anger charges my tone. “What exactly do you think you know?”

She straightens her back. “I know the security firm isn’t affiliated with your pack corporation. Cole’s a werejaguar, ex-alpha of his leap and your partner. Your whole team is made of Weres, and only the best work for you. You deal with kidnapping and missing persons amongst other things and don’t do politics. You are said to be one of the best trackers in the world with a sense of smell so accurate, you can detect a

lie. I've also heard you refuse to deal with humans and Meterans, but I thought—”

Something about her controlled voice as she recites my resume bothers the fuck out of me.

“And knowing all this, you still came here? Maybe you're not as smart as people give you credit for.”

Jade's head jerks back, and my wolf bristles. Young Jade would have fled the room, not look at me straight in the eyes with challenging determination.

Since she vanished from Vosges, I haven't learnt anything that the papers hadn't already printed. At twenty-four, she graduated in psychology from an Ivy-League university. A decade ago, the sorcerer and her started UnityFest, which put her on first-name basis with world dignitaries. Then, she co-founded *Whole of Us* with her best friend, a witch called Dana McAllister. The mixed species, women-only health center is the first of its kind. She's all over social media, but her private life is a tomb. A few years ago, after she was photographed lip locked with someone who wasn't the sorcerer, they made the front page again to announce they were in an open relationship.

I shift back, taking in the toned curves of her body, and her red toenails peeking out of the expensive sandals. She's always been oblivious of it, but she's the kind of woman who leaves a mark on a man's soul.

“Don't you guys fuck people on the side? Maybe Thyonian needed something ... fresher.”

Anger flits in her darkened gaze. She flicks her hair over her shoulder, and the move sends wafts of honeysuckle that tease my nose. “Vaughn's been taken, and it would take a lot of power to even subdue him. I just need you to locate him, and we'll do the rest. Will you help us?”

Us. All this fire. For him.

“Please?” When her voice breaks, I clench my jaw. Striding to my desk, I half-sit on the edge where the damn

woman follows me. *Too close.*

She locks her eyes onto mine. “Saxton, just name your price. Tell me what you want, whatever it is, and I’ll get it for you. Anything, if you help me find him.”

Anything? The plea in her big eyes, her parted, bitable lips, and the way her breath catches makes blood rush to my head. *After fourteen years of silence, she thought she could show up and just bat her lashes at me.*

“I don’t do leftovers, Jade. A little cold and dry for my tastes.”

The little growl coming out of her makes me hard, which pisses me off even more. “I wasn’t—”

When I get on my feet, her brows knit, and she holds her breath.

“We don’t get mixed in Meterans’ affairs. But even if we did, there’s nothing you can give me that’d be worth lifting a finger to help you. Go back to your castle and don’t waste my fucking time because your magician got himself stuck inside someone else.”

She nods slowly and steps back. “All right.”

She expected my response.

After clasping her hands behind her back, she dips her chin, and I can almost taste the sadness weaving into her scent.

“Much obliged for your time and audience, Alpha Cavendish.”

The polite salute in impeccable Were customs is a ‘fuck you’ that pokes at my wolf as she turns on her heels. Without looking back, she picks up her purse from the coffee table and sways her hips out of my office.

As her footsteps recede behind the closed door, I roll my shoulders back.

Fuck. If the prominent Met has been taken, it could shake the brittle alliance with humans, and the trickle effect

will impact Weres. I grab my cell.

Tremayne, the werewolf who leads one of our deadliest teams, picks up on the first ring.

“I want your team on Jade Channings.”

She’s silent for one beat. Two. “*The Jade Channings?*”

“Yes.” *The Jade Channings who claimed she loved me and moved in within days with the next guy who showed up in her life.* “She just left my office.”

“On it. I’ll send Moby to cover the manor.”

Next, I contact Cole. “You and I are going to the magician’s castle. I’ll brief you on the way.”

“Good to have you back in the field, hermano.”

Once in my truck, I receive a text from Tremayne.

Tremayne: **Highway 29. Silver Audi.**

It takes me a few minutes to catch up to her car going fast down the highway. I keep three cars behind hers as she veers into Ridgemont exit. That’s four exits before the mansion she shares with Thyonian.

Where is she going?

Twenty minutes later, as she turns onto a quiet, woodsy residential area outside of the city, I send my coordinates to Cole and to my team. At the sound of her engine turning off and the muted slap of the front door closing, I park my truck on a side road out of sight.

Under the cover of darkness and the lack of neighbors, I get close enough to hear the click-clack of Jade’s heels in the house. It takes me a couple of minutes to check the periphery of the bungalow.

There’s no alarm of any kind, and the faint scent of fresh paint hovers from the back walls. The house is new or newly refurbished.

Why did she come here?

I still for a second as Cole's scent reaches me.

As he lifts his chin, I automatically set my pitch to alphan-speak, a frequency detectable only to Were alphas, but since humans don't have the capacity to hear most frequencies, I could have used were-speak.

"The house isn't listed on the portfolio of their properties."

"Lowdown?" Cole asks.

After relating an abridged version of my conversation with Jade, we follow the sound of her steps to the kitchen. When her cellphone rings, we flatten our backs onto the cool brick walls on either side of the kitchen bay window leading to a small patio.

"Hi, sweets." The woman's voice she's talking to is as clear to us as if they were both in the room.

"Hi, Dana." *The witch* "Hold on, I'm just encrypting the call." After a few beeps and a slight white noise, Jade says, "All right, our conversation is secure."

The other woman grunts. "The asshole said no."

The asshole?

"We knew it was a huge chance anyway."

When Jade sighs, her friend's tone sharpens. "The piece of shit was mean to you, wasn't he?"

I clench my fist at Jade's scoff. "He made it very clear he'd rather eat razors than help me."

Cole's eyes cut to me. "Wolfie, what the fuck?"

Jade moves within the house, and we track her footsteps to what must be her bedroom. She puts her cell on speaker, turns the lights on, and the hiss of a zipper covers the silence followed by a couple of muted thumps. She's undressing.

Her friend grumbles. "Might help with the giant rod he's got up his arse. Jade, you have this unwavering faith in

people's goodness, and I know how deeply you felt for him, but he's a closed-minded, arrogant tosser. What he did to you was beyond cruel, and people like him don't change."

Fuck you, lady.

I wince at the sadness in Jade's voice. "You're right." She clears her throat. "The interview I gave *People* magazine is out tomorrow. The Pures won't be happy, so hopefully this'll get them out of the woodwork."

Those fuckers have been at her since the magician and her made their relationship public.

And the little idiot is willingly posing as bait?

"Dex's mom and her sleuth are keeping watch, and Corina got me an audience with her mate the day after tomorrow."

I whip my eyes to Cole, who alphan-speaks. "Her bodyguard is May Winchester's son, the alpha of the werebears, and Corina's the witch mated to Lucian Kaste, alpha of the Kaste pride."

Jade is on the move again. She heads back to the kitchen. "The only wild card is Raine Ryker. She only trusts Weres. She hates humans, but she respects Vaughn, so I hope she won't rip my head off before I get a chance to ask for her help."

The alpha of the werejackals.

Her friend hums. "Maybe if you tell her about Tatiana ___"

"I'm not bringing Tatiana into this."

Again, I look to Cole, who shakes his head. "No idea."

They fall silent for a few seconds, but as Jade speaks again, her voice is laced with an emotion that makes my wolf fret.

"We need Zayn."

“Bloody fantastic. Now the devil.”

Jade’s voice follows her pacing. “We agreed he’d be our last resort, but we’re at that point. And he’ll do it for me.”

The witch emits a snarl worthy of a Were. “But what is he going to ask for in return?”

“Dana, Zayn’s not like that. But if he asks, I’ll give him anything he wants.”

Same thing she said to me.

“Sweets, the creep is always undressing you. He’s all over you, and you know Vaughn can’t stand him around you. None of us can.”

He’s undressing her?

Jade’s tone is placating. “Tilda and Dex don’t mind him, and he just enjoys annoying Vaughn.”

“I really don’t know what you see in him. The guy’s a pompous, manipulative dickhead who parades his twin concubines.”

I jerk my chin up at Cole. “Who the fuck is this Zayn?”

When he shakes his head, I text Moreau, a French-Canadian wolf hacker who joined the firm three years ago.

Saxton: **Need information on a Met named Zayn.**

My cell vibrates.

Moreau: **Met?**

Saxton: **Affirmative.**

Moreau: **Copy.**

Jade’s sigh speaks volumes. They’ve had this conversation before. “He’s not. He’s just ... bored. And Roma and Milan... Anyway, it doesn’t matter. Dana, we can’t do this alone. The Cavendish territory is the only territory we have zero access to, but I doubt whoever took Vaughn would take him there.”

The witch grunts in agreement. “There’s a silver lining for being the Pures of the Werenation. No-one in their right mind will trespass their territory.”

Who the fuck does the witch think she is? We’re nothing like those bigoted motherfuckers.

Jade exhales a long breath. “Dana, come on. That’s not fair.”

As she strides to her living room, we push off the wall in the trail of her voice.

“Are Dex or Tilda with you?” the witch asks.

“No, I’m at my house—”

“In Ridgemont? I haven’t worked on it yet. Please, tell me your alarm system’s been installed.”

When Jade says it hasn’t, worry deepens her friend’s voice. “Jade—”

“I know.” She lets out a trembling sigh. “I... I just needed a minute. I texted Dex and he’s on his way.”

Cole scowls. “What the fuck happened at—?”

A scent traveling downwind wafts in, and both Cole and I tense.

Humans. And guns.

As one, we race toward the dense woods behind the house.

In minutes, we stalk through the darkened woods to a clearing where six men are gathered around a campfire.

Were those fucking weirdos just waiting for her?

Settled on a tree trunk and camping chairs, they’re decked in army fatigues complete with camouflage makeup they think help them blend in. Fat luck with the stench of sweat and beer clinging in the air. They’re also armed to the teeth with assault rifles laying at their feet and hunting knives holstered at their waists. *A fucking arsenal.*

While Cole moves swiftly behind the group, I shove my hands in my pockets and walk slowly into the clearing toward the men. Any Were would be in full attack mode by now, but I'm nearly onto them before one of the so-called army of puppet soldiers sees me.

The bald one stares up while his hand flies to the walkie-talkie at his waist. "Who the fuck are you?"

At his yelp, the others jump to their feet. Perfectly aligned for Cole to take them all in one swipe.

I ignore the short fucker posturing before me and focus on the male standing behind him. He recognizes danger. He's the leader. I thread a fraction of the power of my alpha in my command. "Report."

The clearing falls into a dead silence while the fucker roams his squinted eyes over me, debating whether he can take me.

I dare you, dipshit.

The putrid scent of their collective fear clings in the cool air before he steps forward but stays at arm's length. "Where the fuck does the master find you guys?"

There's a master.

I lean in, careful not to push my alpha voice too hard. Humans tend to go hysterical or collapse under its power. "I said report."

He sets his hand on the walkie-talkie hooked on his belt. "We've got intel the freak hasn't been around for a couple of days. Team Two's ready to take her."

Don't like the sound of that one fucking bit.

"Take her?"

He nods while the bald piece of shit beside him sniggers.

"Take her where?"

The leader scoffs while the fat insect touches his balls, making my wolf claw under my skin.

“After we rehab her, that little bitch will love human dicks a—”

I lunge.

The man in my hold sputters and his eyes bulge under the pressure of my hand crushing his windpipes. “You’ll have first turn.” I tighten my fingers. “She’s all yours, man. I—”

I throw him hard enough on the ground to knock him out cold. The others step back. Right into my partner’s grasp. Cole punches four of them hard at the back of their heads.

When they drop unconscious on the grassless ground, the leader’s eyes widen. He opens his mouth to scream, but his jaw breaks under my fist before his body slumps next to his acolytes.

Cole touches the sides of their necks and straightens up. “Still breathing. I’ll call—”

The walkie-talkie crackles. “We’re in. Ready for extraction. Over.”

A blood curdling scream pierces through the night.

Jade.

I race toward the house at full speed.

Although the house is plunged in darkness, I can see as clearly as day. The back door is smashed open. A chair is tipped onto the floor of the kitchen, the small table stands askew, and muddy footprints dirty the beige tiles. My wolf’s shaking with the need to pounce. I step toward the arched doorjamb between the darkened kitchen and the lowly lit, wide living room, and stop dead in my tracks.

Jade has her back to me while four men stand in line before her. She holds a sword—a fucking sword—she uses to keep them at bay.

There's no fear in her scent, just pure anger, sweet and heated. In jeans, a black tee, and boots, her stance is of a fighter ready to strike.

Stepping back into the darkened kitchen, I push my shoulder against the slick wall to watch.

She touches the tip of the blade against the throat of one of the motherfuckers who raises his palms high.

He stares at her like she's a grenade whose pin came loose while the three others back away slowly.

“You break into my house and want me to go willingly God knows where with a bunch of racist incels?”

The man whose throat is about to be slashed open gulps. “Jade—” The edge of the blade breaks skin, and his Adam's apple bobs. “Ms. Channings, if you let me explain—”

Without warning, she kicks his balls. Hard. As the man keels over clutching his crotch, she spins in a perfect arc to roundhouse the fucker in the face. She leaps over the human heap and rams the heel of her boot into another one's throat. Her hits are precise, and within minutes, all four men are out cold on her floor.

She's fucking magnificent.

I step toward her. And freeze.

A Were's approaching.

While she glares down at the fanatics, I mask my scent—something I inherited from my father's dire-wolf bloodline—and unleash my claws. She can fight, but she'll never be able to take on a Were.

The boom of a bike engine alerts Jade. “Dex.”

Her whisper is loaded with relief. Taking advantage of her distraction, one of the little shits on the floor starts to sit up. Her sword still in hand, she taps the tip of the blade on his balls.

“Move, and I'll do womankind a favor.”

When the human wisely lays back down, she angles her head to the door.

“Dex, don’t break—”

The door crashes open, sending splinters flying into the wide room. In two steps, he’s near her. “Peanut. You’re hurt?”

Peanut?

“I’m fine. I’ll get my bag.”

As she shifts toward her bedroom, her brows furrow as she peers into the darkened kitchen. Her searching gaze sweeps over mine for a split second before she hurries down the small hallway.

While she’s out of earshot, the werebear pulls out his cell.

“Detective Chambers,” a man barks.

“They broke into Jade’s house.”

“The manor? Is Vaughn—?”

The werebear’s tone teems with controlled rage. “No, the scum attacked her in her house. Your restraining order is worth shit, so next time, you’ll be picking up bodies.”

The cop snarls. “Shit, Winchester, you know I can’t let you—”

“And you’re paying for her fucking doors.”

Jade’s bodyguard slides his cell in his pocket and steps toward the pile of humans. He nudges the one who tried to escape with the heel of his boot and kicks the fucker cold.

When Jade returns to the living room, she swings her backpack over her shoulders, and I stare at the familiar gesture.

My Jade is still in there.

I make my way through the back door and race to the woods.

Chapter Eleven

Jade

When I step back into my ruined living room, my heart speeds up. They must know about Vaughn. The Pures are a lot of things, all abhorrent, but they've never been organized enough—and I suspect not smart enough—to plan this botched kidnapping. But what if—?

Dex throws his hand out to me. “I called the cops. Let's move.”

After wrapping my hand around his, we rush out and jump on his waiting custom bike. It's a bigger version of the one he gifted me with five Christmases ago, which I stopped riding after paparazzi nearly ran me off the road. I loop my arms around his waist and let the speed of the vibrating engine ground me.

Once we arrive at the manor, I pull the black helmet off as we head to the front door and sigh in relief. This is the safest place on Earth. There's a military security system linked directly to the police station. But the real protection comes from the powerful wards Dana created. They make human and most Meteran trespassers confused, so they can never find their way to the manor's grounds, nor to the house itself.

In the hallway, Dex rakes his fingers through his thick hair and turns to me. “Why were you at your house? You know those assholes track you everywhere. Are you okay?”

At my nod, his frown deepens. When I tell him about the humiliating interaction with Saxton, he exhales slowly and shakes his head.

“I don't know what this guy's deal is with Meterans. Humans, I can almost understand, but not even for Vaughn? He doesn't know him.”

I sigh. *Not for lack of trying.*

He grunts low. “Can’t be a coincidence the scum attacked today. They must know about Vaughn or at the very least noticed his absence.”

I swipe off a tear with shaking fingertips, and before I can agree with him, Dex engulfs me in a hug.

“Peanut, I know you’re worried. But it’s Vaughn. If anything, we should feel sorry for whoever took him.”

He’s right. But I’m not crying because I’m upset—and I am. My worry has turned into anger, and the rage I feel has nowhere to go but through my tears.

Squaring my shoulders back, I peer up at Dex. “Thank you, Dex.”

He grins. “They didn’t create teddy bears by mistake.”

I chuckle at the joke as old as our friendship.

As we move farther into the house, Tilda comes out of the kitchen.

After a warm hug, she curls her fingers around mine. “Tomorrow is the Women Friends of UnityFest Luncheon.”

Oh crap. I totally forgot about the yearly benefit lunch with the festival’s richest and most prominent female benefactors.

Dex stops a few meters from the mouth of the kitchen. “Say the word, and I’ll shut it down.”

Between the months of preparation going into the festival and the increased activity at the health center, I could use some rest. But the truth is, seeing Saxton in the flesh after all those years shook me a lot harder than I thought. He’s as gorgeous as ever. And as mean. God, I thought I was past that, but after one look at him, I was too easily reeled back into the tennis shoes of the stupid eighteen-year-old who let him trample all over her heart.

I take a deep breath. “We’ve never missed a year. Tomorrow’s business as usual. I don’t want to make anyone

suspicious, and the women coming tomorrow are smart *and* observant. All they need to know is Vaughn's away and will return soon. They come for him, so hopefully the event will be short."

Saxton

"Who's the master?" I ask again.

After Tremayne's team confirmed Jade was back at the manor and safe, we took the fuckers' leader to one of the isolated houses the firm owns. Cole, Tremayne, and I have been locked in all night in the stench of fear and urine rising from the human tied up to a chair. His face is not nearly fucked up enough to assuage the rage still churning inside me.

Every time I push my alpha voice on him, he pisses himself. But we fucking need answers.

Tremayne, standing behind the chair, taps her booted foot on the dirt floor. "Let me talk to him."

At the sound of her voice, twiddledick twists his neck to try to look at her.

When she edges beside me, the room fills in with the putrid smell of the human's arousal.

His legs, bound tight to the chair, fidget as he stares at the werefox who is as attractive as she is dangerous. Some say crazy, but she's one of the best agents in the firm.

I join Cole against the wall and clench my jaw as Tremayne crouches before the fanatic.

"My name's Victoria. Your name's Glen, isn't it?" When the human nods, she touches his knee, and the smell of his deepening lust clogs the small, windowless space.

Cole were-speaks. "It's going to take me days to get rid of that stink."

"Glen, I know you're a nice person. I can tell because you have kind eyes."

My partner shakes his head. “Kind *eye*.”

“...and you wouldn’t hurt a woman, would you?”

The whiny piece of shit is lapping up her attention. “Never. But it’s not right. You understand, right? We should be with our own, but she’s encouraging other women to sleep with those freaks. It’s not right.”

Once more, I find myself pondering how bloody a war would be if humans knew about Werres.

“Glen, what do you want with Jade Channings?”

The fake soldier straightens his back as best he can and glances furtively at Cole and I before swallowing hard. “Our mission was just to take her.”

Tremayne pushes on her knees. “What for?”

Dipshit pales. Fear sweat has the worst fucking smell.

“Glen, talk to me.”

His Adam’s apple quavers. “If I tell you, you’ll let me go?”

She must have smiled because he spills his guts, and the words he sputters through broken teeth set my wolf on edge.

“Our trained teams receive the names of the women who need to be saved from our commanders. After that, the women are moved to a secret campground.” I don’t know what he reads in Tremayne’s expression, but the acidic smell of his fear chokes the room. “I only joined them a month ago. I swear. I swear.”

Tremayne hums. “Save them from what?”

He shakes his head as if the question is incongruous. “Fucking those freaks. Getting pregnant with God knows what. Some of them say they loved them!”

Jesus fucking Christ. I shove my hands in my pockets to refrain from pummeling the fucker’s jaw into his throat.

The werefox sighs. “Glen, you like Jade, don’t you?” At the human’s nod, she straightens up. “I like her too.”

I whip my eyes to the woman’s back. *Truth.*

The human says, “We would never harm her. I swear. The new master knew the sorcerer would be away, and we had a small window to take her. We were just the reserve team in case she went to her new house, and we kind of lucked out until...”

He peers at us, and a wave of the human’s terror assails my nose as both Cole and I move toward the chair while Tremayne leans in.

“Glen, who’s the master? We just want to talk to him. We’re on the same side. Maybe we can help him.”

His chest hiccups under his choppy breaths while he shakes his head. “I don’t know. I swear. Since he arrived, only our commanders get to see him.”

Fuck.

“Truth,” I were-speak to Tremayne.

Quick as a flash—even for Weres’ eyes—Tremayne’s fist crashes on the man’s face, sending him back to sleep. She pivots toward us. “My team will take care of this fucktard and his friends.”

Cole and I make our way to my truck.

Once on the road, he dons his sunglasses. “Speak.”

Even though I set our security protocols around Jade the minute she rolled her lovely ass out of my office, Cole and I haven’t had time to talk.

“About?”

“Your little threesome with Thyonian and Jade Channings.” Before I can reply, he says, “Sax, if there’s bad blood between the two of you because of her, I need to know.”

We're rightfully wary of humans' insatiable need for violence, but my pack more than most since my father lost his brother at the hands of a hunter. And my mother. And I don't get involved with Mets because I don't trust anyone capable of waving their hands or their wands or whatever the fuck they do and turn the world upside down.

Cole's the only person outside of my pack I trust, so I tell him—not in details—about our short-lived relationship. When he asks if she knew I was Were, I shake my head.

He scoffs. "She does now."

What I don't say is after the war with the Prestwood pack ended, I stopped at the small diner where an angry Met told me Jade had left. For months, Harris and I searched the country. To no avail. Then, a couple of years later, after her mother was found dead in a motel room, I watched the funeral from behind a tree at the cemetery, waiting for her to show up. She didn't. She had vanished. Disappeared without a trace.

Not long after that, a new Met announced himself to the world as the great sorcerer and introduced his partner, a beautiful human named Jade Channings. For weeks, pictures of them where Jade poses by his side and gazes up adoringly at him adorned every damn paper and newsfeed.

Cole's cell chimes with a text.

"I contacted Winchester earlier. Told him we had information. Jade's hosting an event, but he'll let us in at 3:00 PM."

Then, he just watches me.

"Cat—"

"Hermano, we've been partners for a long time, and I've never seen you react the way you do with her."

My knuckles strain around the wheel. "What? Pissed off?"

"Pissed off, I've seen. Everybody has. But this is something else. Was she some kind of experiment?"

“Cat, you’re pissing me off. “

“Yeah. And I’m scared. “What is it, then? She’s the one who got away and your wolf ego can’t take it?”

“Fuck’s sake, Cole—”

“Fine. So, what happened after you tossed her out? Her friend said you were cruel.”

I can’t help my snarl. “I was cruel to be kind. She was an eighteen-year-old human girl. I had just become alpha, and we were at war with the Prestwood pack. I did what was best for everyone.”

As I park the truck by our office, the werejaguar shakes his head and makes that annoying chuffing noise while his piercing eyes get more intrusive. “It worked out for her. She mated the alpha of all Mets—”

“She’s mated?”

Cole grunts. “Potato tomato. Mated, erousiaed, whatever you call it, sharing life force with someone is the same fucking commitment. So, the human woman you left for her own good who ... how did her friend put it? Ah yeah, ‘felt deeply for you’ is so worried about the man she’s been with for the last decade she comes to you.”

“Colson—”

He leans in. “Wolfie, no one will ever challenge your pack after you near exterminated the Prestwoods, Samwell is living his best life, and your pack is thriving. For fuck’s sake, you have a pack.”

I grit my teeth. Cole walked away from the alphahood of his leap in favor of his sister a few decades ago. Although he doesn’t talk about it, I know how painful that must have been.

My sympathy vanishes when he cocks a brow. “You were right. Your decision benefited everyone, so what’s your deal?”

She didn’t wait.

Before I can find an answer that will get Cole to back off, he shifts back.

“Sax, we can do this without you—”

“She brings my wolf out.”

Cole shakes his head slowly. “Okay, and she brings my jaguar out. Jade Channings smells good, and she’s gorgeous. You got used to women showing their bellies at the snap of your fingers. But Sax, she’s not yours.”

No, she’s not. I saw to that.

Cole parks his jeep besides my truck and whistles low as he peers up at the massive three-story house.

“The sorcerer bought his queen a castle.”

I slam the truck’s door with more force than necessary, and as we reach the front door, a throng of elegantly dressed women filters out the wide entrance.

While we wait for them to leave, Cole winks at the ones who blatantly eye-fuck us and alphan speaks. “Did you know Dana McAllister is a fifth-generation hedge witch? They’re said to be the most powerful but also prone to insanity.”

Fucking A. The British witch who hates my guts is also crazy.

“So, definitely your type then.”

He chuckles as we step into a marble hallway where the werebear zeroes in his pointed gaze at me.

“What are you doing here? Jade said you told her to fuck off.”

I pitch my voice to were-speak. “We caught the fuckers who attacked her last night.”

“Come in.”

Just as the heavy door shuts behind us, the tap of high heels echoes in the grand foyer followed by the sweet scent of

spiced honeysuckle.

We swing our heads toward the grand stairs just as Jade, looking regal in a knee-length, fitted sleeveless royal blue dress that molds her curves, glides to us. There's a bruise on her shoulder that makes me clench my teeth. One of the pissheads must have grabbed her.

As she greets us, neither her scent nor her expression betrays the rightful agitation I expected from someone who was almost kidnapped a few hours ago. "Hi, Cole. Nice to see you again." The warmth of her smile dims as she lifts her gaze to mine. "Dex said you had information about what happened last night."

Light footsteps stemming from what smells like the kitchen have us all turn toward a willowy woman with long purple hair padding to us. Her odd colored eyes—a blue so deep it looks purple—brush over us as she stops by Jade's side.

Jade touches the woman's arm. "Atilda, this is Alpha Saxton Cavendish." The woman nods in greeting. "And Alpha Cole Hatfield."

Cole flashes her a wide grin. "Cole and Sax will be fine."

He can't help himself. Every woman is a challenge. But unlike most females, the Met with a scent of freshly cut flowers responds by a slight shake of her head.

"There's leftover lamb roast with mashed potatoes in the kitchen if you're hungry."

Shit. That's one of Cole's favorite meals. She's one of those Fae. The cat's hanging mouth is fucking priceless. When she switches her attention to me, I wait. I'm not hungry.

"What you hunger for is not for me to give," she says.

And that's why I stay the fuck away from anyone with magic.

Without waiting for a reply, she turns to Jade. “The cleaning staff is still here.”

“Thanks, Tilda. We’ll use Vaughn’s office upstairs.”

As the Fae strolls back to the kitchen, Winchester curls his arm around Jade, who softens into his embrace, and I drive my fists in my pockets.

“Dana should be here soon.”

Speaking of the witch.

The front doors open on the attractive red head who throws a glare in our direction as she strides toward us and curls a protective arm around Jade. Her scent is a mix of fireworks and cocoa. Definitely an acquired taste.

Standing at the same height as Jade, she points her frosty gaze at me. “Are you here for Vaughn?”

As Cole confirms we are, my eyes stay on Jade, whose shoulders relax as she exhales slowly. Her voice comes out as a shaky whisper. “Thank you. Please, follow me.”

Chapter Twelve

Jade

After telling Saxton and Cole of our plan to ask Vaughn's most powerful friends for their help, Saxton dropped the 'master' bomb on us. The Pures have a leader. Someone strong enough to take Vaughn.

I hold my breath as I gape at him. "Are you sure?"

My heartbeat quickens, and Dana half seated next to me on the edge of the cherrywood desk touches my wrist.

Saxton nods. "And I'm pretty sure Weres are also involved." Dana and I gasp as he answers the question we're too dumbstruck to ask. "One of them said, 'where does he find you, guys?' Humans are usually blinded, but on some level, they can sense us."

This is not good. Not good at all.

My heart hurtles against my ribs, and as dread courses through me, I start pacing the room.

When Dana curls her fingers around my shoulders, I take a breath.

"Sweets, can you still sense him?"

I breathe out the fear clawing at my chest and close my eyes until I find the tiny thread of warmth inside me.

"Yes ... yes. I can."

Saxton's voice lashes through the room. "Are you mated to him?"

Snapping my gaze to his scowl, I clench my fist while blood rushes to my head. "Not that our relationship is any of your business, Alpha Cavendish. But no, I'm not mated to him, only Weres mate. We have a bond."

I step closer and lock my eyes onto his. "Why are you even here? You kicked me out of your office." *And boy, did*

that hurt.

Power, anger— whatever that weird energy is—vibrates from him, but his tone is calm. “The sorcerer’s abduction impacts all of us, so I had you followed.” He crosses his arms over his chest. “And good thing I did.”

Smug jackass. While I’m debating on whether to punch his face or kick his shin, Cole clears his throat, pulling my attention to him.

“The humans seem to both fear and adore the master. The idea of him anyway, but none of them have actually met the guy.” His brows pull together. “Jade, someone as powerful as Vaughn must have made enemies. Is there anyone you can point us to?”

Everyone who meets him loves Vaughn.

I shake my head.

“What about his extra partners? One of them might have gotten obsessed with him. People in love have done crazier stuff.”

As I shake my head again, Saxton locks his gaze onto mine. “What about your lovers? No one who wanted him out of the way? To keep you for themselves?”

Dex, standing by the bay windows behind Saxton, rolls his eyes. Six years ago, the sexual chemistry between Vaughn and I fizzled out, but the genuine love we have for each other, and our work kept us close. When we were ready to date other people, I let the press catch me kissing Jagr, a funny, very attractive Fae from the Unseelie court. A few days later, Vaughn and I took to Instagram to announce we were in an open relationship. Vaughn has excellent tastes, the men and women he dated are awesome individuals who love him and have no idea what he is. Or that he’s been taken.

Before I reply, Dana says, “We’ve talked to them, and none of them would hurt Vaughn. Or be able to.”

Dex straightens up. “And Jade doesn’t sleep with assholes.”

I bite on my bottom lip. *Except for one.*

Saxton locks his hard gaze to mine. “Are you sure? Because Mets and Weres may have taken him, but the Pures are obsessed with you.”

Nothing new then. I take a deep breath, knowing what I’m about to say won’t be popular, and turn to Dex. “What if we give them what they want?”

Ignoring the sudden energy shift in the room, I walk to Dex whose gaze—full of fury—bores into mine. “Jade, no—”

“No, listen, if we let the Pures take me, they might lead us to wherever Vaughn might be, and—”

“Peanut—”

“Your mom—”

Saxton’s suddenly in my face. God, I forgot how fast he moves. His woody cologne yanks me back into the past so hard, I teeter on my heels.

His silver eyes blaze. “Are you trying to get yourself killed? It’s a shit plan. We don’t know where they’re keeping Thyonian. What if you’re the fucking prize the master promised the shithheads while he kills your magician?”

I swallow hard, but before I can reply, Saxton’s body is catapulted against the door, and he roars.

Dana takes one step to the middle of the large room while her green eyes, glowing with magic, set on Saxton.

She raises her palm toward Cole who steps toward her. “I’m not hurting him. Yet. There’re just a few things I need us all to agree on.” She gets toe-to-toe with Saxton, who’s vibrating with anger within the magical shackles.

“We all know where your small-minded pack stands with Meterans and humans.” Her tone turns biting. “But you don’t get to speak to Jade or any of us that way. If you’re going to be an asshole and swing your dick around, we’ll do this without you.”

A growl erupts from his chest as Dana releases him. He rolls his head from side to side before drilling his furious gaze into hers. “She came to me. Use fucking magic on me again, and we’re done. Are we clear?”

Dana scoffs in response before edging close to me. “Jade, he has a point though. Whoever’s doing this is attacking on all fronts. Attempts to breach the wards have multiplied in the last week.”

Saxton and Cole speak at the same time.

“The what?”

“Wards against what?”

While Dana tells them about dark magic weavers and answers the questions Saxton and Cole throw at her, I round the desk to settle on the comfortable armchair behind it.

She won’t say the D-word, but if demons did this, I hope Zayn will be over his rift with Vaughn.

Dana and Dex don’t know this, but when Vaughn decided to reveal who he was to the world, Zayn argued humankind couldn’t be trusted with the truth. But Vaughn was adamant.

Shortly after we gave the press conference to unveil the Great Sorcerer, Zayn disappeared from our lives, only returning when the Pures rallied more and more followers, becoming a threat we could no longer ignore. He was still sarcastic, irreverent, and devilishly cunning, but there was a hardness to him that wasn’t there before. And the wedge between them widened.

I can *feel* Saxton’s eyes on me. Lifting my gaze to his, I hold my breath. Although I’m beyond relieved for his help, I

can't talk about Zayn without betraying Vaughn.

Saxton

Fucking hell. Dark magic weavers?

Jade stays silent. I glance at Cole who dips his chin. He heard what wasn't said as well. No mention of Zayn.

The Met her friend calls the devil and who's all over her. The one she would give anything he wanted if he found her sorcerer.

Seated behind a desk that swallows her, Jade's rubbing the knuckle of her index finger on her bottom lip. The sadness in her scent nags at my wolf, so my voice comes out hard.

"We'll tour the alphas together. What I say goes, and you follow my lead."

I expect a little bit of a fight—want it—but she just gets on her feet and nods. "All right."

She would do anything for her Met.

Cole says, "I'll coordinate our teams here and search for the rotten Weres and Mets." He turns to the witch. "Dana, who can we meet from the witch Council if we need to?"

Jade's friend glowers at Cole.

And here I was thinking she only hated me.

"The Council kicked me out years ago, so I'm the wrong person to ask, but Jade has already lined up their support."

That's a lot of clout. Witches are said to be very picky in their alliances.

Cole nods. "I'm impressed."

Jade tucks her hair behind her ear, and I clench my back teeth at the slight trembling of her fingers. "Don't be. They made it very clear they're only doing it for Vaughn."

Worry floods her scent again.

“What time are you expected at the Kaste pride tomorrow?”

“Lunchtime. I’ll call Corina to let her know you’ll be joining us.”

“Pack a bag. I’ll pick you up at five. We’ll stop at my house in Crowley and take the country roads in case we’re being followed. I’ll call Alpha Ryker and ask for a meeting. I want anyone who had a hand in this to know Cavendish Security is looking for the sorcerer.”

Jade blinks fast, and the relief pouring out of her fills the airy room. When an almost silent sob rolls from her chest, the werebear is the first to act on it, and moves to hold her.

“It’s okay, Peanut.”

Those two seem awfully close. And that ‘Peanut’ thing starts to grate on me. I bury my fists in my pockets while he comforts her.

Cole grins. “Why do you call her Peanut?”

Dex disengages from their embrace while her face flushes, and she bites on her full bottom lip.

The werebear chuckles. “I’ll let Jade tell you.”

She groans, a cute sound reminiscent of her younger self that makes my wolf growl. She’s fucking adorable.

And not mine.

After Dex and Dana say their goodbyes, Cole and I are making our way to the door when Jade calls out.

“Saxton, can I have a minute please?”

Once we’re left face to face, Jade smooths out her palms over the skirt of her dress. “I’m really grateful for your help, we all are. But before we start, we need to settle your fees.”

Her blank expression almost keeps me at arm’s length as I inch closer.

“Yesterday, you said you’d give me anything if I helped you. Does that offer still stand?”

She pinches her lips. “Yes. And just to be clear, I wasn’t offering myself.”

Not my best moment there.

“There’s something I want.”

Her expression becomes guarded. “What?”

“I want answers.”

After a couple of blinks, she nods. “Of course. Finding Vaughn is my priority, so whatever you need to know—”

“Answers about you.”

Jade narrows her eyes. “Don’t you run a security and *investigation* firm?”

Here’s the smartass I know.

“Do we have a deal?”

Several emotions flit across her face. None of them I can read, which is unusual enough to rattle my wolf. “What if I refuse? Will you still help us?”

Yes, but I need those damn answers. “Do we have a deal?”

After a short exhale, she nods again. “All right, but I won’t answer questions involving other people. Also, if a question is too personal, I won’t answer, and you can ask another one. How many questions are we talking about?”

“As many as I want.”

A surprised scoff escapes her throat, and she shakes her head. “Saxton, that’s ... that’s crazy.” She curls a strand of hair behind her ear, and her chest vibrates under her quickening heartbeat, which makes her scent richer. “Will they be yes and no answers?”

Didn't think of that. “No.”

“All right. Five questions.”

Nice try. “Fifty.”

The roll of her eyes is both annoying and sexy-as-fuck. “Ten. One follow-up for each question.”

Aroused by the verbal jousting, I slant closer to get more of her spiced scent while my wolf almost wags his tail at the prospect of her sweet submission.

“Ten? That’s all he’s worth to you?”

The second my words fall out between us, I realize I fucked up.

Jade gasps and her eyes fill with tears. As she wheels away to stand by the window, a silent sob shakes her shoulders.

I reach for her. “Shit. Baby—”

When she pivots back to face me, her expression is shuttered. “All right. You win.”

Doesn't fucking feel like it. “We’ll go with ten and one follow up.”

As she touches her fingertips to her throat, daylight caresses her face. She lifts her wide, shiny gaze, and I fucking hate that I’ve put that pain in there. “Ask away.”

The ache in her voice claws at me, and there are shadows under her eyes. When was the last time she slept? “We’ll start tomorrow. Get some sleep.”

“See you tomorrow, Saxton.”

I park my truck in front of the pack’s mansion and head straight for the back of the house. My hands and knees hit the tiles of the mudroom. Sounds and smells crystallize, and my vision sharpens while I welcome the sweet agony of the morphing.

Howling at the night sky, I start toward the thick forest.

I race at full speed. The wind slashes through my fur while my paws pound the musty grounds. I run for hours.

But no matter how fast or how far I run, the honeysuckle is still coating the back of my tongue.

Back at the house in human form, I dive under the shower, but the beating of the icy water on my skin doesn't bring me the peace I need.

Chapter Thirteen

Jade

Saxton peruses over my three bags set neatly against the wall of the manor's hallway. His hair is still wet, and he looks just...

He chin-points at my luggage. "Are all of these yours?"

My face heats up as I nod. Vaughn and Dana tease me all the time about it, but I always pack heavy. Knowing perfectly well it'll be physically impossible for me to wear most of the clothes in such a short time. But I need options, the more the better, to help me cope with my childhood borne insecurities of not being good enough.

I wait, expecting some kind of criticism, but he just scoops all three bags in one hand and opens the front door.

Once settled in the passenger's seat, I tangle my fingers in my lap and curl deep into the soft leather. It's nearly a four-hour drive to his house. Then another two to the Kaste Pride, so I expect Saxton to drill me with questions. But twenty minutes into the journey, he remains silent, so I shift sideways.

"What do you want to know?"

His gravelly tone fills up the cabin of the truck. "Jade, I need you sharp for this, and you look exhausted. It's a four-hour trip, so sleep, and I'll wake you up when we get to my house."

I *am* tired. I shut my eyes, and the humming vibration of the car lulls me to sleep.

"Jade."

Smuggled into his sheltering body, I feel his voice on my skin, and shiver. When his fingers graze my cheek and his breath warms my mouth, heat pools in my lower belly.

“Saxton.”

With my eyes closed, I reach for his kiss. Swallowing his sharp exhale, I slide my tongue in his mouth and moan. His rumbling groan seeps from his chest to mine, and my nipples pebble. I could kiss him forever. Hungry for him, I press closer. I need more of him. All of him.

“Baby, wake up.”

No, I don't want to. I want...

“Fuck, Jade. Wake up.”

I open my eyes. Straight into Saxton's furious gaze.

What did I do?

When he wipes my lip-gloss off his mouth with the back of his hand, my heartbeat races. Dear God, did I just—?

Oh God. I kissed him. I really kissed him.

Fully awake, I jerk back against the seat while a completely different type of heat engulfs my face. *Crap. Crap. Crap.* Corina and May told me Weres don't take lightly to someone *talking* to their mates. Let alone kiss them. And I have zero interest in ever crossing paths with Breanne again.

“I'm sorry. I'm... I was uh...”

“You were what?”

Dreaming of you when you were my home? I clear my throat. “I'm sorry.”

He leans back slowly, but his gaze stays locked on mine. “We're at my house. We have about an hour before taking the road again, and I guess you want to freshen up. Let's go.”

He opens his door then mine before retrieving my bags from the trunk, and I exhale slowly to control my heart trying to jump out of my chest.

Freaking great. It hasn't been a full day yet, and I'm kissing him.

Saxton unlocks the thick door, and we are welcomed by a stone fireplace, hardwood floors, and wooden ceiling beams. A dark beige sectional and two four-seater couches facing each other are set around a square glass coffee table placed atop a big houndstooth rug. The ensemble is an elegant mix of classic with modern touches.

The house is both warm and spacious with plenty of light coming through the bay windows. It's beautiful.

He points his chin toward the arched hallway leading to the back of the room. "The bedrooms are down there. Pick any one you want."

I open the first door to my right where Saxton follows me. He places my bags on a large bench at the foot of the inviting bed covered in a heavenly soft white duvet and matching pillows.

My voice comes as a whisper. "Thank you."

When the door shuts behind him, I drop heavily on the bed and grip the comforter. After sending a quick check-in text to Dana, Tilda, and Dex, I splash cold water on my face and don a knee-length sleeveless dress and rose gold platform wedges. After a little makeup, and a dynamic brush of my hair, I grab my purse. As I step to the door, it opens on Saxton.

His wide shoulders roll under the grey t-shirt that molds him perfectly as he slides his hands in the pockets of a pair of faded jeans making love to his long legs. He's as gloriously handsome as ever. Probably more. Definitely more.

"I have a question."

Clutching my purse tighter, I force myself to stay still as he edges closer. "All right."

"Do you love the sorcerer?"

That's easy. "Yes, I do."

"Why?"

I blink several times and gawk at him. “What do you mean why? I just do.”

His expression darkens. “You were with him right after you left Vosges. He has powers no one understands, and he’s apparently richer than God. You were young, impressionable, and I can see how that would be attractive to someone like—”

Screw you, jackass. My blood boils, cutting off the rest of his sentence. “Let’s see if your sense of smell is as acute as they say.”

The smug jerk crosses his arms over his chest, as I shift closer.

“There was no spell, and no amount of wealth that would have made me stay by his side. I’m with Vaughn because I like who I am around him. He’s been my friend, my lover, the man who constantly pushes me to be my best self, who makes me laugh until my ribs hurt, and comforts me when I’m sad. That’s why I love him. Oh, and thank you for calling me a gold digger.”

When he flinches, I lock my eyes onto his. “Am I telling the truth?”

The hard clench of his jaw is my answer.

I step back. “You’ve always refused to meet Vaughn, but you would have liked him if you’d bothered to at least hear him out.”

Saxton’s eyes are blazing. “And what did the great magician have to say to me that was so important?”

Not falling for the barb, I take a deep breath. “Vaughn, several alphas, and the head of the Witch Council have started a coalition, a group of allies, so no one’s isolated.”

Saxton glowers. “And I guess Thyonian is the leader of the group?”

Vaughn must be so much better at this than I am, because all I want is to slap Saxton’s angry face. “No one is.

It's more like an exchange of information for everyone's protection."

His eyes narrow. "My pack's good, and I never met with him because he never fucking asked."

He sounds sincere. Furious but sincere. So now, I'm confused.

"Saxton, we've been sending you invitations for the past ten years for either a face to face with Vaughn or for meetings with the other leaders. And I know this because I'm the one who sends them."

And every time I sent them my heart would beat a little faster. Then, he'd decline, and the part of me that still belonged to him would break a little more until there was nothing left.

"The second year you declined, I sent a note stating that the meeting would be just between you and Vaughn, but the Cavendish pack kept declining every single one of them, which led smaller packs to follow in your pack's lead."

His expression darkens, and I'm not sure what's happening, but right now, Vaughn is the only thing on my mind.

"Look, I'm sure Vaughn will be happy to tell you more about it, but this is my first visit to the Kaste pride, and I really don't want to be late."

Saxton

"All set?"

As Jade locks her seatbelt in and nods, the morning light filtering through the open window turns her hazel eyes into a melted gold.

I'm still hard from that kiss. The way she whispered my name before opening her mouth under mine revved me up more than the women I've fucked in the last fourteen years. It

took everything I had not to rip off her clothes and give her what she wanted. What I've been craving since she burst in my office.

Everything she said is the truth. She might love the sorcerer, but there was need in that moan.

What happened to those invitations?

Jade pushes the button to wind up the window, drawing my focus on her. The designer dress holds her round breasts while the V-neck gives a glimpse of her soft skin. All class and sensuality. She's fucking gorgeous.

And another man's. One for whom she's ready to put herself at the mercy of some of the world's most lethal beings. One she fell in love with within a few weeks of falling out of love with me. She's intensely passionate. Nuclear in the sack. The sorcerer is a fucking idiot.

"Thyonian honestly doesn't care that you mouth-fuck another man?"

When her fingers curl tight on her lap, I wince internally. I'm being an asshole.

She takes a sharp breath before angling her gaze at me. "Saxton, I apologize for the kiss. It was highly inappropriate and disrespectful to you and your mate, and I promise it won't happen again."

What the...? I hit the brakes, and Jade whips her widened eyes to mine.

"What are you do—?"

I ignore her small gasp while the quickening pulse on the side of her neck makes me groan. "My fucking what?"

Her eyes, already big, grow huge. "Your ... mate?"

"You think I'd kiss you if I were mated?" *Or salivate at your scent like some horny pup?*

Her lips purse in an 'o', and I want a bite. "Okay," she says, drawing the word out. The small swipe of her tongue

over her bottom lip gets me harder. “Well, technically, *I* kissed *you*.”

And just like that, the fight in me wilts out. As I start the car, her back is ramrod straight, and her thumb worries her index finger. The anxiety in her scent paired with the nervous gesture pulls at my chest, so I make my tone gentle.

“So, you’ve never met Kaste?”

She shakes her head. “The only alpha I’ve met is May Winchester.”

“Thyonian didn’t want you to?”

Shaking her head again, she turns toward me. “He did, but I preferred not to.”

Or Thyonian convinced her not to. “Why not?”

Her voice pitches low. “Vaughn told me about the atrocities Weres have been subjected to at the hands of humans, and it didn’t feel right for me to attend those meetings. I didn’t want to trigger anyone nor take the risk of being a glaring reminder of what some of them had lost.”

The compassion in her expression is all hers, and it pushes at something inside me. “I’ve lost my mother to hunters.”

With a small gasp, her hand flies to my leg and she squeezes my thigh while her eyes soften, and the simple touch warms me.

I trap her small hand under mine.

“Saxton. I’m so sorry.” She’s quiet again for a couple of beats, then she curls her fingers around mine. “How old were you?”

“Nine.”

“God, you were a baby.” Her hand tightens, spreading soothing waves of comfort. “What was she like? Your mom.”

I exhale slowly. After my mother died, my father went feral with pain, and the way he dealt with it was by shutting down. As the pack took on raising me, they mourned with him, but no one ever talked about her. When Jade makes a soft sound at the back of her throat, I let myself go to that bittersweet place I locked deep down after I lost my mother. I remember how her smile made her cornflower eyes bluer, the smell of cupcakes and cookies in her neck when she hugged me which she did often. She used to call me ‘My great little wolf’, and there was so much love in her eyes. Then one day, she didn’t come home. The world buried Sarah Cavendish, the pack had lost its beloved Luna, and my father became my alpha. But no one ever asked me how I felt losing my mother.

I clear the choking emotion out of my throat, and misreading my silence, Jade shifts back.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.”

“You’re not. It was a long time ago. She was ... a great mom.”

When she pulls away, the absence of her touch feels like an ache.

Her shoulders stiffen again, so I keep talking.

“She was my father’s true mate, and—”

Jade frowns. “True mate? Aren’t all matings the same?”

She’s closer again and I draw in her scent. “Werewolves mate pretty much like Erousia, but our true mate is our born spiritual soulmate, our perfect fit in every way.”

Her golden eyes widen. “This sounds so ... romantic. I didn’t expect—” She shrugs.

“What? You didn’t expect wolves to be capable of romance?”

The emotion flickering in her gaze chafes at my wolf. “No, I just didn’t expect you to believe in this notion of perfect love.”

I don't. True mates are rarer than unicorns. Which I heard exist.

She clears her throat. “But I’m sorry, I interrupted you. What happened to your dad after your mom died?”

“He mated Roselyn, who joined our pack after hers was destroyed.”

“Oh.” It’s all she says before turning her gaze to the rolling countryside, and I wonder if she’s thinking about her own unhappy childhood. I’m starting to loathe the walls her silences put between us.

“Tell me about your friend, Kaste’s mate.”

Jade’s smile brightens the whole car, and my wolf stops pacing. “Corina was one of the first volunteers at Whole of Us. She’s a healer like Dana, and one of my favorite people. She’s also a very talented illustrator who works mostly on children’s books.”

Her face gets animated as the conversation flows naturally to her job. Her throaty voice warms up while her fingers fly in front of her in expressive arabesques as she tells me about the women’s health center and UnityFest.

The health center is impressively manned by a round-the-clock, full-time staff of medical doctors, including a surgeon and two gynecologists as well as healers, therapists, and volunteers from all walks of life.

“What made you create the clinic?”

“After university, I worked with a psychiatrist whose clientele was mostly female, and she was frustrated at the lack of support out there. Then, while traveling and working with Vaughn, I noticed there was next to no support for women in mixed species relationships, which carries its own lot of issues. It gave me the idea of a safe space where all women could share their experience, stay over, hide, cry, and do whatever they needed to heal.”

“And Dana?”

The mellow sound of her chuckle trickles through the car. “Dana and I were fighting for the same cause. She just had a different way of going about it. We talked and came up with Whole of Us. Now, there’s an urgent need for satellite clinics all over the country. We’re working with local governments and associations while fighting bigotry and discrimination to make it happen.”

I like her like that—fervent and spirited. Who am I kidding? I fucking love seeing her like that.

When I park in front of the Mediterranean style mansion, Jade takes a deep breath and tucks her hair behind her ear while her eyes dart to the oak double front door. She’s scared.

“Jade.”

She lifts her eyes to mine. “Breathe.” As she does, I shift closer. “Whether Kaste helps us or not, I promise you, we’ll find Thyonian. Okay?”

“Okay,” she whispers. The vulnerability of her expression knocks my chest hard, and I clench my jaw before stepping out of the truck to open her door.

At the front door, a young man grins as he greets us. Dipping his chin at me, he eye-fucks Jade.

“Jade, what an enchanting scent.” He kisses the back of her hand. “My name’s Rick, and if you need anything, anything at all, please let me know.”

She offers him a smile that makes me want to punch him.

“Hi, Rick, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

I let out a growl only he can hear, and the young Were instantly releases her hand while she flashes a brief frown at me.

We follow the cocky werelion around the side of the mansion. He leads us through a carefully curated designer jungle of dense foliage and long grass that would provide perfect coverage for werelions in their beast forms. The light breeze soothes the sting of the midday sun as Rick stops and points his chin toward the widening path ahead of us. “This way to their house.”

He winks at Jade before making his way back to the main house.

Those fucking felines.

At the end of the forking path, I freeze, my senses on alert. Something’s coming at us fast. A werelion. I position myself between Jade and the ball of fur barreling toward us at high speed.

“Jade, stay back.”

Jade whips her gaze toward the threat before she grips my arm. “Saxton, no.”

She falls on her knees beside me and spreads her arms wide, seconds before a lion cub launches itself at her. The baby Were snarls, growls, and chuffs in her arms, and she laughs while they nuzzle each other. And I stare.

The cub morphs into a freckled toddler with a high-pitched giggle. A fully dressed toddler. I keep staring. I’ve never seen anything like it. When we morph, we’re as naked as nature intended.

“Hello, my Dylan,” she says softly, before blowing raspberries in his neck to his utter delight.

He loops his chubby arms around her neck, his voice muffled by her hair. “... ello, Jaaade. Looove you.”

When she pecks his head, the cub purrs. “I love you too, munchkin.”

“Dylan, come back here.”

At the woman's voice, Jade unfolds on her feet with the cub wrapped tightly around her.

Lucian Kaste, with his arm around his blonde, smiling mate, approaches us slowly. I've never met him in person, but he's a respected alpha who leads the biggest pride in the country with fairness.

Jade's friend beams, and the women hug each other around the cub who claimed Jade.

"Jade, how are you, honey?"

"I'm well, darling. How are you?"

The woman shifts toward me and bows her head slightly. "Alpha Cavendish. Welcome to our home. I'm Corina Kaste." She strokes the child's hair and grins. "And this is Dylan, our youngest and a big fan of Jade's since he was a few weeks old.

The feeling seems mutual. She's holding on to the cub just as tightly.

"Thank you for having us, Corina." I reply before greeting the alpha with the formal handshake. We both extend our right arm and grab the crook of each other's elbows.

"Vaughn finally convinced you to join our ranks? Good to meet you in the flesh, Cavendish."

I dip my chin. "Same here."

When he turns to Jade, she bows her head. "Alpha Kaste, I'm Jade Channings. Please accept—"

Kaste chuckles and pecks her cheek.

Those felines sure are a touchy-feely bunch.

"Jade, I'm starting to understand why Vaughn kept you for himself all this time. My son's reaction to you is all the introduction I need. Call me Luc."

Her face flushes as she smiles at him. "Thank you, Luc."

Chapter Fourteen

Jade

Seated beside Saxton and across Corina and Luc at the smaller round table in the beautiful, shaded backyard, I shift in my armchair to accommodate Dylan's body. The cuddly toddler brings his two middle fingers in his mouth before falling asleep on my chest.

The unreasonably attractive alpha of the werelions who accepted straight away to help—making the call before we had the first appetizer—scrutinizes me from across the table. “Jade, you should have come to us sooner. Vaughn's a friend, and you'll always be welcome in the pride.”

“Thank you, Luc. I really appreciate that. I didn't want to raise the alarm until I was sure.”

When Luc taps my hand gently, I *feel* Saxton's growl from under my skin and shiver. The same thing happened when we were greeted by Rick, and the sensation is oddly intimate.

Dylan's soft snoring pulls my attention back to the bundle of cuddles in my arms, and I move my hair over my shoulder, so his little face rests on my skin.

Luc shifts his attention to Saxton. “Any idea of who the Weres working with them might be?”

“Not yet, but my team's investigating every group to find the rogues.”

Corina's mate smiles, but his eyes are cold. “Good. Knowing your team is on the hunt will put some fire under those motherfuckers' asses. We have our own enforcers. If you need back up, just say the word.”

Saxton grunts low with the same lethal expression, and I'd almost feel sorry for the kidnappers. Almost. But they went after Vaughn, and for that, they deserve whatever's coming to them.

I'd thought Saxton would take over the conversation and was surprised when he let me explain the situation to the Kastes, interjecting only to share the measures he put in place to find Vaughn.

Corina reaches for the ice bucket. "Jade, white wine?" Before I can answer, her gaze sets on her son. "Aww. Look at my beautiful trouble."

As if Dylan heard her, he smiles in his sleep.

So adorable.

Saxton angles his gaze toward the Kastes. "How do you get him clothed after morphing? I've never seen anything like it."

Luc chuckles and kisses the inside of Corina's wrist, whose face flushes under her mate's gaze. "It's my Rina's spell. She didn't want me naked in front of anyone."

"No, I did not," my friend growls. But her eyes are soft as she grins at her mate.

Luc places another peck on Corina's hand before turning to Saxton. "It's very handy when we travel. And it saves us the hassle of going through burner cells every time we morph. Most of the pride asked for it."

"Interesting," Saxton says with his eyes on Dylan.

Corina chuckles. "It's a fairly simple spell. Ask Dana, she's created it."

As Saxton looks at me, his expression robs me of breath for a couple of seconds. Then, I remember how he sent Breanne—who's not his mate—with a bag of money, and the sharp pain which has become part of me tightens my chest. *My son would have been thirteen this year.* Saxton must see it, or sense it because his brows furrow.

Dylan squirms, and I relax my hold around his small body. *Sorry, munchkin.* I kiss the top of his head and smile as he resumes his soft snoring.

Corina stands up. “I’ll put him to bed.”

Luc kisses his mate’s lips. “I’ve got it, my queen. Stay with our guests.”

He takes his sleeping son from my arms and strides to the house. When he comes back a few minutes later, he curls his arm around Corina, and I look around, searching for the slim frame of the Kastes’ older child.

“Where’s Tonie?”

“She’s staying over at one of her friends’—.”

Lucien growls, an honest-to-God growl that no human could produce. My friend cups her mate’s cheek. “Amour, she’s sixteen, half-Were, half-witch, smart as a whip, and has her daddy’s confidence. Stop worrying.” She turns to me. “Oh, and thank you for the shoes. She loves them.”

“My pleasure. And I told her it’d be fine if she wants to intern with me or with Dana next year.”

Saxton

On our way back to my truck, Kaste and I fall back while Jade and his mate chat, arm in arm a few feet before us.

The werelion turns to alphan-speak. “So, you’ve never met Thyonian, but you’re helping his woman find him?”

Straight to the point. “She asked for my help.”

Kaste lifts a brow. “What she and Vaughn are doing is important work. I know you have your ways, but there’s strength in numbers and coordination that could also serve your pack. The coalition is good for us, and Vaughn has been working hard over the years to make it happen. Jade seems to trust you, but he won’t like the way you’re looking at her.”

The alpha is easy to like, and I can see the benefit of having a counterpart to talk to. But right now, he needs to mind his own business. My wolf jerks his head up. “Are you warning me off, Kaste?”

He shakes his head with a light chuckle. “I wouldn’t dare anger the mighty Alpha Cavendish.”

This time, I can’t help my own chortle at the wiseass quip. We slow our gait as we’re nearing the front of the house.

“I’m just saying, you don’t want to piss him off.”

“I’ll deal with him.”

When he chuckles again, I clench my jaw, but it’s not like I could hide my wolf’s reaction when a male sniffs around her.

At the truck, after the women share a warm hug, Kaste kisses Jade’s cheek and winks at me.

Bastard.

Once in the car, she’s quiet, and her fingers are clutched tight in her lap.

Earlier, my wolf whined at the shards of pain in her scent while she was holding the cub. And what a sight she was. All curled up and soft around the little one. No wonder the cub fell asleep in her arms. She’s one of those women children are instinctively magnetized to because they can sense love and protection pouring out of her. And the cub was basking in her sweet scent.

She shuts her eyes, and I tighten my fingers around the wheel. She looks fragile. Her darkened hazel eyes open, and for a second, that same pain flits through before she straightens up and turns her gaze to the window. Thyonian and her have been together long enough to have kids, or at least to have talked about it.

“You were very good with the cub.”

I don’t like the sucking breath she takes before she answers. “Dylan’s so adorable, it’s hard not to.”

Not what I’m saying. “Thyonian doesn’t want kids?”

There it is again, that bitter scent of hurt. She dips her chin. “I’m not answering that. Ask another question.”

Damn it, woman. I roll my neck side to side. Her refusal hits that special nerve that seems to be created just for her. “Okay. How many men have you fucked?”

Did she just roll her eyes at me?

“I’m not answering that. Ask another question.”

I can make you if I push my alpha voice on you. But I want her answers given freely. For now. Crushing the wheel between my fingers, I ask what I’ve been wanting to know since she left Vosges. “How long did it take you to fuck the sorcerer after us?”

Her scent seals off before she turns her eyes toward the window. “I’m not answering—”

“Why? Because you won’t be able to lie to me?”

“No, because it’s none of your freaking business.”

It fucking is.

When I pull over to the side of the deserted road, she whips her flushed face to mine.

Crowding her, I lock my eyes onto hers. “You say you love me. You fucking beg me to stay, promising all kind of shit. I go away for a few weeks, and when I come looking for you, you’re fucking gone. Next thing I know you’re living with the sorcerer, so it *is* my fucking business.”

Jade’s eyes narrow as she leans in. “You self-centered, arrogant jackass. You didn’t ‘go away for a few weeks. You left me.”

Her chest heaves under her fast breaths as she leans in. “I gave you everything, and I still wasn’t good enough. You just took what you wanted, then threw me out like I was freaking garbage. *You* did this, and you have the nerve to demand answers? How long should I have waited for scraps of you, Saxton? Six months? A year? Two? My whole life?”

Fuck. “Jade—”

“How long until you got bored of the poor human girl again?”

Pain jams her scent, but she’s not crying, as if the hurt carves too deep for tears. She shakes her head slowly, and when she speaks again, the sorrow coating her voice cleaves through my chest.

“I thought you were the universe’s gift to me. And every bad thing that happened to me, everything I had to go through didn’t matter, because it led me to you.”

Her shaking breath sucks the air out of my lungs.

“I had no friends because the upstanding citizens of Vosges decided that, like my mother, I was only good for one thing. But I didn’t care because I had a plan. I was going to get out of this hellhole and make something of myself.”

She tucks her hair behind her ear with trembling fingers, but her gaze is clear as she locks her eyes onto mine. “All my life, people treated me like something they had to flush. But you, you made me *feel* that way. So, no, Alpha Cavendish, you don’t get to know how long it took me to be able to trust someone after the ‘us’ you spat on. You don’t get to know what it took for me to rebuild myself after you broke me to return to your real life. You lost that right the night you told me I was turning into my mother and made me believe it.”

Rage mixed with guilt swells inside me until my wolf howls. “Jade—”

Anguish clogs her scent, and her voice wavers. “Can we please go now? Please?”

I start the car.

Jade

A little bit after 5:00 PM, Saxton parks in the driveway of his house. I slowly climb out of the weighty silence of the truck. My limbs are heavy, and I’m struggling to keep upright as I step in the cool house. I thought telling him would make

me feel better, vindicated even, but I'm just exhausted. And sad. The adrenaline that has kept me on alert for the past week is slowly waning.

When I trudge to my bedroom, Saxton's big body blocks my path.

Please, I can't go back to that place right now. No more questions. No more.

"Saxton, I'm tired—"

When he reaches for me, I step back. "Saxton, I just need a minute. You can ask—"

"Baby, I know you're tired." His eyes darken, and the way he looks at me is... "Please, mia bella. Let me just say this."

Hooked onto the emotion in his gaze, I breathe out slowly.

He frames my face with gentle hands. "Jade, my beautiful. That day at the diner, I heard you, and the moment I saw you, you took my breath away. But you were so young and innocent. I knew pursuing you was wrong because there could be no possible future for us. And I should have stayed away. I tried."

I shift back, but Saxton cups the back of my head to keep me close. "I was born an alpha. Raised and bred to lead my pack. When my father instigated the dominance challenge, I had no choice but to step up. And during that mayhem, the only thing that kept me sane was you. I kept coming back to you because you were the only place I could breathe."

My heartbeat quickens, and I hold my breath while Saxton continues.

"My duty is to my pack, and I couldn't tell you what I was. And whatever I wanted, however I felt for you couldn't matter. But I should've protected you from me, and in this, I fucked up."

He strokes the pad of his thumb on my burning skin.

“Jade, I had to let you go. Let you find the life you deserved. One I couldn’t give you. I fucking hated myself that day, and I needed you to hate me enough to leave. But I did it badly. I went about it like a fucking animal and caused you more pain than I ever intended to, and that’s on me.”

His Adam’s apple jerks up and down as we stare into each other’s eyes. “Baby, you’re nothing like your mother, and I’m sorry for ever making you feel you were anything but kind, generous, and beautiful.”

My breath hitches, and I touch his chest. Part of the old, sinewy knot of pain lodged deep in my heart loosens, clogging my throat, burning the back of my eyes, and flows down my cheek.

“Mia bella,” he whispers. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

I can read the truth in his eyes, so I wrap my arms around his waist, place my cheek on his fast-beating heart, and cry. My pain soaks his t-shirt while he holds me close, murmuring words of regret in my hair.

I’m not sure how long we stay like this, but too soon, he pulls back and strokes the back of his fingers on my cheek.

“Baby, get some rest. We’ll talk after.”

I nod and head to my bedroom, where I kick my shoes across the thick rug and peel my dress off before sliding between the cool sheets. As my cheek hits the soft pillow, my mind whirls. He hasn’t mentioned the baby, nor the money. He came looking for me... My lids become heavy, and I can no longer resist the pull of sleep.

Saxton

Within minutes, Jade’s breath deepens. I step away from the door of her bedroom and grab my cell.

Tremayne picks up. “Boss.”

“I’m going to Mordsen, and I want your team on Jade at my house in Crowley. She’s asleep, and she needs peace and quiet. I should be back before she wakes up. I don’t want anything to upset her, and if she’s so much as sneezes, I want to know.”

“On it. Moby’s in Latham. Should be at your house in twenty, I’ll use the helo.”

When Tremayne and Moby, the werehyena she recruited a couple of months ago, arrive at the house, I take one last peek into Jade’s room. She’s all curled up under the thick duvet. I rub my chest to soothe the tightness lingering there, and ease the door closed.

After morphing, I head for the woods. The way to Mordsen is far enough to burn off some of the anger coursing through me.

My wolf darts between rocks and low-hanging branches, tearing through the thick forest. The faint sounds of small animals scurrying to safety makes me growl in satisfaction. But I’m not hunting, my wolf needs the workout, the aching burn.

Fourteen years ago, I chose my pack. Above everything else. Racing faster, I welcome the cutting lashes of the icy wind through my fur. But no matter how much I exert myself, the sense of loss is shredding through me.

She loved me. She was mine. Wholeheartedly. Mine only. Always there for me with a smile that made me hard and a touch that erased the rest of the world.

Barely out of breath after sprinting through the mountains, I morph back while I enter the back of the pack’s mansion. I dress quickly and stride through the quiet house to my office. After the pack war, Samwell and Roselyn took on vacationing like a mission, coming back once every couple of years for a few weeks. They’re in Asia and will be back in two weeks to celebrate the Spring Jubilee, before jetting off to South America.

Once in my office, I push on the dial pad of my desk phone.

My beta replies before the end of the first ringtone. “Harris.”

“Ris, come to my office and bring Bree with you.”

“She’s putting Georgie to bed—”

“In my office. With your mate. Now.”

Minutes later, they enter the office hand in hand, and I waste no time.

“Have we ever received requests from Vaughn Thyonian to meet with me?”

As Harris shakes his head, I zero in on Bree’s paling face.

Her mate snaps his eyes to her face. “Bree?”

My sister, the Director of Communications for Cavendish Corp., pinches her lips. “I did what was best for the pack.”

“By going behind my back?” I turn to Ris. “Did you know about this?”

My beta flinches. “No.”

Truth.

I lock my eyes onto Bree’s who bows her head.

What the fuck did she do?

Leaning back against the desk, I dive my clenched fist in the pockets of my jeans. “Talk.”

Chapter Fifteen

Jade

I wake up and stretch slowly. Rolling onto my back, I take a deep breath. *'You were the only place I could breathe.'*

Breanne lied about being his mate, and I'm pretty sure she lied about being sent by Saxton that day. My fingers instinctively graze the scar above my hip, and I close my eyes. He came back for me, but by then, it was too late. For *him*. For us. Saxton's arrogant, forceful, and narrow minded, but he wouldn't ask me about children if he knew.

If he didn't send money for me to get rid of our baby, the reason that kept my anger alive disappears. So now what?

Vaughn and I have spent years looking for the demons who attacked me, without any luck. I need to talk to Saxton. He needs to know about them. And what they did to me and our baby.

I grab my cell from the side table. God, I slept for four hours. After a quick shower, I dress in comfortable pants and a tank top, splash icy water on my puffy eyes, and step out into the illuminated hallway.

Barefoot, I tiptoe on the cool wooden floor, following the faint rustling coming from the kitchen. My stomach grumbles. *I hope he's making dinner.* "Saxton?"

Standing behind the counter, the man pivots slowly toward me holding a sandwich halfway to his open mouth.

Not Saxton.

We stare at each other for one endless second. My heart jumps to my throat. The next sound coming out of my mouth is a scream. I race back toward the bedroom. "Saxton!"

The stranger takes chase. "Fuck. Wait!"

"Saxton!"

I'm nearly at a back door when a strong arm bands around my waist from behind, cutting off my airway. My body knifes down around his arm.

“Hmph!”

My cell flies out of my hand and crashes against the wall of the hallway. Out of my reach. Unable to breathe for a second, I dig my nails in my assailant's tree-trunk sized arm. I push my whole weight onto his forearm, which doesn't move an iota. His strength is inhuman. *Oh crap. Not human.* My heart whams against my ribs as panic sets in.

The breathiness of my voice is no pretense. “I can't breathe. Please, I can't breathe. I can't brea—”

As I let my chest slump forward, hanging like a wet towel over the cement-like arm of my attacker, he grunts.

“Fuck.”

Playing dead until he sets me on my back on the floor, I wait until the heat of his body shifts away. When he kneels beside me, I keep my eyes shut and try my best to control my breathing.

He swears again and places his fingertips on the side of my neck.

Now.

I punch his throat, and pain radiates from my hand to my shoulder. *Jeez. What is this guy made of?* Taking advantage of his surprise, I roll away and jump to my feet. He recovers fast and growls, so I kick, aiming for his face, but catch his shoulder instead. That'll have to do. I run toward the kitchen and lunge for two of Saxton's kitchen knives that I yank from their wooden block on the counter.

“Tremayne!”

At the man's bellow, I spin around. *There's two of them.* Where the hell is Saxton?

I'm about to call out for him again when a beautiful woman steps calmly in the kitchen. Her long, dark blonde hair shimmers under the light, contrasting against her black t-shirt and leather jeans as she walks toward me. She smiles. A white grin as stunning as she is.

"Jade. My name's Victoria Tremayne." Without breaking eye contact, she tilts her head toward the attacker while her green eyes sparkle with merriment. "And this is Rowan Moby. We work with Sax. He—"

But Saxton wouldn't leave me. Would he?

I swallow hard while my heart thumps in my ears. Clutching the smooth handles of the knives tighter, I plant my feet apart.

"Where's Saxton?"

As she's about to reply, the man steps beside her. Also dressed in black, he's twice her size with almost unnaturally wide shoulders. He grunts and shakes his head. "She's scared," he says.

You think, Sherlock?

He groans and swipes his large hand over his face. "I'm so fucking fired."

Victoria Tremayne's expression sobers. "Jade, don't be scared. Sax's away, and he—"

When she advances toward me, I jump back, putting the counter between us. I point the knives at her. "Stay where you are."

She stops and raises her palms. "Okay. Ok—"

"Call him. Call Saxton."

Victoria's hands are still up as she tilts her right wrist down and points at her legs. "My cell's in my pocket. I'm going to reach for it now, okay?"

After I nod, she retrieves her cell and dials.

“Put him on speaker.”

“Sure,” she says with a smile that must have wrapped countless people around her little finger. It’s certainly starting to work on me.

The call goes straight to an automated voicemail. I exhale a trembling breath and glance at the back door behind her. *Too far.*

My fear must be showing again because Victoria Tremayne frowns. “Jade, we’re not here to hurt you. I’ll try his other line.”

She dials fast.

“Yes.”

“Sax? You’re on speaker. Moby and Jade are here...”

“Saxton?”

“Baby—”

The line fizzles while a warm shiver skates my back. We all whip our eyes to the white orb of light that appears beside me.

The smooth ethereal voice sounds like it comes from every corner of the house.

“Temptress.”

Better the devil I know.

I take the extended hand shaping out of the light.

Saxton

Half-seated on the edge of my desk, I keep my arms crossed. “What do you mean she asked for money?”

Bree’s eyes narrow. “She came to the house during the war with the Prestwoods. Mom was there, and only Mom. Can you imagine what would have happened if anyone had caught the scent of that skank?”

In a split second, I'm inches from her. "Don't ever fucking talk about her like that."

Her eyes widen as the power of my voice pushes her head down.

I move back to my desk.

Curling her fingers into fists, she says, "I gave her money, told her I was your fiancée and if she ever came back, I'd deal with her."

That's where Jade got this bullshit mating from. "You threatened her?"

Bree steps closer. "Sax, *she* was the threat. A stupid little human wandering on our territory during a pack war. What is it with you and that girl anyway? First the stinky diner when you *had* to rescue her, and now ... this?" She catches my quick glance to her mate and wheels toward him. "You knew?" Ris doesn't reply. "You knew about this, and you didn't tell me? I'm your mate."

Harris locks his eyes onto hers, looking almost as pissed off as I feel. "You never told me you went to see her pretending to be Sax's mate. Was that just fucking wishful thinking, Bree?"

She sighs. "For God's sake, Ris. How many times will I have to tell you I never felt that way for Sax?"

I don't have time for this shit. "She asked Roselyn for money?"

The mated couple pivots to me, and Bree nods. "She demanded to see you." Her lip curls in disdain. "But Mom knew exactly what that—"

At my warning growl, she notches her chin down. "Apologies, Alpha." After a short exhale, she says, "And we were right. After we gave her enough money, she disappeared."

You've lost that right the night you told me I was turning into my mother and made me believe it.

She came to see me, heartbroken, and received a bag of money while thinking I was stepping out on my mate with her the whole time.

I stalk to the bay window. I never truly realized how unhappy she was. She talked fondly of the people at the diner, and I just assume that someone like her would be popular. *Fuck*. That's a lie. I never questioned the fact that she was always available to me day and night. I expected it. I never asked about her thoughts or worries. Her whole life revolved around us. Around me. And I greedily took everything she offered.

With my back to them, I roll my head side to side. "How much?"

"What?"

Anger rises in my tone as I turn to face the two people I trust most. "How much money did you give her?"

Bree scoffs. "Enough for her to buy herself a new life and catch the eye of the sorcerer." She sighs and edges closer. "Sax, she's just an ambitious human girl. What she wants from you is—"

Finding the man who treats her like the queen she is.
"How much?"

"One hundred thousand dollars, which is more than she's worth or probably can count—"

Ris glares. "Jesus fucking Christ, Bree. This isn't you. It's your fucking mother speaking—"

"Mom's right about humans—"

I push my alpha voice hard onto her. "Enough."

Both her and Ris freeze as she bows her head.

One hundred thousand dollars. *Fucking pocket money.*

"Sax, I'm sorry for the invitations. I thought she was trying to get—"

“Those invitations have been sent to every alpha in the country. They formed a coalition we’re not part of because you took it upon yourself to make decisions that were mine to make. And your excuse is you didn’t want me to talk to Jade Channings? Are you fucking kidding me?”

Bree’s face flushes. “The pack doesn’t need—”

I lean in. “When did I fucking die and make you alpha?”

She exhales sharply. “Alpha, I’m sor—”

The shrill ring of the phone on my desk cuts into her apology. I push on the speakerphone. “Yes.”

“Sax, you’re on speaker. Moby and Jade are here.”

Fuck. I wanted to be back before she woke up. Tremayne continues, and I can hear the smile in her voice. “Jade kicked Moby’s ass, and now she’s in the kitchen with knives in her hands waiting for you to confirm we work for you.”

“Saxton?”

She sounds scared, so I pick up the receiver. “Baby—”

Electricity crackles on the line.

“Tremayne?”

“What the f...? Moby... Wait ... fuck. Moby! You okay?”

“Tremayne!”

“Boss, he took her. I don’t know what the hell he was. He just ... took her.”

I’m already on the move. “I’m on my way.” In one leap, I’m halfway across the room. “Ris, prep the chopper.” While my beta yanks the door open, I turn to Bree who stands in the middle of the office. “You have two days to find your replacement.”

Her eyes widen. “Sax, I was protecting the pack, protecting you. Alpha, I’m sorry.”

Truth. But that kind of transgression won't fly in my pack. "Two days." I slam the door behind me.

During the flight, I message Cole who'll pick up Dana with the firm's helicopter. I check my cell and clench my teeth. Nothing from Tremayne. I'm going to make whoever took her fucking sorry.

Ris's voice comes through the headset. "Bree fucked up with the invitations, but she's got a point. What are you doing with Jade Channings again?"

"Are you asking as the pack's beta or as my friend?"

"Isn't that the same thing? Sax, you've been fucking restless lately. The pack wants nothing more than seeing their alpha content, so if you want to fuck Jade Channings for old time's sake, just get it out of your system. Then have your pick at a mate." When I whip my eyes to him, he frowns. "What can I do?"

"Keep your mate out of pack business. I'll take care of the rest."

As the helicopter descends toward my house, I turn to Ris. "That's close enough." I jump off and hit the ground running.

In the kitchen, Moby paces while Tremayne stands with her back against the island and her arms crossed.

"What happened?"

She straightens up. "One minute she's standing there barefoot with those stupid knives in her hands, then that big dude with no scent appears. Then—" She snaps her fingers. "They were gone."

They were gone? My team's the best at what they do. So, I walk away before I lose my shit on the undeserving werefox. Minutes later, Cole and Dana walk in.

The witch's face is pale with worry. "What happened? Cole said someone took Jade."

“I wasn’t there.”

“Where the hell were you?” I wait for some snide insult, but she just turns to Tremayne and Moby, who give her a description of the soon-to-be dead fucker. “Did he have like diamond eyes and that creepy little smile that makes you really want to punch him?”

Tremayne’s brows climb her forehead. “Kinda, but also not really.”

The witch speaks fast. “Was Jade scared? Before he took her, was she scared?”

She was. I heard it in her voice. “Dana—”

Jade’s friend swats away my question. When they say she was, the witch sighs. “What did he call her?”

“He said ‘temptress’,” Moby replies.

Dana exhales slowly. She’s relieved, but I’m losing patience.

“Who the fuck took her?”

She rolls her eyes. “It’s Zayn. She’s with Zayn.”

I don’t tame the growl in my voice. “The dickhead Thyonian doesn’t like around her?”

Cole, standing behind her, shakes his head and alphan-speaks. “Hermano. Dude.”

She scoffs. “Were eavesdropping. Classy.”

“What does he want with her?”

Her annoyed sigh isn’t directed at me. “Zayn kind of ... fancies her in an odd way.”

My wolf scratches at my skin. “Fancies her?”

“Language is not your forte, Alpha Cavendish?” Before I can reply, she says, “Zayn’s an old friend of Vaughn’s, so if she was scared and Vaughn wasn’t with her...” She waves her fingers.

How often does she get scared? “What is he?”

Jade’s friend settles at the large kitchen table with her back to me. “Not my story to tell. But why don’t you eavesdrop on their conversation? That’s your thing, isn’t it?”

Chapter Sixteen

Jade

Zayn takes us to a rich garden. He always creates the most amazing surroundings, but today, I don't have the time nor the inclination to admire his art.

Standing before him, tears press behind my eyes. "It's Vaughn."

When he curls his fingers under my chin, I look into his crystal eyes, so similar to Vaughn's, and for the first time since I've known him, he frowns, and my heartbeat speeds up.

"When?"

"Six days ago. Seven tomorrow."

"Can you still feel the speck of his crux?"

The fragment of light that bonds us.

When I nod, his smirk returns, which somehow calms me. "I'll find the old boy."

"Thank you, Zayn."

He winks before whooshing back on a golden throne that appears as he lowers himself onto it. "Besides, who am I going to torture if he's not here?"

A little more relaxed, I glance at my toes and smile. We're in a giant glass fish ball suspended between the blues of an ocean and the skies.

The open roofed bubble is walled by vibrant flowers in every color, folded in emerald dancing foliage of all shapes and sizes. I lift my eyes to the sky. We're so high above ground, it feels like I can touch the clouds.

His voice echoes, touching everything around us. "Temptress, do you like it? I created it just for your visit today."

That nickname again. The day I met him, I gawked at him while Vaughn curled his arm around my shoulders. When I extended my hand to introduce myself, he smiled and said, ‘Temptress’. And that was that. He never called me Jade, but he’s been an amazing friend who amongst everything he did for us, gifted us the manor. I stopped trying to understand Zayn’s powers a long time ago. He seems to foresee information he’ll deliver in the most cryptic snippets possible. He mocks and pokes but never hurts. And his intentions are good. Mostly.

When he scrutinizes me with his head tilted to the side, his thick and impossibly silky hair brushes his shoulder. He waits.

God, it’s so freaking annoying when he does that. I last less than a minute under his grinning stare. “Where are Roma and Milan?” The two beyond-beautiful succubae who usually are wherever he is.

Vaughn calls them Zayn’s women as in sexpots made for his pleasure. But I think they stay around him because he has this, I’m-a-bored-charming-jerk-who-just-want-to-belong air about him. Or maybe I’m projecting a bit of my angst onto him. Which again, a lot of people tend to do.

“Ah. My women. They’re getting ready for battle.”

“For battle? Are they all right? Do they need—?”

Zayn chuckles. “You really care, don’t you?”

That’s a stupid question. “Of course, I care. They’re my friends.” I lean in. “They’re your friends too.” When he lifts an arrogant brow, I roll my eyes. “Zayn, you can pretend all you want and hate on hugs, but I *know* you care. So, are they in danger?”

His grin widens. “No, they’re in a battle of need and desire.”

I gape at him. *What does that even mean?*

“They’re fine, Temptress.”

As soon as he says the words, the lovely twins appear. After a quick once-over, I smile. They are indeed fine.

“Hi, Jade.”

“Hi, Roma. “

“Hello, darling,” the second one says in the same hot chocolate voice.

“Hello, Milan.”

We hug warmly, and I linger because they are the best freaking huggers in the world. Roma cups my cheek and throws her enchanting grin at me. “I don’t know how you’re the only one, except from Z, who can always tell us apart.”

I chuckle silently. Time has a different meaning for succubae. For them, it was a dot on their long lives, but after I met Vaughn, we spent a whole year in Zayn’s house. Although Vaughn and Zayn were awesome, Milan and Roma treated me like their baby sister. I cried, laughed, talked, and ate with them every day, which was long enough for me to be able to tell them apart.

I grin back. “Because you two are very different.”

And they are, Roma is the quiet one, a daydreamer, while Milan knows the dirtiest jokes, and has a perpetual facetious glint in her eyes. Also, Milan always stands on her sister’s right side. But they really enjoy the mirror games they play.

The sisters speak in the same voice at the same time. “We are.”

When Zayn chuckles, the sisters turn to him. “Thanks, Z.”

They blow me a kiss with dancer-like synchronisation before ... evaporating. I don’t know what else to call it.

Once Zayn and I are left alone in the paradise he manifested, I shuffle my bare feet.

When he leans back, I sigh loudly.

“You have a real God complex, you know that?”

He laughs. No smirk, nor mocking chuckle, but a deep belly-laugh. His hand flies to his chest. “Oh, Temptress. ‘Complex’ is such an ugly word, for I represent beauty.”

I can’t help but giggle. He’s incorrigible. “Can you return me back now? The others are going to worry.”

“Your wolf’s already going mad.”

You were the only place I could breathe. “He’s not my wolf.”

My face heats up under Zayn’s knowing grin. “And the alluring sorceress knows you’re with me.”

That’s what he calls Dana, and one of the reasons why she gets so irritated by him. Witch or sorceress, she’s amazing. But that label is why she got shunned from the surprisingly conformist Witch Council. And I know the torturous helplessness that comes from being rejected for who you are.

As he continues his staring game, I groan. “Zayn—”

“Temptress, do you know how truly beautiful you are?”

My God, not this again. I clench my fists and march to him. “Yes, you told me. Body made for sin, yadda, yadda. Can I go back now? Please?”

I gasp as he’s suddenly inches from me and presses his palm in the center of my chest. “Here. You’re truly beautiful, here.”

There’s melancholy in his expression, and my heart melts a little. “Zayn—”

“I wish I’d found you first.”

It’s not the first time he utters those words, but today they feel heavier with a meaning I still can’t quite grasp. It sounds stupid knowing what he is, but he looks like he really needs a hug, so I lift my arms to do just that, but he thwarts my attempt by taking my hand.

“Let’s get you back.”

Saxton

I pace the kitchen and glance at Dana, who’s typing on her cell. Her complete lack of panic is the only thing keeping me from tearing the country apart to find Jade.

“They’re here,” she says.

Moby, Tremayne, and Cole jump from their stools to stand in front of the island.

Seconds later, Jade and the Met appear behind the kitchen counter. And I take my first full breath. When the Met wraps his arm around her waist to pull her to him, a red haze clouds my vision.

Ready to pounce, my wolf growls in warning. “Get your hands off her.”

Jade shakes her head. “Saxton, don’t. Please.”

She’s defending him?

The bastard grins, and his voice seems to be coming from everywhere as he smiles at Dana. “Sorceress, as sublime as ever.”

Jade’s friend rolls her eyes before returning her focus to her cell. “Sod off, Zayn.”

“Oh, I love you too.”

Jade’s lips pinch in a thin line. “Zayn, go.”

When the back of his fingers strokes her cheek, I fist my hands by my sides and wait. The two women who know him don’t react to him, and there’s no fear in Jade’s scent, so I force myself to stand still.

My eyes on the girly, coiffed asshole, dressed in all white, I cross my arms over my chest. “Dana, you were right about that smile.”

As her friend giggles, Jade lifts her soft gaze to mine, and I exhale slowly.

“Clever wolf,” the asshole whispers. He turns to Moby. “Your mommy issues are about to get a lot worse.” Before the werehyena snaps his hanging mouth shut, the fucker focuses on Cole. “Your sacrifice was for naught, but a reckoning is near.”

Cole’s hands clench into fists. “Mind your fucking business.”

Enjoying his magical shit-stirring, the Met locks his frosted glass eyes on Tremayne, who grins and sets her elbows on the counter.

“Do me,” she whispers.

Maybe the werewolf is crazy after all. But to my surprise, and apparently Jade’s whose eyes widen, the Met shakes his head. “Sweetheart, I don’t step on fractured hearts.”

The asshole sure loves the attention. And I’m done with his bullshit. Jade’s been gone for fucking hours, and I need to touch her, hold her.

When the sorcerer smirks at me, I clench my jaw.

Jade emits a little growl of her own and rounds the kitchen island. As I reach for her, my body caroms into something cold. An invisible barrier that blocks me while Jade is propelled back by his side.

He places two fingers under her chin and leans in too fucking close. “Looking forward to our kiss, Temptress.”

She whips her head out of his grasp and grunts. “Zayn, will you please just go?”

The fucker chuckles. “Anything for you, always.” The invisible force disappears as he turns to me. “Son of Samwell Cavendish, very soon, you’ll want to kiss my feet, probably suck on my toes, and as enjoyable as I’m sure it might be, I’ll pass. And wolf? Ask the right questions.”

I knew it. Mets are just fucking insane.

When the Met finally leaves, Jade meets Dana in the center of the kitchen.

Dana cups her face. “I honestly don’t know how you can be around him for more than five minutes—”

Both women gasp. Jade opens her arms and glances down her body. She’s in a golden, tight, short, strapless dress. Her long legs are fully on display, and her feet are encased in golden, strappy, high heeled sandals.

Dana winces. “Ugh ... he did it again.”

The sight of her.

When Cole were-whistles low, I wheel around to find Moby’s eyes on her shapely legs. I were-growl at them, and they snap their eyes up.

“Oh my God,” Jade whispers. “He’s so freaking...” After a heavy sigh, she un-pinches her lips and nears my agents, who gawk at her as she extends her hand. “Victoria, Rowan, I apologize for earlier. Can you please stay a little longer, so we’re all updated on the situation?”

Tremayne grins as she shakes her hand. “Sure. And I like the way you fight, Jade.” She winks. “Dirty.”

When Jade chuckles, more tension rolls off my shoulders.

After Moby assures her there was no harm done, she accepts Cole’s peck on her cheek—*Those fucking felines*—and smiles at me. “Zayn’s going to help us.”

I clench my fists in my pockets. “How do you know he’ll keep his word?”

“Zayn never lies.” Jade and Dana reply at the same time.

Fucking magical Kool-Aid.

Looking like a fevered wet dream, Jade raises her gaze to mine. “Can we please order something to eat? I’m a little

hungry.”

“I’ll make us something.”

Her eyes soften, and I get hard. “That’ll be great, thank you. I’m going to get changed, then we’ll talk.”

She’s touched everyone in the room, stayed by the Met’s side while he annoyed the shit out of each of us. I’ve been going out of my fucking mind, and all I get is a smile?

As she walks down the hallway with her hand in Dana’s, I cross my arms on my chest.

“You look fine. Let’s talk now.”

“I just need a minute.” She throws over her shoulder while rolling her juicy ass in the fuck-me shoes the Met put her in. And before I know it, I unleash my alpha voice on the sex-on-legs woman.

“Jade. I said now.”

The two women stop so abruptly I wonder if I didn’t use my voice on both. You can hear a pin drop in the room as Jade pivots slowly toward me. Her eyes narrow into slits, and her skin is flushed as she glides to me, but all I can think of is a flat surface to lay her down on. Then devour every inch of her silky skin until I get drunk on her scent.

The heels put her gorgeous mouth inches from mine, and her eyes blaze.

“Don’t you ever use that tone with me.”

That tone? I jolt as something warm, familiar yet foreign, brushes my skin.

When she jabs her finger in my chest, I pull my full attention to the beautiful woman seething with anger before me.

“I’ve had it with arrogant jerks telling me what to do. If you want something, you say please.” More ire peppers her scent. “Like a freaking normal person.” She steps back. “Now,

I'm going to get changed, so I don't feel like I've just stepped off a strip pole. *Then we'll talk.*"

Not waiting for a reply, she spins back toward her friend and slams the bedroom door behind them.

I was hard before, but this... *Fuck.*

My chest expands, my heartbeat thunders while my body wires up. The power of my own voice swirls around me. *Outside of me.* Coated in fury and ... honeysuckle.

I rub the heel of my hand on my chest and exhale sharply.

"Sax?"

"Boss?"

She threw my own power back in my face. *My tone...* She called my alpha voice my tone. She—

"Hermano, you good?"

She's not Were. She's bonded to the sorcerer.

I turn to the Weres grinning at me like idiots. "What?"

Cole chuckles. "I believe Jade asked us to stay for a dinner you're making."

Dinner. Yes.

The only person immune to the alpha voice would be...
Fuck.

Jade Channings is my true mate.

PART THREE

Chapter Seventeen

Jade

After peeling off the barely-there outfit Zayn spelled on me— I'll keep the shoes—I jump into comfy pants and a tank top while Dana sits cross-legged in the middle of my bed.

She scans the spacious room as I join her on the large mattress. As she flicks her fingers into an arabesque I've seen often, I frown.

“You're warding the room?”

She nods as I lay on my stomach beside her and hold myself up on my elbows.

“Why?”

“Alphajerk eavesdropped on our conversation the day the Pures tried to take you.”

Huh. “How do you know?”

“When I told him you were with Zayn, he blurted it out. Talking about arseholes, what did the devil say?”

“He said he'll find Vaughn.” I roll on my back to place my head in her lap and shut my eyes under the soothing touch of her fingers on my forehead.

Her voice is airy. “What's wrong? Alphajerk?”

It's as if by opening up to him, I've also let all the other feelings I used to have for him loose, which is making me dizzy. Or I might just be hungry. But it's time to stop obsessing about him. I smile with my eyes closed. “Cole looks interested and interesting.”

The soothing motion of her fingers stops. “Of course he's interested, he's a feline. They're all charming and sensual until you fall for them. Then you let your guard down, and boom, they're bloody gone.”

She's referring to her ex, a werepanther who broke her heart, long before she and I met. The two times I asked her about him, she just shrugged in a way that spoke of pain, so I didn't push.

The motion of her fingers resumes on my forehead. "But you're deflecting. Something's changed. What happened?"

I tell her about the kiss, the invitations, and the heart-to-heart Saxton and I had earlier. "He said he was trying to protect me."

She scowls. "So, the Breanne bitch isn't his mate, and he doesn't know about the baby?"

The old pain pinches my chest. "No, I don't think he does."

After a heavy sigh, Dana groans. "I understand why he wouldn't tell you he was Were, but there were better, gentler ways to let you down."

I agree.

We both fall into a reflective silence that Dana breaks first. "You might be right about him not knowing about the baby. He's an arrogant arsehole, but not the kind who'd kill his baby." She pauses for a few seconds. "I hate him a little less, but I still don't think your attack on his territory was a coincidence. Someone sent those demons."

Again, I agree.

"I'll wait until Vaughn's home before I tell Saxton."

Dana nods slowly. "Good idea. For all we know, the master might be behind what happened to you *and* Vaughn's kidnapping."

My best friend traces my eyebrows with light fingertips and chuckles. "The little showdown earlier was priceless. I don't think I've ever seen you that angry."

I snap my eyes open on her grin. "That's because I'm not surrounded by high-handed jerks who boss me around."

When she just watches me, I sit up. “What?”

Dana clasps my hand between hers. “Jade, everybody can feel the energy between the two of you. And although he’s still on my top five shit list, you clearly want him. And the man is gagging for you.”

“He’s not gagging for—”

Dana’s brow lifts. “Darling, we both know he’s not here for Vaughn, not entirely anyway. And I personally think it’s more than time you broke your born-again-virgin vow. You’ve had no one since Jagr.”

Jagr was an attentive lover, tender and gentle, but he touched me like I was made of glass. Although I liked it at the beginning, after a few months, I realized being in control in bed doesn’t bring me as much pleasure, so we ended it and stayed friends.

My friend’s gaze sets on my heated face.

“You still have feelings for him, don’t you?”

My heartbeat quickens. “I’m not going to sleep with Saxton. He—”

She grins. “I don’t think sleeping is what Alphawanker has in mind.”

I jump off the bed. “Dana, he’s...” *So many confusing things.* I shake my head. “I can’t sleep ... be with him.”

My friend gets on her feet. “Is that true?”

When I frown, the corner of her mouth curves up. “You can’t kiss and moan and let yourself feel pleasure? I know it’s been a long time. I’m sure I can find some books if—”

I can’t help but chuckle. “I get it.” I take a deep breath. “It’s been fourteen years, and in just a few days, I’m... I’m scared of how he makes me feel.”

She tugs on my hand. “Isn’t that the point though?”

“No, safe is the point.”

Dana's eyes soften. "I hate how much you suffered because of him." She cups my face. "But I've also never seen you so alive. And I love seeing the bad bitch he brings out of you."

That he does. Along with so much more. We giggle together, and before I ask, my heart sister places her palm on my belly.

"Whatever you decide is fine, but if you want him, I can protect you."

I do want him. Just the thought of him... I cover her hand. "Yes. Thank you, my Dana."

She weaves her magic for a contraceptive spell, and just as we hug afterward, the bedroom door vibrates under sharp knocks.

"Jade? It's Victoria. Dinner's ready."

My stomach growls, and I hurry to open the door. "Thanks, Victoria."

Bookended by the two women, I make my way to the dining room.

Sandwiched between Dana on my right and Saxton at the head of the table, I reach for the jug of water, but Saxton beats me to it and pours me a glass.

Without my anger, I feel febrile ... exposed. My face warms up. "Thank you," I whisper to my plate.

While Saxton serves me a generous amount of food, Dana touches my hand under the table, and I squeeze her fingers.

Victoria, seated across from me, leans in. "Is Zayn a sorcerer too? I thought Vaughn was the only one."

"Where did he take you? You just disappeared," Rowan says.

Saxton slides my plate back in front of me. “This can wait. Let her eat.”

Grateful for the reprieve, I bring my fork to my mouth, and... *Oh. My. God.* I almost moan. Saxton doesn't like magic, but the way he cooks is just that. Absolute magic. I open my eyes to find Saxton's heated gaze on my mouth.

Warmth engulfs my face. I *did* moan. “S-sorry,” I say behind the cover of my hand.

Cole chuckles. “I think I'm going to take cooking classes.”

A muted growl emanates from Saxton, but when I look at him, his expression betrays nothing.

Victoria reaches for one of the platters in the center of the table. “I'll have what she's having.” She winks at me. “And a double helping of everything else.”

Rowan chokes on his mouthful of food, and I grin back at Victoria.

After one last hug to Dana, who hitches a ride with Rowan and Victoria—she's not a fan of heights—I step back into the house with Saxton.

Heading straight for the living room, I toe out of my shoes and settle cross-legged on the welcoming sofa while Saxton makes his way to the kitchen. Raine Ryker has agreed to see us on Wednesday, which gives us two days during which we'll return to the manor.

When Saxton joins me in the living room, carrying a mug, I straighten my back.

“Where did you go earlier?”

He sets a mug of hot cocoa on the coffee table in front of me and lowers his powerful frame beside me.

“I went to Mordsen.”

I can't help it, I tense at the mention of the nightmarish place.

His jaw clenches briefly. "Bree declined the invitations without my knowledge, but this is on me."

"What is?"

Lines bracket his mouth while tension bulges his shoulders. "All of it. I'm the alpha. Whatever's happening in my pack is my responsibility."

My heartbeat speeds up. "Who is she to you?"

"She's my sister, Roselyn's daughter, and Harris' mate." Before I ask, he says, "Ris is my oldest friend and my beta. Bree acted alone."

So, someone he trusted. He's putting so much pressure on himself. No one can be everywhere at once. Except maybe Zayn. And Vaughn before we met.

"Saxton, you can't blame yourself for trusting someone who's supposed to have your back."

He exhales sharply, something in his expression lurks behind the anger. Pain. I touch his hand. "I'm not Were, so I probably don't understand your duty as alpha, but I know no one leads alone, and I'm sorry you had to go through that."

He brings my hand to his mouth to place a gentle kiss on the inside of my wrist. "You're very kind."

I pull my hand from his and shift back. "I just know what it feels like to be betrayed by someone you trust."

His jaw tightens again, and as he moves closer, my heart crashes against my chest. "Saxton, it's getting late—"

Saxton wraps his warm hand around my nape, and the same emotion from earlier turns his grey eyes charcoal.

When his breath mingles with mine, I shift back.

"It's late. I think I'm going to get some sleep."

He leans back and dips his chin, but there's a sort of sadness in his eyes, a loneliness that tugs at my heart, so I curl back into the deep cushions and grab my untouched mug.

After a mouthful of the delicious chocolate drink, I set my mug on the table. "Can I ask you a question?"

He replies without hesitation. "Yes, anything."

"What's it like to be Were? I mean, do you feel the wolf when you're in man form?"

Saxton

My chest swells. Since I know who she is to me, I'm off balance. If she were a wolf, she'd feel the mating call as strongly as I do, but she's human. A human woman I hurt deeply, and who is bonded to another.

I didn't know how much I needed her curiosity until now. But there she is, close and so beautiful she takes my breath away.

Jade blinks fast and shifts back. "I'm sorry, am I being rude?"

"No, baby. My wolf is just ... me."

When she frowns, I try to find words that would explain something which is as natural as breathing.

"He's like ... a limb. Part of who I am. When I'm in wolf form, my human side is in the background thinking for him, and in human form, I rely on his instincts and senses to guide me. We're enmeshed into the fabric of one another." *Except when it comes to you. But now, I know it's because he sensed you before I did.*

"Oh wow. That's..."

Weird? Monstrous?

"... amazing."

Her golden gaze widens, and I fucking love how attentive she is. When she angles back again, my wolf whines. *Stay with me.* I take her soft hand and exhale when she lets me.

Jade clears her throat. “Can I ask you another question?”

As long as you keep looking at me like that, you can ask me anything. “Yeah.”

She bites on her bottom lip, and my wolf growls at her nearness. On a small gasp, she says, “This. This is what I want to ask you about.”

She lost me there. “What?”

“Those noises you make. Earlier at the Kaste pride, you made that kind of ... muted

growl. Kind of the same one you just made, but different. And again, during dinner.”

She can hear that?

As I watch her, her face flushes. “Sorry, I must be tired. I ___”

“No, baby.”

“No what?”

I clear my throat. “It’s my wolf.”

Her eyes turn into saucers while her lips move soundlessly for a couple of seconds. “What?”

You’re my true mate, so my wolf found a way to talk to you, is what I want to say, but she’d run screaming for the hills.

Jade tilts her head to the side and surprises me again. “Is your wolf mad at me?”

There’s no fear in her scent. It’s one thing to be familiar with Weres, but another altogether to have no perceptible fear, nor anxiety when evoking the beast part of me being angry with her.

“No, he’s just being vocal.”

She blinks slowly, then her eyes light up. She beams at me, turning my cock into stone while something in my chest detonates and spreads into an emotion that chokes me.

“So, your wolf’s talking to me?”

“He is.”

Excitement sprinkles her voice. “What is he saying?”

You’re mine. I need you close. Always. My heart races. “He’s very ... territorial of his relationship with you.”

“Oh. So, he doesn’t speak to other people?”

“Not like this.”

If she asks why, I’ll tell her the truth. She doesn’t. Her eyes hold a joy that pierces through me, and I will never, ever forget the wonder brightening her beautiful face as she grins at me. But it’s three in the morning, and she should rest. We’d agreed that she would carry on her scheduled events appearances, and we still have a lot of ground to cover to find the sorcerer. And the sooner the better. I’ll put her first. Always. As if on cue, she yawns behind her hand, so I get on my feet and pull her up with me.

“Time to sleep, beautiful. We have a busy day tomorrow.”

Standing before me, the pulse on the side of her neck speeds up as she lifts her eyes to mine.

“What is it, baby?”

“Do you think I can... Can I meet your wolf?”

I cup her face and touch my forehead on hers. *Fuck. I’ve missed out on so much.*

Misunderstanding my silence for rejection, she raises her small frown to me. “I’m sorry. You don’t have to. I didn’t mean to be intrusive.”

You’re more than I’ve ever dared dreaming of. My wolf prances and paces restlessly, eager to meet her. To experience

our mate.

I'm alpha, so my wolf is the size of an adult male non-Were bear. "Have you ever seen a morphed adult Were?"

My beautiful mate shakes her head. "Not ... really."

I fill myself with her scent and step back. "I'm still me, and I can understand you in my wolf form. Trust me and don't be scared, okay?"

She smiles. "I'm not."

Truth. I undress quickly and chuckle when she gasps and turns her back to give me some privacy. *We're going to have to work on that.*

Morphing is a dull ache, akin to a fast and rough fuck without the ensuing release until my wolf takes over.

I shake my fur, stretching my muscles into my body. My tender-skinned mate who stands with her back to me smells divine. Basking in her scent, I nudge her shoulder and stay still.

When she twists to face me, my muzzle levels with her face. Her heartbeat picks up, but not out of fear. The rush of blood through her small body gives her scent a muskiness that makes me salivate.

"Oh, hi," she whispers. She lifts her hands. "Can I touch you?"

In response, I lick her palm, and she grins. "I take that as a yes."

My flower-scented mate buries her small hands in the fur on the sides my neck, strokes the top of my head and under my jowl.

Nuzzling her neck, I growl in contentment.

She wraps her arms around me and the vibration of the pearly sounds that escapes from her throat makes me want to howl in joy. When I push my face into her neck, she shrieks as she falls on her round behind before settling on her back. Her

laughter bursts between us louder than before while her golden-green eyes open wide.

I love her scent when she makes that sound.

She wants to play? I love playing. Careful of my size, I set my fore legs on either side of her and stand over her. Once she's caged between my paws, I chuff and let my tongue out to get more of her scent.

Her stern expression contradicts the joyous tone of her voice. "Saxton, don't you dare lick my face!" She talks to me like she does to the man within me. Because, to her, we're one and the same.

My mate braces on her elbows as I lower my neck. Her eyes lock onto mine and bore straight into my soul. I lick her neck, huffing when she makes the gleeful high-pitch sound again.

Then, her mouth drops while her breathing quickens, her lips quiver, and her eyes become shinier. When a small whimper rises out of her chest, I sniff, searching for the source of her pain.

"My God, you're beautiful," she murmurs. Then she wraps her arms around my neck and buries her face in my fur.

My mate holds me tight against her soft body. She accepts me. Says I'm beautiful.

Her mouth opens wide, and her heavy sigh brushes my fur. She needs rest. I nudge her flat on her back, move to her side, then rest my muzzle on her chest to listen to her heartbeat.

She rakes her fingers in the fur behind my ears, and I close my eyes, purring like a fucking cat.

As the peace of sleep lades her body, she rolls on her side and snuggles her small body against mine.

I morph back laid down by her side. *My mate*. I sweep a curl of her ebony hair from her face with shaking fingers, touch my forehead to her temple, and weep.

My precious mate. The miracle the universe created just for me fell trustingly asleep against my wolf.

When she stirs, I slide my arms under her neck and the back of her knees before standing up slowly.

She loops her arms around my neck and burrows her face in the crook of my shoulder. Holding her close, I take her to her bedroom where I place her gently on her unmade bed and pull the duvet over her.

Then I sit in the armchair facing the bed and watch my true mate.

True mates aren't made, they're born. So, why didn't I recognize what she is to me before? What if she refuses me? My wolf whines at the thought. I'm going to find her Met alive because he deserves a fair chance when I'm going to fight him for his woman. My woman. The pack will have to deal, and if their reaction is anything like Bree's, shit's going to change. Life has bestowed the most sacred gift on me, and I won't give up my true mate for anything. Or anyone. She comes first.

Getting hard at the idea of claiming her, I push to my feet and exit the room silently.

As the night gives way to dawn, my purpose is clear—regain my place back into her heart.

Chapter Eighteen

Jade

Standing under the heavy spray of the shower, I can't stop smiling.

I met his wolf. His big, playful, beautiful wolf, and it was one of the most extraordinary experiences I've ever had.

Once ready for the long day ahead, I ease the door of my bedroom closed and let the yummy aromas of Saxton's cooking guide me to the kitchen.

From across the arched doorjamb, I watch Saxton's back and shake my head. How did I not realize he was more than human? Every single one of his movements is imbued with preternatural grace and power.

As he places a plate of chocolate pastries on the kitchen table, the sizzling heat of his gaze makes me shiver.

"Come eat, mia bella."

At the kitchen table, I smile behind my fragrant cup of coffee. "Thank you for last night. Meeting your wolf was amazing."

Saxton's lips twitch as he sits beside me at the head of the table. "He likes you."

My grin widens. "I like him too. He's gorgeous and so playful."

His thick brow arches while his lips curve up. "Playful, huh?"

Heat crawls to my face under his intense gaze, but I can't stop grinning.

Saxton's chest vibrates, his eyes brighten, turning almost silver, and the deep rumble of his laughter fills the kitchen. He laughs with an abandon that reminds me of his mischievous wolf, and my chest tightens.

As if he senses it, his laughter dims to a grin. “What’s wrong, baby?”

I swallow the last of my croissant. “Nothing.”

He leans in. “You know I can tell when you’re lying, right?”

There’s light teasing in his voice, so I take a deep breath. “It’s the way you laugh. I have a feeling that between your security firm and the leadership of the pack, you probably don’t do it very often.” Another deep breath. “So, that made me a little sad. That’s all.”

Saxton watches me for long seconds, and my face warms up. Maybe he laughs often, with pretty, funny women who make him happy. But Breanne’s betrayal affected him. He felt responsible, and...

He reaches for my hand, and the air becomes charged. “You’re sad at the idea I don’t laugh often?”

“Do you? Laugh often?” *Are you happy?*

He grins. “I will if you keep telling me how playful my wolf is.”

It’s my turn to smile. “And gorgeous. Don’t forget gorgeous.”

While his eyes lock onto mine, he places a soft kiss on the inside of my wrist, and I exhale a trembling breath.

“Mia bella.”

My cell rings and breaks the spell. Time to start my day at the manor.

I hurry to meet the event coordinators waiting for me in the office. There’s still no news from Zayn. I stop at the bottom of the stairs to check my cell. Nothing from Vaughn.

If Zayn can’t find Vaughn... What if Vaughn... I touch my chest, shut my eyes, and search for the tiny bubble of

energy that links me to Vaughn. *I can't find it. I can't...* My heartbeat races and deafens me. *I can't... Vaughn. I... There. There it is—*

“Jade?”

Gasping, I clench my fist on my chest and whip my gaze up to Saxton's scowl.

He pulls me to him. “Baby, what's wrong?”

I can't find my voice, so I shake my head, and he wraps me tight in his arms.

“Shh. You're okay. I've got you,” he whispers in my hair.

When I stop trembling, I shift back. “Vaughn...” I swallow hard. “I couldn't sense him, and I thought...” I don't finish the painful thought.

Still frowning, Saxton cups my cheek. “But he's there now?”

“Yes. But what are *you* doing here? I thought you were at work.”

“I can stay.”

I shake my head. “I'll be fine. Tilda and Dex are here.”

The day goes fast. After a podcast interview, Dex and I go to the opening of a mixed-species kindergarten, before rushing to the book signing of a young Fae author I particularly like.

When we enter the manor around 8:00 PM, I head straight for the kitchen, where Tilda has set trays of warm sandwiches on the table.

I'm famished. I reach for a sandwich while Dex strides out of the kitchen. He comes back a couple of minutes later and settles at the table.

As I bite into rare roast beef and warm bread delight, Tilda's gaze lifts toward the archway, and I can *feel* Saxton's behind me.

"Alpha Cavendish," Tilda greets.

"Just Sax."

I pivot toward him and gape. The man is simply stunning. Dressed in black jeans and shirt, his hair's still damp and curls on his collar.

His eyes laser on me and he pecks my cheek. "How did it go today, beautiful?"

I'm suddenly eighteen again. Eighteen with a massive crush on the big bad wolf who broke my heart. My heartbeat quickens up, my legs turn to jelly, and I just stare at him. When his brows knit, I clear my throat. "Good. We're done for the day."

When I notice the bag in his hand, my breath catches in my throat. "You're staying over?"

Dex replies, "There's something I have to deal with at home, so Sax will be staying at the manor."

Saxton shifts toward Dex. "You can use the chopper anytime you need."

My giant friend pales, and I bite on my smile. "No flying. But thanks."

It's funny that two out of my three closest friends have a fear of height. Vaughn's tried everything, but nothing worked. Tilda's like me, she loves it. Dana would only do it if she must, but absolutely nothing will make Dex leave the safety of Earth's solid ground.

I smile at Saxton. "All right, let me show you to your room."

Grateful for the steadiness of my voice, I climb the stairs. Two steps ahead of him, my fingers slide up the cool, smooth ramp, and maybe the sway of my hips is more

pronounced because I know he's watching. His muted grunt makes me shiver as I continue my slow progression up the grand stairs. I'm playing with fire, and Saxton is lava, but the warm quiver skittering down my back feels so. Freaking. Good.

Once we reach the first level, I turn to face him.

"There are three suites on each side of the balcony. Pick any one you want."

Saxton

I was on my way to my truck when terror clogged her scent. Without thinking of the humans in the house, I lunged to her. She was hunched over, in pain, with tears in her eyes.

Tears and fear for him. Because she thought he was gone.

"Where's your bedroom?"

She points to the right. "My quarters are here."

"And Thyonian's?"

"On the other side."

Like this shit is normal. "Sounds like a Victorian marriage."

She chuckles. "I guess."

As I make my way to the room closest to hers, I crush the burning question at the forefront of my mind.

Do you love him more than you loved me?

Cole's tone is hard. "We caught one of the Weres who worked with them, and you're not going to like it."

I relax my hold on my cell and stop pacing the gardens of the manor while Jade is catching up with Dana and Tilda in the kitchen.

“Who?”

“Ben Prestwood.”

Those fucking Prestwoods. The youngest of their alpha line, who not only refused to join our pack but challenged me after we’d eradicated most of his during the war. A war *they* fucking instigated. I should have killed the little motherfucker. But I don’t kill pups.

“I’m on my way.”

Cole grunts. “There’s nothing left of him. Before we destroyed him, he said the master wanted Jade.”

Over my dead body. The device cracks. “What did he say?”

“All we could get from him was the master has a grand plan, and Jade is part of it. Tremayne and Moby have tracked another one, so we might learn more in a few hours. I’ll keep you posted.” He disconnects the call.

Fuck. Knowing Thyonian might have been taken for a way to get to her will devastate her, but she’s my mate, and I won’t hide this from her.

We need to find the sorcerer, and fast. Resisting the mating call is fucking hell. Her voice, her scent, every time she smiles, every time she fucking breathes, I get so hard my body shakes with need. I crave my mate. Yearn for the feel of her skin against mine, her arms around me, and her body holding mine.

As I enter the kitchen, Dana and Tilda are chatting by the stove but there is no sign of Jade.

“Where’s Jade?”

The witch smirks. “Getting sweaty with Dex downstairs.”

“What?”

The next second, I’m towering over Jade’s friend who keeps stirring at the sauce simmering on the stove.

She lifts her smug expression to me. “You can go watch. They won’t mind.”

I know the witch is baiting me, but I can’t keep the wolf out of my voice. “Where is she?”

She looks at Tilda, who rolls her eyes before taking the spoon from the witch’s fingers. “Danayel Lauran McAllister, show him.”

Dana sighs loudly. “Fine. Come with me.”

I follow her to the back of the house where she walks too slowly down the longest fucking corridor. She stops abruptly, faces me, and my body freezes before crashing against the wall.

Her eyes take on a fluorescent glow as she edges close. “If you ever hurt her again, I’ll give you reasons to hate magic you’ll remember for the rest of your life. Understood?”

Enough of that shit. I let her do it before because Jade was scared, and I’d been an asshole to my mate. I call on my bloodline, half morph, and break the magical binds. When I land on the floor, I stretch my neck from side to side to get my wolf under control.

The witch’s eyes widen briefly before she tilts her head to the side. “Huh. Aren’t you full of surprises?”

“I fucking told you not to use magic on me. And I’ll never hurt her.”

Jade’s friend raises a brow. “We’ll see.”

Once in the basement, a wide, brightly illuminated, all-white room turned into a dojo, I stop dead in my tracks and stare at my mate.

Fuck me.

She’s a vision.

In a black sports bra, second-skin leggings, and army boots, her ponytail swings as she braces her legs in a fighter stance. Her face is flushed, and her eyes steady on the shirtless

werebear across from her. She clenches her fingers around a tall Bo staff while her chest heaves under her panting breaths.

When Dex glances at us over his shoulder, she races across the room and swings the staff, catching the side of his knee. The werebear groans at being caught off guard. She bounds back into her previous position and winks at him.

“That’s two,” she pants.

He grins. “Make it three?”

After a quick nod, she braces. She’s focused, expertly using the staff to keep him away from her body. He doesn’t use his full strength nor speed, but he’s moving a lot faster and with more force than any human. Every time the werebear throws her down, I grit my teeth, but she rolls away and gets right back up. My mate’s an excellent fighter, and I can’t keep my eyes off her.

“She’s good, isn’t she?” Dana says.

My eyes on Jade, I groan. “Fucking magnificent.”

They spar until Jade gets the third hit on his shoulder. She grins and bows deeply. “Thanks, Dex.”

He mirrors her salute. “Anytime, Peanut.”

As she lifts her gaze to mine, her slow, come-hither smile shoots straight to my cock.

“Fight me, Alpha Cavendish? Three strikes and I win.”

My wolf chuffs at the foretaste of her sweet surrender. In seconds, my tee and boots hit the floor, and I step onto the mat.

“You’re on.”

“Show him who’s boss, sweets.”

Jade giggles and waves at her friends as they exit the room.

Chapter Nineteen

Jade

Lord, he's sexy.

I drink in every detail. From his wide shoulders, his chest sprinkled with dark hair that arrows down across his six, eight, twelve packs, to his jeans set low on his narrow hips. My gaze lingers on his bulging crotch pushing against the denim, and I bite my bottom lip. His grunt sparks goosebumps over my whole body. I raise my eyes to his heated ones, and stalk toward him.

Alpha Cavendish, your muscled butt is mine. I clench my hand around my staff, spin, and aim for his shoulder. Hit.

As I skip back, he braces his legs apart, and waits. He wants me on the offensive? Fine. I race toward him, and as his lips curve, I plant my staff on the cushioned floor and leap over him. A move which took me three years to master. As soon as I land on my feet, I twist and swipe the staff to the back of his thigh. Hit.

He wheels toward me, and his growl makes me shiver. "Jade."

Saxton bounds toward me, and I jump sideways, rolling away from him. I race to the other side of the dojo. Bending slightly at the knees, I wink at him.

"I have no powers and no super strength. My only advantage is surprise. And I got you. Twice. One more hit, and I win."

Saxton's predatory smile quickens my heartbeat. I launch myself at him, spin, and sweep the staff toward his shoulder. He catches it and pulls, which yanks me toward him. I release the staff seconds before colliding against his chest. I twist and kick the inner side of his knee. Giggling at his surprised grunt, I grab the staff and race to the other side of the room. Once there, I grin.

“That’s three, Alpha Cavendish. I win. I want my prize.”

Faster than I can gasp, Saxton’s inches from me. He bands his strong arms around me, and the staff drops on the mat. The heat of his hard body against my slick skin triggers spasms of need in my lower belly.

His words flutter against my mouth.

“What do you want?”

Rolling up on my toes, I taste the inside of his upper lip with the tip of my tongue and nip at his bottom lip. “You.”

He plasters my body to his and tilts my head back. Then, he delves his tongue in my open mouth. Each stroke of his tongue pulls my belly tight until I moan. When his hand presses on the back of my thigh, I loop my legs around his waist, trembling at the friction of his erection digging into my skin.

The kiss becomes urgent, and I fist his hair as he lowers us to the floor. Shivering harder at the cool mat on my back, I whimper at the first roll of his hips cradled between mine. I arch up to remove my sports bra, and his gaze turns incandescent as it drops on my breasts.

A deep groan rolls out of his chest. “I need a taste.” The words are barely out before he closes his mouth on my nipple and draws deep.

Shaking with need, I slide my hand between us, yank his jeans open, and curls both my hands around his engorged penis.

“Jade... Fuck.”

He knifes up between my legs and grabs the waistband on my leggings—

A blue light on the ceiling flashes before the strident alarm blares. We both freeze.

Saxton springs to his feet, taking me up with him. “What’s happening?”

“The wards have been breached.”

We get dressed fast. Saxton snatches my hand, and we race upstairs.

Dana, Tilda, and Dex are already in the entrance hallway.

“Tilda, turn off the lights,” Dex says. As she dashes toward the back of the house, he turns to me. “You know what to do.”

Saxton inches closer. “What do you do?”

I grit my teeth. “I hide.”

“Sounds like a good plan.”

Of course, he would say that. I glare at him, but Dana wraps her hands around my shoulders. “Jade, go. Dex, Sax, and I will take care of them.”

Nodding quickly, I rush toward the stairs. Then, halfway up, I stop and twist to Dana. “Dana?”

“Oh, right.”

She flicks her fingers, casting a spell that covers me in a black skin-tight leather catsuit that’ll shield me against magic long enough for me to run or hide. As I push Vaughn’s door open, I yelp as someone grabs my arm from behind. Saxton. “Wha—?”

He wraps his big hand around my nape and pulls me close. “Jade, they want *you*.”

“What? Who?”

Saxton’s eyes harden. “Whatever the master wants involves you. So, you stay hidden, understood?” His hold is too tight for me to nod, but I don’t have time to utter a word as he crushes his mouth on mine. “You stay safe. For me. Yeah?”

My racing heartbeat stutters at his expression. I kiss him fast. “You stay safe too.”

He dips his chin and *vaults* over the balcony. Six meters over the marbled floor.

Once in the darkened room I know by heart, I head straight for the shelves behind the desk from where I retrieve the leather-bound box, and take the dagger hidden within.

The day Vaughn gave it to me, he said, “This will cut through everything. If you’re in danger and I’m not here, use it.”

Seated in his lap, I remember whipping my eyes to his. “Why wouldn’t you be here?”

He held me tighter while giving me a reassuring smile. “Love, as long as you’re here, I will be as well.”

I clench the handle of the dagger tight and—because I’m a freaking cliché—I crouch behind the desk and wait.

Saxton

What the fuck are those things?

Standing a hundred meters from the back of the manor, I brace as a dozen of the deformed humans run at us and morph into ... no animal I’ve ever seen in the natural world. Black as night, all fangs and disarticulated limbs, they look like fucked-up Weres. And they reek of rot.

Sounds of cracking bones, tearing flesh, and screeches fill out the air from the west corner of the manor where Dex took post.

“Those moppets are mine,” Dana hisses. Her skin glows, lit from the inside. Her fingers trace arabesques in the air. She claps her hands, and I stare as the group of whatever the fuck advancing on us explodes. They simply self-combust, leaving fuming piles on the ground.

The eight-foot plus werebear rounds the side of the house as he morphs back into his human shape—his fully dressed human shape.

Then, nothing. This wasn't a battle, not even a fight. Standing between Jade's friends, I roll the unused adrenaline off my shoulders and turn to the powerful witch. "What —?"

We whip our eyes up. Something's flying, heading straight for...

"Jade!"

My wolf takes over and I cut toward the building.

The thing crashes through the window.

My mate screams, and I howl in rage. I won't be fast enough. I....

My body surges high, lifted by an invisible force—Dana—and I land into the dark room on broken glass.

The thing crowds her against the door, and as one of its clawed paws reaches for her, I hammer into it and clamp my jaw to its side. We tumble away from her.

It gets to its feet while I place myself in front of her. It lashes his claw and pain slices through my shoulder.

"Saxton!"

There is fear in her scent.

As it swings a disjointed arm at me, I plunge my fangs in its throat. More pain tears through my stomach. I won't let go. I won't let it anywhere near my mate. We roll on the floor. Furniture smashes. Screams echo.

Then, suddenly its weight is off me. I let go of its mangled throat and roll up onto my feet. My mate is on the thing's back. Both her hands are fisted around the handle of the dagger lodged deep into the back of the thing's head. She yanks it out. Jams it back. She does it again, and again until the thing's body slumps on the floor.

Excruciating pain beats through my body, and my hinder legs give in. Morphing will heal my wounds.

I morph, but my body feels like it's on fire.

“Saxton?” My mate is scared. Her small, beautiful face jumps before mine, and I almost flinch at the cool touch of her hand on my burning skin.

Terror skewers her scent as she lifts her hand covered with my blood. I touch my bleeding flank. I should have healed. I want to tell her I’ll be all right, but all that comes out is a groan.

“Dana!” Her arm loops around my waist. “Dana! He’s hurt! Saxton’s hurt!”

I clench my jaw just as her friends come crashing through the door. “Baby...”

The last thing I hear is my mate yelling my name.

I wake up in a soft bed with my head propped up on too many pillows while daylight filters through pale yellow curtains. My wounds are fully healed. *How long have I been out?*

Shaking off the stiffness of my body, I tighten my arm around the warm woman tucked to my side.

I inhale the scent of honeysuckle I need as much as air. “Baby—”

Her head springs up. “You’re awake.”

She shifts to her knees, and I grunt in pleasure as she peppers kisses all over my face.

“Saxton... Oh my God...” Her voice breaks as she sets her forehead to mine. “I thought I’d lost you.” Her fingers dig into my cheeks. “You promised you’d stay safe. You promised.”

Her breath hitches, and when her tears wet my face, I pull her on top of me while she sobs in my neck.

“I’m okay, my Jade. Don’t cry, baby. I’m okay.”

Stroking her back, I make shushing sounds, but nothing seems to calm her down. I cup her face. Her eyes are swollen as if she's been crying for hours, and she's wearing soft PJs shorts and a t-shirt.

“How long was I out?”

“Three days,” she whispers while more tears roll down her cheeks.

I sit up, and when I drape her legs over mine, her eyes open wide before she emits a cute growl.

She slaps my shoulder. “A minute ago, you were unconscious. How can you be—?”

“Hard?” I peck her nose and grin. “That’s what happens when you’re close.”

As she’s about to reply, the door opens on Tilda carrying a tray of food, followed by Dex, Dana, and Cole.

Fuck. It must have been bad for them to call him.

“Welcome back, hermano. Dex and Dana briefed me. We have a team on the manor and one at the health center. His lips twitch. “I can see you’re fully recovered, so I’ll be on my way.”

He winks at Jade, backslaps Dex, and exits the room while Jade settles cross-legged by my side and curls her fingers around mine.

A brief frown mars Tilda’s smooth brow as she approaches the bed before she turns to Dex. “Dex, can you please move the table?”

I assess the room. The furniture has been pushed against the walls far away from the bed. Deep claw grooves dent the walls and the wooden floor.

The fever. When Weres are gravely harmed and can’t heal through morphing, the fever starts as the last resort. A fight that will fuse back our dual anatomies. Or kill both parts.

Which means I must have morphed countless times. Thrashing and lashing at everything and anyone who stood close.

Dex sets the round table and heavy chairs closer to the bed. He would know.

“Did I get the fever?”

When he nods, I pull Jade closer.

“The fever is—”

“I know what the fever is.”

Dana sits on the armchair by the bed, picks one strawberry from the tray, gets her hand slapped by Tilda, and sighs.

“We all know, but Jade insisted on staying with you.”

The close proximity of my mate would certainly be incentive enough for my wolf and I to fight to live, but even other Werens tend to stay far for fear of losing a limb.

I examine my mate’s body. She has no visible wounds, nor bruises. I inhale deeply. She has no internal lesions either.

“How?”

“Dex helped control your wolf, and I’ve healed her after each of your episodes.”

“Why did you let her stay? I could have killed her.”

Dana tilts her head to the side. “Alpha Saxton Cavendish, let me introduce you to the most stubborn woman on the planet.” After another sigh, she adds, “She wouldn’t leave your side, so I moved in one of the suites.”

Jade groans. “And she’s sitting right here.”

Tilda throws a pointed look at my mate. “Jade Channings, he’s awake and well, so you’re eating a full meal. I’ll see you all in the kitchen in five minutes.” At Jade’s nod, she smiles and exits the room.

I'm about to get on my feet when I remember I'm stark naked, which I have no problem with, but if I could... I turn to Dana and do something I'd never thought I would.

"Dana, can you please do the clothing spell on me?"

Dana's eyes widen. She gasps dramatically before setting her palm on her chest. "The fever must have gone to your brain, because I swear I just heard you ask me to do magic on you."

The witch had to bust my balls.

Jade bites on her grin while Dex's chest shakes under his contained hilarity.

"I did."

She grins. "How hard was that?"

"You have no fucking idea." I grit my teeth as her grin turns into full laughter.

"Oh, but I do, Alpha Cavendish. I do."

Fucking witches.

At the table covered with enough food to feed a dozen Weres, Jade's quiet. Seated beside me with Dana to her right, she eats under Tilda's watchful gaze. When her scent peaks with sporadic bursts of fear, I know she's reliving the past three days. My wolf paces, and I grit my back teeth at the shadows under her haunted eyes. She needs to rest. I'll ask Dex about the fucked-up beings later.

Her elbows hit the table, and she locks her eyes onto mine. "The things that attacked us were demons."

I wouldn't have been more stunned if my head had been bashed with a tree trunk. "What?"

"I've never seen the kind who attacked us, but they come in many types. We... Vaughn and us, have been tracking them for years. All we know is that most seem to be mindless

killers, but they can be weaponized. They've attacked Weres, humans, and Meterans indiscriminately, but we've never been able to catch one alive." A wave of distress infuses her scent. "Since the other night, we also know their claws can be poisonous."

All eyes are on me as I process her words.

"Poisonous?"

Her clenched fists set on the table as she nods, but it's Dana who replies. "When I healed your cuts, I extracted poison from your bloodstream."

I make my tone gentle as I turn to my mate. "What about the dagger you used?"

"Vaughn imbued it with his power."

Leaning back in my chair, I look to the only other Were sitting at the table.

Dex exhales slowly. "It takes a minute to wrap your head around it, but those creepshows are as real as they come. Since my sleuth has been informed, we've been on the lookout for any suspicious deaths or disappearances."

That's why Thyonian has been reaching out to all of us. *Fuck.*

Demons who can kill Weres. A deadly enemy I didn't know about. Because my pack—me included ... me at the helm—has been so wary of outsiders, we didn't see the helping hand that was extended to us, leaving us wide open for the taking. But we've been lucky, and that's all it comes down to. Dumb luck.

"I'll check in with my beta, but my pack was all accounted for before the attack."

Jade nods with a small smile. "I'm happy to hear that."

Truth. Even after the way Bree treated her, she doesn't wish us harm. Emotion strangles my chest, and I bring her cold hand to my mouth.

“Thank you, my beautiful.” Turning to the table, I dip my chin at the people who’ve been looking out for all of us. “Thank you.”

Jade’s hand relaxes, and when she curls her fingers around mine, my wolf stops fretting.

Chapter Twenty

Jade

After dinner, I walk Dana to the front door and hug her. I can't find the words that could express all the love, gratitude, and awe I have for her. "Dana—"

"I know."

I lock my gaze onto hers. Between Saxton and I, she's done a lot of healing. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, my darling. I just need a long Moon bath to replenish, and I'll be my usual fabulous self."

Her expression softens as she cups my face. "Jade, *you* need to rest. Your injuries are healed, but you need to let your mind and your spirit recover." When I'm about to reply, she shakes her head. "You've been running on empty for way too long. I know you're worried about Vaughn, we all are, but you have to take care of yourself. Vaughn would be beyond miffed if he saw you so depleted." She smiles, and her voice lowers to a whisper. "And by the way Sax looks at you, I can tell you're going to need the energy and strength when he gets his hands on you."

Heat floods my face, and I shiver, which makes her chuckle.

After one last hug, she strides to Dex, who's waiting by his car to drive her home.

As I enter the spotlessly clean kitchen, Tilda pecks my cheek. "Jade, get some sleep."

"Kay. Love you."

"I love you too, Jade Channings."

Names have power.

After climbing the stairs slowly, I trudge to my bedroom and jump as the door opens on Saxton's scowl.

After he shuts the door behind me, I clasp my hands behind my back. “What’s wrong?”

In response, he brushes his lips on mine in a touch so tender, it brings tears to my eyes.

Kneeling before me, he removes my tennis shoes, the left, then the right. He undresses me with careful, gentle hands down to my panties, before carrying me to the bed. Once I’m under the duvet, my body rolls toward the dip his big body creates as he lies by my side.

“Come here, baby.” He pulls me close until our skins are pressed tight against each other’s and pecks my head. “Sleep, mia bella.”

Safe and warm in his arms, I do just that.

“Good afternoon, Jade.”

I smile at Hailey, our pilot, as Saxton and I step into the cabin of the private Gulfstream that’ll fly us to Raine Ryker’s pack at the border of the desert.

“Hi, Hailey.” I turn to Saxton, who fills up the narrow space. “This is Saxton Cavendish.”

After greeting him, our pretty pilot takes her seat in the small cockpit. Minutes later, her cheerful voice comes through the PA system of the aircraft. “Weather conditions are good. Jade, I left something in the galley for you.”

As we move farther down the luxuriously cream interior, I shiver, acutely aware of Saxton behind me. When I woke up—later than I have in weeks—he was already gone. Which gave me some much-needed alone time.

My heart still hurts at the memory of him falling to his knees, bleeding after he jumped in to save me. The fever was brutal, wrenching through him as he fought with himself while his body burned from the inside. Every time he was in his human form, I lied next to him, holding him, begging him not to leave me. Then, he would morph, and his wolf would throw

me off before Dex tackled him. And that pained noise he made... When he wouldn't wake up, I thought he... *Deep breath.*

Before we left, Dex, he, and I had breakfast during which Saxton was quiet. Not angry. It was more like I'm-deep-in-thoughts-because-you-people-have-tilted-my-view-of-the-world-forever broodiness. I hate the way he had to find out about demons. No one should ever be introduced to anything through violence. Never. But maybe it will make it easier for him to accept Vaughn's true nature. And Zayn's.

The private aircraft has two wide seats on each side, and a long leather-covered bench at the back. As I spin toward Saxton, I gasp at how close he is. *God, his eyes. His mouth. His body.* And he smells so good. All woodsy and uber manly male. And of sex. Lots of it.

His lips twitch. "Do you have hotdogs in here?"

My brain goes into hyperdrive. "Hailey's from Vartan, which is not far from Mordsen. But you know that. Anyway, every time we fly together, which has only happened three or four times because she has to be the pilot on call, and there're a lot of variables, but when all the stars align, and I do realize this is a tiny, menial thing in the grand scheme of things, but when that happens, she gets me hotdogs from her favorite hotdog place which taste almost as good as the ones we used to make at the Star Diner, and I—"

"Jade and gent, fasten your seatbelts. Ready for takeoff."

Thank God. Hailey's announcement stops my Gilmore's Girls—without the wit— monologue while Saxton chuckles.

He settles by the window, leaving me to sit by the narrow aisle. As the plane lifts off, I close my eyes. I love flying. Being high up in the air, no longer tethered to the ground and its ugliness, is truly freeing. When we reach our cruising altitude, I undo my seatbelt, ready to make my way to the galley. I won't eat them, but I want to at least see and smell the piled-on-with-every-possible-condiments hotdogs.

As I scoot forward, Saxton takes my hand. “I have a question.”

No hotdog, then. “All right.”

“Apart from the sorcerer, how many men have you had?”

This again. Like a dog with a bone. A wolf with a bone. *And why does it matter anyway? It’s not like I’m...*

“How many women have you slept with in the last fourteen years?”

His silver eyes hook onto mine. “Eleven. None for the last two years. Your turn. How many?”

Eleven? I bet they were all stunning specimens who just loved pleasing you.

Anger flares, starting at the bottom of my stomach. “Good for you. I—”

Saxton cups my nape. “Baby, how many assholes will I have to tell you’re mine?”

“Saxton, I’m not yours.” *It sounded more convincing in my head.*

He frames my face while a deep frown creases his. “Baby, how many?”

I sigh. “One. Three years ago.”

Saxton’s gaze drills into mine. “But Thyonian had several others?”

“I’m not answering that.”

Now he’s scowling. “Why only one for you?”

Because I compared him to you. “It ... didn’t feel right.”

“Do you love him that much that you’d stay loyal to him when he has no problem fucking other people?”

“I’m not—”

His voice hardens. “For fuck’s sake, Jade. Why are you staying with him? Don’t you want to be with someone who thinks you’re enough?”

Seriously? I draw away from his touch. “*You* didn’t think I was enough.”

I brace myself for his anger, or whatever emotion is brewing the storm in his eyes, but he just shakes his head, and his tone softens.

“Mia bella, you were eighteen, a human who had no idea Weres existed. I was a century old weredirewolf about to become alpha of my pack. Can you honestly tell me you’d have accepted me? My pack?”

Tears choke me, so I clear my throat. “Saxton, do you have any idea how much I loved you? You were the air I breathed, and I would have done or become anything you’d have wanted me to be because all I needed was you.” I take a deep breath. “Would I have accepted everything? I don’t know, but you didn’t give me the chance, so I guess we’ll never know for sure.”

“You’re right.”

I hold my breath as he takes my hand and places it on his fast-beating heart.

“I didn’t give us a chance. But losing you for fourteen years has been my punishment. One I deserved for not trusting what we were to each other. But I know better now, and I want another chance. I want you.”

When I close my eyes and sigh, Saxton curls his fingers under my chin. “Baby?”

No authoritative voice, nor demand, he’s asking. Like my answer is important to him. So, after another deep breath, I tell him the truth.

“Vaughn and I stopped being intimate six years ago. But what we built is greater than us. Our image has become a powerful tool that I didn’t want to turn into a prison. So, I

came up with the open relationship to give us the freedom to date whoever we wanted while we remained a couple in public.”

The tension in Saxton’s body lessens, replaced by something bigger, more intense, and I catch my breath at the burning in his eyes.

“You said you loved him.”

“I do, but I’m not in love with him. He’s my family.”

Vaughn is so much more, but my bond to the man people call the Great Sorcerer is mine and mine only.

He inches impossibly close. “And the other guy?”

“Jagr’s a friend. A good friend who’s erousiaed to the love of his life.”

When he cups my cheek, I get lost in his eyes. “Okay, baby. I can work with that.”

Saxton

Losing her isn’t a fucking option, so as I said, I’ll work with that. We’re halfway through the short car journey to Ryker’s pack, and she’s quiet. When she interlocks her fingers in her lap, I take her hand.

“You didn’t eat your hotdogs.”

She groans, an almost child-like sound that brings up my smile. “Raine Ryker hates me on principle, so I’m not eating a sloppy hotdog before meeting her.”

There must be some logic in there, but damn if I can see it. “Why not?”

Shifting toward me, she pouts, and I want a bite of those full lips. “Because of Weres’ freaking super sense of smell.”

Still not making any sense. “What does that have to do with hotdogs?”

She adds a little frown to her pout, and I shift in my seat to relieve the pressure of my cock against the buttons of my jeans.

“Everything. Most Weres I’ve met commented on how I smell, and I don’t want to smell like hotdogs.”

What? As I glance at her puzzled expression, I try not to, but I can’t help it, I burst out laughing while she scowls at me.

We’re early as we’re approaching Ryker’s compound, so I pull over to the side road and get close. “Baby, your scent has nothing to do with what you eat or the perfume you wear.” The slight tilt of her head sends a curl over her eye, and I tuck it behind her ear. “What we smell is deeper, more like your essence, your primal emotions, and in my case, your pheromones as well.”

Her eyes grow into saucers. “You can smell when I’m —?”

“Aroused? Yes.”

Her cheekbones get flushed. “I think that’s worse. And flattering, not the aroused part ... I guess.” She slants closer. “What do I smell like to you?”

Like mine. Honeysuckle paradise and sex. My wolf growls in need, and Jade’s frown smooths into a smile.

“Your wolf likes it.”

Understatement of the century. “Yeah, we both do.”

Her grin widens. “I like how you smell too.”

I need to touch her, so I cup her satiny cheek and push my thumb into her pliable bottom lip. “Yeah? And how is that?”

When the tip of her tongue grazes my thumb, I feel the tiny lick in my cock, and I growl.

Her gaze drops to my mouth before diving into mine. “You smell like heat and sex in the forest in summer.”

No doubt she's my true mate. “Fuck, baby. Do you know what you’re doing to me?”

She leans back into her seat, and I let her go because all I want is to fuck her hard. Now. Into next week. Or the next six months.

“Same thing you’re doing to me,” she whispers. “Let’s hope Raine Ryker’s sense of smell is not as developed as yours.”

I can’t help my smile. My mate is fucking cute.

We pass three gates through the arid land before I turn the engine off in front of a hacienda-style mammoth of a house. Jade swipes her hand over the skirt of her dress, closes her eyes, and lets out a long exhale through pursed lips. When she opens her eyes, my chest swells in pride at the determination in her gaze. My warrior mate is going to battle, and I’ll be right by her side.

As we step out of the car, a woman exuding power and flanked by four thick-necked men approaches us. Her eyes harden as they set on Jade, and I clench my jaw. If one of those assholes touches a hair on my mate’s head, that’ll be the end of that fucking nonsense.

Ryker extends her arm. “Cavendish, about time we met.” After we greet each other in alpha-fashion, she turns to Jade, who clasps her hands behind her back and bows her head.

“Alpha Ryker, I’m Jade Channings, please, accept my gratit—”

“Where’s the sorcerer?” Jade snaps her eyes up and before she gets a chance to reply, the alpha leans in. “If he’s not here, you can fuck right off.”

Fuck, no. I step in front of the alpha and my wolf comes out in my voice “Mind your fucking tone when you talk to her.”

The werejackal narrows her eyes on me. “I agreed to see you, not some human woman who thinks she’s special because

she's fucking—”

Jade steps beside me. “Alpha Ryker, I apologize for the affront.” She touches my arm. “I’ll wait in the car.”

Raine Ryker scoffs. “No, you fucking won’t. I don’t want you to call your human friends and give them our location.” She extends her open palm. “Give me your cell. My guards will take you to the pool house.”

This woman is seriously pissing me off, even more so when apprehension spikes Jade’s scent. “You’re not taking her cell. If she’d wanted to ambush your pack, she’d have done it by now.”

The alpha whips her angry face to mine as I address her men. “You touch her, and we’re going to have problems.” I turn to Jade and cup her cheek. “Baby, wait for me while I talk to Ryker.” I glance back at Ryker’s guards. “If she so much as looks sad, you’ll answer to me.”

When Ryker bristles, I lock my eyes onto hers. “I’m here for the sorcerer. Did I waste my time?”

As the alpha grunts, Jade bows slightly to her and follows the two guards to the side of the house. Her red wine dress flares around her knees, her back is straight, and her gait utterly feminine as she sways on her high heels.

Ryker pours more whisky in the tumbler placed on the patio table between us. When she lifts the bottle in my direction, I shake my head and slant back in the rustic but comfortable chair.

“What’s it to you if the sorcerer’s gone? I thought you hated the guy.” She sets the half empty bottle on the table. “And I thought the Cavendish pack hated humans. But here you are, with her, asking for my pack to keep an eye out for him.”

I laid out the situation to her as soon as we entered the house. As I expected, she knew about demons. When I told her

about the sorcerer's disappearance, she paced the terrace, and there was concern in her expression.

I need to get to Jade. "Are you in or out?"

She gulps down the entire glass. "Yeah. I'm in." We get on our feet. "Now, take your human and get the fuck out of my pack."

As we near what she calls the pool house—there's no pool or any bodies of water around—the alpha scowls at the two men posted before the door. "Why are you outside?"

The guard on the left straightens his back. "Tati asked us to."

Ryker barges into the house, and I'm right behind her.

Chapter Twenty-One

Jade

I smile at Tatiana seated beside me on the rococo sofa. She looks like a softer version of her mother. They have the same startlingly blue eyes and auburn hair cascading over slim shoulders. Her almond-shaped eyes twinkle as she grins back.

I touch her fingers. “Have you talked to her yet?”

When she shakes her head, I squeeze her hand. “How are you, honey?”

“How’s Tilda?”

We laugh as we speak at the same time.

“Really good,” she says. And she looks well. After I tell her Tilda is her usual marvelous self, she clutches my fingers, and her face brightens. “Tonight, we’re celebrating the Spring equinox. Can you—?”

The door crashes open.

Tatiana and I jump to our feet.

“Get the fuck away from my daughter.”

The alpha lunges, but Saxton gets to me first and shields me against the furious woman.

Although his voice is loaded with command, his tone is calm. “Don’t touch her.”

Tatiana, the guards, and I stare for a second. I’m not sure how, but she inserts herself between Saxton and her mother.

“Mom, stop. Jade’s my friend.”

Saxton moves fast, and I find myself tucked to his side a couple of meters away from the confronting mother and daughter. Worried of what it might trigger for Tatiana, I step closer.

“Alpha Ryker, I apologize—”

Her eyes are full of rage. “I know she worked at your fucking clinic.” She points her finger at me. “You and the sorcerer made her believe in this bullshit utopian world united by love. I can take this shit from Vaughn, but not from someone whose species kills for fun. Your kind are liars, perverted killers. Look at you, supposed to be the sorcerer’s woman, but everyone can smell how wet you are for Cavendish. If you—”

“Mom. Stop!”

Raine Ryker whips her eyes to her daughter’s. “Tati, what the fuck do you see in that little c—?”

“Alpha Ryker—”

Her glare pins me into place. “Talk over me again, and I’ll fucking —”

Tatiana takes my hand in a strong grip. “Mom, she saved my life.”

The werejackals’ alpha whips her gaze at her daughter. “What?”

I squeeze my friend’s fingers to get her attention. “Our business is finished here. We’ll just go.”

Releasing my hand, Tatiana faces her mother. “This is a private conversation. Leave.”

It takes me a second to realize she’s talking to the guards, who immediately obey and close the door behind them.

Saxton wraps his arm around my shoulder. “Let’s go.”

Her eyes still on her mother, Tatiana says, “Jade, please stay.”

Ignoring Saxton’s hard expression, I nod. “All right.”

The alpha’s daughter exhales sharply. “When I left five years ago to be with Paul...” At her mother’s scowl, her tone sharpens. “I know how you feel about humans, but we don’t all feel that way. A lot of us are friends with them, we just hide

it from you. I loved Paul, Mom, like you loved Dad. And he loved me.”

Raine Ryker’s eyes shoot daggers, but Tatiana continues. “One night, we were coming out of his restaurant and three Weres jumped us. Paul tried to protect me, but he was no match for them. While one of them held me down, the other two beat him to death while they laughed.”

Her voice wavers, and my heart breaks a little. “They laughed... Then, those ... they decided I needed to be taught a lesson because I dared to be with a human. I ran, but they caught me. They ripped my clothes off...”

She wipes her tears while Saxton swears under his breath.

“But I fought back. I fought and I fought. And I thought I was going to die. When they stopped, I crawled into an alley next to the center where Jade found me. She carried me to her car and drove me to the manor, and when I got the fever, she stayed with me.”

Saxton’s arm wraps around my shoulder.

“When I woke up, Jade had bruises and cuts all over. But she stayed. She fed me, bathed me, talked to me. Without questions or judgment. She even asked Vaughn to stay away and just took care of me. For weeks. When I was healthy again, she asked me if I wanted to go home, and I told her I couldn’t go back to my pack because my mother disowned me.”

The alpha flinches as if she’s been slapped, but Tatiana continues. “Working at Whole of Us was my idea. And I’m glad I did, because I met women like me, women who understood and to whom I could relate. Including human women. And it helped, knowing I wasn’t alone, that I could make even the tiniest difference to the ones who went through the same hell I did. Every time I had nightmares or ... dark thoughts, Jade was there. As my friend.” She takes her mother’s hands. “Mom, I know you think humans are evil, but

Paul wasn't, and Jade isn't either. And just now, she was trying to convince me to talk to you."

When Raine Ryker darts her eyes to me, helplessness and pain have replaced the rage in her expression. "Why did you help her?"

"Because I could."

She cups her daughter's face. "What happened to the cocksuckers who attacked you?"

"They're dead."

Oh. That I didn't know.

"Good." She turns to me. "Have a problem with that?"

I shake my head. "I just hope it was slow and painful."

Tatiana clenches her jaw. "It was."

Then, mother and daughter fall into the fiercest hug.

Lifting my eyes to Saxton's, I mouth. "We should go."

As we reach the door, Alpha Ryker's voice slices the air. "No."

When she strides toward us and extends her right arm to me in the alpha's salute, I gawk for a second. Recognizing the gesture for something she'll never say, I hold her arm.

Her expression is almost a smile. "Be our guests, tonight. My pack's having a little shindig."

Tatiana grins over her mother's shoulder. "I promise it'll be fun, and my best friend's dying to meet you."

Saxton squeezes my shoulder, and I grin at Tatiana. "All right. I'll reschedule our flight."

Saxton

Jade waves at me from across the clearing over the huge bonfire. A lot of people hover around her either to take selfies

or talk to her. She's graceful amidst the attention she's receiving, and I fucking love watching her.

After an opulent dinner with Ryker's pack during which she sat between Tatiana and me, the dancing and drinking started.

Ryker settles on a boulder next to mine with her eyes on her daughter, who's engrossed in a giggling fest with Jade and another she-jackal. She sighs and swallows the content of her tumbler. "My fucking prejudices nearly cost me my kid."

Mine nearly cost me my true mate. My wolf knew my mate was out there, which is why I couldn't commit to any relationship, held back by the sense of loss that plagued me since I forced her out of my life.

Ryker's low voice is clipped with grief. "My kid was hurting, and I made it impossible for her to come to me."

As we both watch the people who matter the most to us, I exhale slowly.

"But you know better now, and she's here, so you can do better."

We both can.

After a brief pause, she cuts her eyes to mine and grins. "Are you fucking her?"

"She's mine."

Her smile turns into a rolling chortle. "Not if we find the sorcerer alive."

She pours the last of the whisky bottle into the tumbler she shot drinks. How is the woman still sharp? Even as a Were, the amount of alcohol she's consumed since we've arrived should have had her at least slurring.

I track Ryker's gaze to a man and woman who've been eyeing her. She winks at them as they start toward us. She then points her chin at the three men making their way to Jade, who undulates to the slow beat coming out of the four giant

speakers set around the small crowd. “Don’t kill my men. She’s unclaimed, and the woman smells good.”

I know. My counterpart lofts a set of keys I catch with my left hand.

“I have a house in Cochran. It’s twenty minutes away from here. Can’t miss it. White, pretty, by the creek. You won’t be disturbed there.”

I keep my eyes on the young jackal whispering to my mate. When Jade shakes her head, I relax a little. But the idiot falls on his knees before her with his arms spread wide, and she giggles. *That’s enough of that.*

As I head toward them, Jade points to me, and whatever she says to him has him scrambling up to his feet and walking away. She claimed me. She doesn’t know it yet, but she just did.

In seconds, I’m on the other side of the campfire. “Baby —”

She wheels toward me with a big smile and throws her arms around my neck. “Hello, you. Come dance with me.”

I pull her supple body closer. “Mia bella, are you drunk?”

When she giggles, I move us away from the crowd.

“A tinny ... teensy little bit.” Her unfocused gaze narrows, and she pouts. “You lied to me.”

“What?”

She pulls on my neck, so I lower my face to hers, and the touch of her lips on my ear gets me harder.

“You said you were the only one who could smell my ... phar ... pheromones, but Raine Ryker said she could smell how...” Her voice pitches to a whisper. “... how wet I was for you.”

Straightening up, I pinch my lips around my smile. Ryker was just raging, but after the hotdog discussion, I get

why she'd hear it that way. I inch my mouth to her ear. "Were you?"

She jerks her head back and scowls. "Yes, but that's not my point, Alpha Cavendish."

Time to go. I peck her scrunching nose. "Let's get you home, beautiful."

As I step back, she wraps her arms around my waist and whispers, "Can you smell it now?"

Fuck, Jade. And yes, her scent's getting me so hard, I'm about to come in my jeans.

"Go say goodbye, baby. We're leaving."

After she hugs Tatiana and smiles for a few more selfies, we head to the car.

She brushes her hair off her face. "Where are we going?"

"Ryker lent us her house. It's not far."

As Ryker said, the house is easy to find. Once I close the door behind us, Jade launches herself at me, arms around my neck, legs around my waist.

"Baby—"

"No. No more talking."

Then, she opens her mouth on mine.

Starving for her, I take over and kiss her deep. Hard. When I slant back, her swollen lips, wet with my mouth, stretch into a smile. Her pupils are dilated. She's tipsy. *Fuck.*

I stride to the only bedroom, where I set her on her feet and unzip her dress. She kicks her shoes off, hops in the middle of the bed, and sits on her haunches. Her round breasts encased in black lace and silk, the deep dent of her waist, and the small triangle covering her pussy make my mouth water. *Fuck, look at her.*

She holds her hand out to me, but I won't take her like this. Not when she's had too much to drink.

As I shake my head, her hand falls in her lap, and her wounded expression makes me clench my teeth. "You don't want to have sex with me?"

Not just sex. I swipe my hand over my face before driving my fists in my pockets. "Baby, I can't think of anything I want more. But when I take you, I want all your senses on me, and I want you to remember every fucking second of it."

She slants back onto her bent elbows, crosses her legs at the knees, and smiles while her eyes set on my crotch. When the tip of her tongue traces her lips, my engorged cock jerks at the promise of her wet mouth. "Are you sure?"

As I follow the path of her fingers from her throat to her chest, I lock my knees. "Jade. Fuck."

Her voice turns into a raspy whisper. "I want you, Saxton."

I head for the door. "Good night, baby."

There's a soft humph as her head hits the pillows.

"Fine, I'll do it myself then."

Jesus. Fuck. I let my fist fall by my side, and stagger back to the bed as my mate tosses her bra on the mattress.

Her lashes cast a shadow on her cheek while the heat coming off her gaze, her scent, the flush on her skin, and the breathiness of her voice hit me all at once.

"Do you want more?"

I want it all. Fucking everything.

Jade chuckles and bites on her bottom lip.

When she uncrosses her legs, I lock my body into place. I won't touch her, but nothing in this world will take me out of this room.

My perfectly curved mate arches her back and rolls her tight nipples between her fingers. “Mmm. So good.”

Standing at the bottom of the bed, I grunt when she sets her heels on the sheet and parts her legs.

“Fuck, you’re so damn beautiful.”

Her gaze is clouded, goosebumps pucker her skin, and she moans as she tugs her panties to the side. Her mouth-watering scent floats to my nostrils while her long fingers brush her pussy.

“Saxton.”

I clench my fists until my knuckles ache. “Get your fingers in, baby. Do it now.”

Her hand stops moving. “I want your fingers, Saxton.” She throws her head back and moans. “I want you.”

She’s killing me. “I’m right here, beautiful.”

She sucks in her breath as her fingers push inside. The rhythm of her hand quickens, and she pulls on her nipple. “Saxton.” The back of her head digs into the pillow, and she shuts her eyes.

My wolf comes out in my voice. “Look at me.”

When she does, my shins hit the bed. Her gasping breaths mix with the wet noise of her fingers as she fucks herself faster.

“Saxton... God... Saxton.”

My cock’s on the verge of bursting. “Do it. Make yourself come for me.”

Her breath catches in her throat while her back arches high. She moans long, and when she drops on the bed, I catch her wrist to lick her fingers clean, groaning at her taste like the starved animal I am.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Jade

“You’re turning into your fucking mother.”

His eyes are so cold. I shiver and reach for him, but he flies away. How is he flying away? I run after him and touch his back. Vaughn. He disappears. Vanishes. No. Our tree. He must be there. Saxton? Saxton’s on his knees. His chest is slashed open. No! I’m losing him again. When his heart stops beating, I hold it in my hands and beg it to beat. Saxton. Please. He has to live. Someone’s behind me. I spin around and my heart races so fast, I’m dizzy. I’m in the woods again, and it’s dark. I hate the woods. Hate them. Something’s coming at me. Saxton? A big black wolf growls. His sharp teeth drip with blood. My blood. When he lunges, I scream but no one will come. No one will save me. Claws lash deep through my back and the pain is... No. I don’t want to die. I don’t want to die.

“Saxton!”

I jolt up, and the next second, I’m wrapped in his arms. I crawl onto his lap.

He’s here. He’s alive. I hold on to his warm body.

“Jade, shh, baby. I’m here, you’re safe.”

Digging my fingers in his nape while my heart drums in my ears, I set my forehead on his. “You can’t die. Promise me. You can’t die. Never. Promise me.”

He cages my face in his big hands, and the moonlight coming from the open curtains bathes his frowning expression.

“Promise me.”

His fingers brush my hair from my wet cheeks. “I promise. It was just a bad dream.”

I burrow against his body as he lies down and tucks me tight in his arms.

The smell of freshly brewed coffee filters through the last remnants of my sleep, and I open my eyes. The sheets smell of Saxton. I roll to the empty side, and a delicious shiver lightens up my body at the memory of Saxton watching me pleasure myself.

I shut my eyes and exhale slowly. I haven't had nightmares in years, but with all that's been happening in the last few days, my memories were bound to spring up again.

After calming breaths, I head to the bathroom where fresh clothes and flat shoes wait for me on the small bench near the bathtub. *So thoughtful.*

Feeling refreshed after my shower, I make my way to the kitchen where Saxton leans his back against the small counter and watches me.

My heartbeat speeds up while his simmering gaze sweeps over me slowly, and when he locks his eyes onto mine, I close the distance between us. My hands find his chest while his find my waist, and the gravel of his voice makes me shiver.

“Mia bella.”

“I'm not drunk anymore.” I loop my arms around his neck. “I'm not tired and I'm not hungry.” I roll on my toes, so his breath mixes with mine. “And I'm going to remember every second.”

When he plasters me against him, I gasp, and we breathe each other for a second. He wraps his hand around my nape, tilts my head back, and I moan as his tongue dives in my mouth. He kisses me deep and wet. And long. My skin itches for his touch. I want him so much, I'm trembling. Still kissing me, he unzips my jeans, and as his fingers glide along my sex, I suck on his tongue.

Saxton

Her face is flushed, and her mouth swollen. Fucking beautiful.

“Baby, look at me.”

As she opens eyes darkened with need, I grind the heel of my hand against her clit. I finger fuck her slow then hard, going deeper until she shakes.

“Oh God... Saxton. I'm... Oh.”

I nip on her bottom lip. “Come for me, baby.”

“Saxton.”

“Come.”

My beautiful mate clamps hard on my hand, and I greedily swallow her long moan before carrying her to the bedroom. When I rip off her clothes, she gasps, but I can't stop. I need her. I need to be inside her so bad, my body hurts.

Once she's naked and laid out on the white sheet, mine for the taking, I inhale deeply.

Jade

I rise on my elbows to watch Saxton pull off his t-shirt in one swoop and drop it by my shredded clothes on the floor. His jeans follow. And oh, my Lord, he's hard. Big. As the bed dips under his knees, a violent shiver races through me.

His wolf eyes hook onto mine. “Give me what's mine.”

I spread my legs slowly while my heart pummels against my chest.

His fingertips graze a path up my inner thighs and stop at the juncture of my legs. Saxton touches the shooting star shaped scar. “What's this?”

I open my eyes and force my body to relax. “An old scar.”

He places a tender kiss on my puckered skin, which somehow soothes the tumult his question triggered.

Oh God, Saxton.

His growl skitters on my wet flesh before he dives mouth open on my sex. The back of my head presses into the pillows, and I bite on a moan. The measured strokes of the flat of his tongue are slow, long, and create streams of pleasure that wash over me. He does this until I fist his hair with both hands. “Saxton!”

He keeps me pinned down while his mouth sets me on fire. The hungry sounds he makes ripple through me. When he pierces me with his tongue, my toes curl, and I lose my breath.

“Give it to me, beautiful.”

Yes. Yes. He sucks on my clit, and my orgasm explodes.

Saxton

Drunk on her taste, I want more, so I keep at her.

She pulls on my hair. “Too much... Saxton, too much...”

No, not nearly enough. I lie over her shaking body, supporting my weight on my elbows.

When she smiles, my chest expands. Everything. She’s everything. She crosses her legs on my lower back, and I hiss at the touch of her hot pussy. My mate frames my face, and her soft touch completes me.

“My wolf,” she whispers.

Yes. Every ounce of everything I am, is yours. I want to savor every second. I push slowly inside her tight body until I’m buried to the hilt. *Fuck. Perfect.*

“Look at me.” She does, and I get lost in liquid gold. “Baby, I won’t go slow.”

My gorgeous woman bites on my lip. A sharp nip that sends electricity down my spine. I curl my hands around her shoulders and lunge once. “Baby... My Jade.”

I crash my mouth on hers and take her hard, fast. Until she yells my name in my mouth.

I need more. Still deep inside her, I kneel up, grab her hips, and possess my mate. Mine.

Her full tits bounce with each hard thrust while her pussy sucks me in deeper.

“Saxton...”

When she pulsates on my cock, I let go. My climax erupts from the base of my spine. Shattering me. Making me whole.

Jade

When Saxton’s forehead sets on mine, I mesh my lips to his. We kiss slow while my body shakes around his. As I remember how to breathe again, he rolls to his back, taking me with him, and my ragdoll body sprawls on his chest.

He pecks my head while his fingers stroke up and down my back. “Okay, mia bella?”

I lift my eyes to his and grin. “Mmm hmm. You?”

He answers by taking my mouth in a drugging kiss that leaves me breathless and reawakens my senses—not that it would take much, Saxton makes me hungry. I shiver as he rolls me on my back.

His eyes are soft. “You had a nightmare. You were calling my name.”

I trace his eyebrows, rake my fingers through his thick hair, and curl my hands around his neck. “I dreamed that you were dying. It’s probably a leftover from the attack on the manor.” Tears build up behind my eyes. “But I couldn’t save you ... and it felt so real.”

“Baby, nothing will happen to me. And I’d die before I let anything happen to you.”

His silver eyes hook onto mine as I caress his stubbly jaw and graze my fingers on his beautiful mouth. *My love.*

Two words I'll never be able to tell him, because our lives are worlds apart, and I'll never be Were. I hook my knee over his hip. He's hard again.

When the thick mushroom head slides down my folds, I push on his chest. "Wait."

Once he's on his back, I straddle him while his palms slide up my legs to settle on my hips. He's the epitome of maleness. All muscles and strength. *Gorgeous.*

His big hands cup my breasts, weighing them before he flicks my nipples with his thumbs, and the sensation shoots straight to my clit. "Fuck, you're beautiful."

When he pinches them between his thumbs and index fingers, I moan.

Saxton's voice turns husky. "Do you remember when I made you come just by sucking on your tits?"

I remember. Kneeling between his legs, I curl my fingers around his hard sex.

"Yes, and I remember the first time you came in my mouth."

I lick off the pearl of liquid on the slit and hum at his taste.

He brushes his thumb on my upper lip. "Take me in."

I love seeing him like this. Pleading yet commanding. When I kiss the head of his penis, then blow on it, his hand fists in my hair, and the small prickle of pain travels down my back.

"Suck me off, baby. Make me come."

My pleasure.

After lunch and a quick shower, I find another pair of jeans and a t-shirt in the wardrobe for which I leave a thank you note to Raine Ryker.

On our way to the airfield, I shut my eyes. *Back to reality.*

“Something’s on your mind, baby?”

I already miss you. “I was thinking about us, and...” A very familiar chill makes the hairs at the back of my neck rise. “Saxton, stop the car.”

He slams on the brakes. “What is it?”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Saxton

“Jade!”

I lunge for my mate as she disappears before my eyes. The next second, I’m launched high in the air for a wink of a moment and land on my feet in a large room.

“Saxton.”

I wheel around as Jade runs in my arms. I crush my mate against me and breathe her in. She’s fine. She’s safe. When I set her on her feet, I can’t help the growl that comes out of me. *What the fuck?*

She’s in a blue strapless dress that stops mid-thigh, skyscraper heeled silver sandals, and her hair is up. She’s gorgeous, but that can only mean one thing, the asshole with no scent is nearby. I clench my teeth. The mofo’s going to have to stop using my woman as his personal pin-up show.

After tucking her to my side, I inspect the room. Under high arched ceilings, the marble flooring spreads to wide stairs ramped by carved cherry wood. Daylight seeps through wall-to-wall conic-shaped stained-glass windows depicting scenes of soldier angels engaged in battle. *Why the fuck are we in a church?*

I turn to Jade. “Where the fuck are we?”

“I don’t know.”

Cole, Dana, and oddly, Tremayne and Moby appear in the room. There’s no sign of Dex.

Dana rushes to Jade. “Sweets, are you all right?”

“I’m fine, darling.”

After a quick glimpse of the room, Dana rolls her eyes and mumbles, “Subtle.”

The other Weres get over their surprise fast and check out our surroundings. Their instinct, like mine, is to first find an exit.

After whizzing through the large, enclosed space at Were speed, Tremayne crosses her arms on her chest while we all gather in the middle of the room. “There’s no door. And why are we in a church?”

Two amused, lilted voices coming from behind us, rise as one. “It’s not a church, silly.”

Wheeling around, I push Jade behind me and face the twin models walking toward us. *Where did they come from?*

When Jade brushes past me, I grab her wrist, but she pulls away.

“Saxton, they’re my friends.”

I shove my hands in my pocket while Jade grins at the two strangers.

“Hi, Roma.”

The one on the left grins as she hugs my mate. “Hello, Jade.”

She greets the second one just as warmly. “Hi, Milan.”

“Jade, you look well,” the woman susurrates before sweeping her smile over us. “Which one is yours?”

Jade chuckles. “This is Saxton Cavendish, and these are Cole Hatfield, Victoria Trem—”

“Temptress.”

Even though the voice comes from everywhere, I turn toward the asshole standing at the top of the stairs in front of one of the red, blue, and black stained-glass windows.

No shitty smirk. He must have found Thyonian.

He holds out his open hand. “Temptress, with me.”

No hauling her to him.

I get to the bottom of the stairs first and stand in front of Jade. “Wherever she goes, I go.”

“Not this time, Wolf. Besides, the answers you seek are here.”

Jade hurries to him. Her long legs climb the stairs fast, and as soon as she places her hand in his, they vanish into thin air.

He keeps taking her from me.

Dana steps beside me. “She’s strong. Let her be.”

I don’t want to lose her again. I pivot toward the twins. The asshole’s right, I need answers. Tremayne speaks first.

“What are you?”

“We’re succubae.” They reply in the same voice, and I shake off the creepy *Shining* vibe.

Moby’s head jerks back. “Sex demons?”

They don’t smell like demons, but their scents keep changing like a smorgasbord of desserts. The twins giggle. “No, silly. Demons are borne out of greed and violence. We...” They point at each other. “... are borne out of yearning.”

Fuck’s sake.

Moby approaches them. “Don’t you feed off men’s sexual energy until they die?”

The twins look at each other before bursting into laughter.

How can Jade tell them apart?

Roma—or is it Milan?—shakes her head. “That’s a misconception. It’s not how our powers work. And it’s not only men.”

Moby tenses as one of them steps right up to him.

Her voice is pure honey. “You seem to crave knowledge. Do you want a demonstration? I won’t hurt you, just show

you.”

My agent gives her a sharp nod. “Do it.”

Cole posts himself by Moby’s side while Tremayne edges closer to the twins, and I brace myself. But the succubus just touches his jaw and whispers, “Hi.”

Moby grabs her waist and yanks her to him. His tone is gruff. Aroused. “Where have you been?”

Even though she looks the same to us, he’s seeing someone else.

“I’m right here,” she replies.

When he moves to kiss her, she lowers her hand and steps back.

Moby shakes his head and blinks a few times. “Fuck.”

Tremayne turns to him. “What happened? What did you see?”

He clears his throat. “Natalie was the first girl I ... I loved. And I would have done anything for her.” Shaking his head again, he looks at the sisters. “That’s a lot of power.”

After joining her sister’s side, the succubus grins. “It is. We become the person one loves or loved the most. The rest is sort of easy after that.”

Tremayne keeps her eyes on her partner. “What rest?”

“We ask them to do stuff.”

My female agent grins. “Pretty cool.”

That’s one word for it. Staying at a safe distance from their touch, I ask, “Is Zayn your master?”

Again, they speak at the same time. “We have no master. We love Z. And he loves us.”

Spoken like true brainwashed members of a cult. I step closer. “Is Zayn a sorcerer? A demon?”

“I was going to ask that,” Tremayne says. “Not the demon part.”

The twins laugh harder. I fist my hands and wait for them to stop their stereo giggling. When they do, they tilt their heads to the side. One on the left, the other on the right.

“No, the only sorceress here is Danayel.”

Jade’s friend, who’s been silent so far, groans. “Enough with the bloody labels.”

Zayn is a big-headed asshole, but so far, he’s been telling the truth, and for the first time, I want to know, so I turn to Dana.

“What’s the difference?”

Jade’s friend sighs. “We all come from magic, but sorcerers can weave both dark and light magic.” Her lips pinch. “So, apparently that makes us unstable.”

Someone’s a little pissed. And mistaken. “We’re Weres, no magic there.”

Dana raises a brow. “Really, Alpha Cavendish? And how do you think your kind came about?”

“What do you mean?”

She rolls her eyes. “I mean, how do you think Weres were created?”

Before I can ask her to make some damn sense, she says, “Do you think one day a woman woke up and realized she really, *really* loved her pet wolf? And where do your clothes go when you morph?”

I’ll be damned.

The Italian-cities-named women take center stage again. “Z is the First Fallen, then Vaughn came later. Much later.”

“Fallen what?” Cole and Moby ask at the same time.

The succubae grin. “Look around you, sillies.” They singsong as they wave their fingers in tandem and disappear.

We look around the room like a bunch of school pups on their first visit to a museum.

Tremayne sighs. “I can’t see it. Moby, anything?”

I stare at the windows, and as understanding dawns on me, my wolf chafes under my skin while I lock my body into place.

My mate, the temptress, is bonded to... I whip my eyes to Dana. “A fallen angel?”

While the other Weres swear and grunt, she shrugs. “I guess you don’t need to eavesdrop anymore.”

Fuck.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Jade

“I found the old boy.”

God, he looks... My heart stops, then crashes against my ribs. “Is he dead?” Then I remember one of my first conversations with Vaughn. Fallens don’t die. I correct myself. “Is he ended?”

Zayn frowns. “No, Temptress.”

My legs give in, and I would have dropped on the floor if a sofa hadn’t formed under me.

He settles beside me, and there’s sadness in his voice as he takes my hand. “Worse. Imprisoned.”

How can this be worse? It can. Vaughn’s immortal. “By the master?”

Zayn shakes his head. “No, the master works for Ryzan.”

“Who?”

He clenches his jaw. “The old boy never told you guys about Ryzan, did he?”

When I confirm Vaughn didn’t, Zayn’s expression hardens. “I told him not to leave you in the dark, but Traheens are the most unyielding about that shit. They only reveal what you ask for.” He sighs. “And they think *we* have grey ethics.”

Anger constricts my throat while tears press behind my eyes. *How was I supposed to ask for what I didn’t know?* But there are more pressing matters.

“Can you tell me?”

“Our kind is divided in three factions, the Shalens who observe all species’ evolution, the Traheens who are guides between planes of existence, and the Ouranos who safeguard the world equilibrium. The old boy is a Traheen, and Ryzan

and I are Ouranos. Any one of us can fall, but in doing so, we lose our place in the Dominion, the time we come from. On all planes of existence each force must be mirrored. Ryzan Devine is my opposite, my counterbalance in this world. You know, the whole ‘there’s no light without darkness’.

When I nod, he continues. “I’m the First Fallen and he’s the First Ascended. But he’s a little pissy because whereas I chose to fall, he was forced to ascend. And there are laws Ouranos must abide by. We cannot fight each other, and we cannot take lives. Not directly. The master and its followers are just his killing instruments.”

Dear Lord. Zayn’s no angel—Okay, he actually is—but this Ryzan sounds like the devil. I force myself to blink. “So, he’s the devil. What about the demons? Did he create them? Does he control them?”

Zayn shakes his head. “The notion of good and bad isn’t as clear cut as what humans are being taught. He’s more like a type of necessary evil. He doesn’t create demons. He taps into the darkness which is already there. And any of us can do that. Those who do his bidding have chosen this path, including the master. The darker their souls, the longer the time, then you have demons. Demons with freewill, who can be bought by anyone with enough money or promise of greater powers.”

My heart and my head are pounding. Out of sync. “Why did he take Vaughn?”

“He didn’t. He might have called on the old boy at first, but Vaughn chose to stay and become Ryzan’s prisoner.”

That makes no sense. “Why?”

He lets out a long exhale. “The old boy is as strait laced as they come, and he’s devoted to this world. Ryzan must have promised him something in return. My guess is protection for all of you.”

I stand up. “What do we do?”

Zayn tugs on my wrist until I sit beside him. “Nothing.”

“What do you mean nothing? We can’t do nothing. He’s your friend!”

The clench of his jaw and the cloudiness of his expression tug at my heart. “He’s my brother. We’re all brothers.”

I cling to his words. “If he’s your brother, maybe you can reach out to the other Fallens and—”

“No, Temptress, it wouldn’t work.”

“Why not?” I didn’t mean to scream.

“Because the old boy made his choice.”

My breath lodges in my throat as I stare at him.

I grip his wrist. “Zayn, you know Vaughn. Ryzan must have tricked him. Or maybe Vaughn made a mistake—” When he shakes his head again, my heart plummets.

“But I can still feel the speck of his crux. That means Vaughn’s still linked to me.” Jumping on my feet, I pace the glass floored room then stop before him. “Surely that means something.”

It must.

Zayn unfurls slowly and thumbs off the tears I can’t stop. “Temptress, I’m sorry.”

And my heart breaks. Without Zayn’s help, what chance do we have of saving Vaughn from himself? This can’t be it. This simply can’t be the end of Vaughn.

“Why am I the only person you’re sharing this with? And where’s Dex?”

“The bear is needed elsewhere.”

When he cups my cheek, Zayn looks sad. And I want to scream.

“The old boy asked me to be gentle—”

“You talked to him?”

He nods. “He wanted me to tell you to move on and carry on without him.”

I’m not sure how long I gape at him while my brain is scrambling. Then, anger burns my chest and explodes through my voice. “It’s not a freaking breakup! Vaughn can’t just go and give himself to the devil and expect me to accept it.”

Zayn rakes his hand through his hair and sighs. “I told him you’d say that.”

“Can I see him? I want to talk to Vaughn. Please, can I see him?”

“Jade, I have to respect his wishes.”

I’ve asked Zayn to use my name countless times, but now that he does, I hate it. “Did he *specifically* ask not to see me?”

A twinge of a smirk returns. “No. He did not.”

Okay. “So, will you take me to him?”

I hold my breath for the longest seconds. *Please.* When Zayn nods, my breath rushes out. “Will Ryzan be there?”

“He will.”

Fantastic. “And will he hurt me?”

“Unless you willingly touch him, he can’t.” He leans in, and I tense. “But it doesn’t mean you won’t get hurt.”

The seed of an idea starts to sprout, and I latch onto it. “And Vaughn can decide to not be his prisoner anymore?”

Zayn’s crystal eyes lock onto mine. “He’s bound by his word, so whatever you’re thinking won’t save him.”

I edge closer. “Is Ryzan like you and Vaughn? Can he not lie?”

“Temptress, none of us lie because we don’t need to, but he won’t give you the answers you seek either.”

Freaking seriously? “Very much like you, then.”

Something flits across his expression, and I touch his chest. “Zayn, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that—”

As he steps back, I grab his arm. I know he could smite me or whatever angels do, but it’s Zayn. “Zayn, I was unfair and mean, and I’m sorry. I’m worried about Vaughn, but that’s no excuse, and I’m sorry. I really am. Please, forgive me.”

His fingers brush my cheek. “I wish I’d found you first.”

One day, he’ll tell me exactly what he means, but I sense today is not that day.

“Let’s go. If Vaughn wants to say goodbye, he’ll have to do it to my face.” As he takes my hand, I squeeze his fingers. “Zayn, can you please return my clothes and stop using me as a doll?”

I barely finish my sentence before I’m in my favorite jeans, t-shirt, and Doc Martens.

We land in an immense, deserted field paved with white flowers giving off a nauseatingly sweet scent. The sky is a blinding, aqua blue. It’s not cold, nor hot, nor windy. And there’s no noise. At all. It’s not silence, but something heavier. Suffocating.

Where’s Vaughn?

I turn to Zayn and gasp. This is the first time I see his wings. They’re gold—Vaughn’s are a creamy white—and curve higher than his wide shoulders while their tips graze his booted ankles. His crystal eyes are glowing. He’s about six foot five, but he looks infinitely larger.

“Here.”

I straighten my back as the tall Ouranos dressed in all black with waist-length, white hair appears. Holding my breath, I instinctively shift closer to Zayn. Ryzan glides toward us—he moves like a shark swims—and stops a few meters from us. Beside him, a cage with black bars the size of my bedroom takes shape.

My chest caves in.

Vaughn.

His blood-stained wings are pinned to the bars with barbed wire.

His head hangs low, and his big body is crumpled on the floor. There are bleeding gashes across his face and his chest.

“Vaughn?”

He doesn't react, and I swallow the scream forming in my throat. When I whip my eyes to Ryzan, a shudder seizes me. His eyes are black pools of emptiness, and devoid of ... everything.

The First Ascended smiles at me, and I feel like my whole body has been dipped in oil.

“So, this is Jade Channings. I must say I expected more.”

And I expected horns, sulfur, goat feet, and leather-like red skin. I'm not cold, but my teeth are chattering. “Same here.”

Ryzan's suddenly closer even though he hasn't moved.

“Mmm. Spirited. I think I like her.”

His widening grin sends my heart crashing against my ribs. “Did you come to save him, Jade Channings?”

“How?”

“Temptress—”

Ryzan's slithering voice cuts off. “Temptress, indeed.”

When Ryzan slants in, Zayn steps between the devil and me. The First Ascended shifts back and clasps his hands behind his back.

“Jade Channings, have you heard of Pandora's box?”

I have. The curious maiden who opened the box containing all evils in the world, then panicked and slapped it

closed, imprisoning hope inside. Before I can reply, he says, “I’m just trying to correct the little idiot’s mistake.”

Jeez, he’s one of those villains who monologues. When he chuckles, I inch closer to Zayn. *Can he hear my thoughts?*

“Hope is an evil that must be eradicated. Hope you and your Traheen give to people. Hope got him here. Hope that you’ll carry on his work.”

I swear I see movement in the cage, but when I look up, Vaughn is still ... absent.

“Do you want to save him, Jade Channings?”

“How?”

The devil holds out his hand. “Let’s make a deal.”

Seriously? A deal with the devil?

I cross my arms on my chest. “How do I save him?”

“I will relinquish Vaughn’s promise if you take his place in the cage. Will you lose your freedom? Will you willingly be tortured until you die so hope can live?”

Vaughn lunges, ripping up a little more of his wings, but for some reason it’s the sweat drenching his face that breaks my heart. He never sweats. His voice snaps, echoing in the strange place. “Zayn, she can’t be here. Take her out of here.”

No. No, I can’t leave him here. I can’t...

I peer into his eyes, and my heart splinters at their dullness. Whatever Ryzan did, snuffed out the light out of him.

The next second, Zayn and I are back into the bubble. Before I utter a single word, he towers over me, and his expression scares me a little. “You’re not doing it.”

I narrow my eyes and lean up. “Do you have a better idea? Because I’m not letting Vaughn rot in that cage.”

After a couple of seconds, he shakes his head, but the corner of his mouth lifts. “Your kind has always been so amusingly mercurial.”

Well, that's not helpful. When I frown, he grins. "It's good. It makes you too volatile to accurately predict. And we can use that."

"So, what do we do?"

"Only the old boy can save himself, but you're bonded to him, so I can give you something that might nudge him in the right direction. But neither the old boy, nor your wolf will like it."

"Let's do it anyway."

When he makes a sound in his throat, my heartbeat quickens. "We'll do it in drops, so Ryzan won't sense it." Zayn leans in. "Temptress, you'll have to lie to the wolf, the bear, the Fae, and the sorceress. Because the second the information is shared, Ryzan will know."

I nod and clear my throat. "When?"

"The day after tomorrow."

Swallowing hard, I nod again.

Zayn smirks, the world makes a little more sense.

"We'll do it in drops, so Ryzan won't sense it. Call on your people. As many as you can. I'll come to you."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Saxton

Cole slaps my shoulder and alphan-speaks. “You good?”

Fuck no. My true mate has been living with a fallen angel who hunts down demons. “Yeah.”

We’re in the manor’s kitchen where the Fallen returned us without Jade. I know he won’t hurt her, not physically, but he plays games and is too fucking enamored with her.

Dex and Tilda walk in. The Fae frowns. “Where’s Jade?”

“She’s with Zayn,” Dana says.

While we sit at the table, Tilda organizes drinks before settling down between Dex and Dana.

Moby, seated between Tremayne and Cole, sweeps his eyes over Jade’s friends.

“What’s it like to fly with a fallen angel?”

Dana winces and takes a mouthful of her drink. “Not as exciting as it sounds. But it’s fast.”

Tilda chuckles while Dex grunts. “Not my thing. But Tilda and Jade love that shit.”

I’m not surprised that my gorgeous mate would be a little daredevil. She’s certainly one of the bravest people I know.

Tremayne’s elbows hit the table. “Humans would freak the hell out if they knew the truth. I have to say I’m a little dazed myself.”

A hint of honeysuckle drops in the air before Jade appears in an orb light in the middle of the room. Alone. The next second, I yank her in my arms and breathe her in while she pushes her face in the crook of my shoulder.

She lifts her darkened eyes to mine. “Zayn found him.”

Amidst the relieved sighs and grunts, I keep my eyes on her. She's in pain. I peck her lips. "Come sit down, baby."

Fuck.

After Jade told us about Thyonian being trapped, and her meeting with Ryzan, we sat silently while she gave us a lowdown on the Fallens.

I swipe my hand over my face. "And you have to be there?"

"Zayn thinks that's the only chance we have at buying enough time to wake Vaughn up."

On a heavy sigh, Dana shakes her head. "I'm going to kick his arse. But first, we need to get him home."

Dex nods slowly. "Zayn wants an army, which means Ryzan will have his."

When Jade lets out a trembling sigh, my wolf whines. She's hiding something. It's the way she bites her lip to stop sudden shivers that cover her skin.

"Moby and I are in," Tremayne says while Moby nods.

After Cole says he's in, Jade looks at them. "You don't have to do that, but I really appreciate it. Thank you."

Tremayne grins. "Are you kidding? A battle of good versus evil? I wouldn't miss that for the world. Plus, since Cole told us about demons, I really want to fight one." She sweeps her gaze between Cole and Moby. "Let's get our people."

We get to our feet, and once Cole and my two agents leave, I pull her to me. "What is it, baby?"

She lets out a shaky breath. "There's more."

As we settle back at the table with Dana, Dex, and Tilda, I kiss the back of Jade's hand. "Tell us."

When she pulls her hand from mine, I clench mine into a fist. After clearing her throat, she says, “I can’t give you any details. Zayn said as soon as I share the information, Ryzan will know.”

Dex grumbles. “Ombrandt can be such a manipulative dickwad, but —”

Dana rolls her eyes and cuts him off. “That’s what I’ve been telling you for years.”

Jade’s scent spikes with anger. “And I’ve been telling you that Zayn is not the jackass you make him out to be. Yes, he’s annoying and smug and arrogant, but he’s also been a friend to Vaughn and me forever. I know he rubs people the wrong way, but that’s because he doesn’t sweat the small stuff.” She turns to Dana. “Without him, I wouldn’t have found a sister I didn’t know I was missing.” Angling toward Dex, she adds. “Or a brother who showed me a true man cares and protects.”

The asshole introduced her to the people who became her people. I kiss the back of her hand, and she turns pleading eyes to mine.

“I can’t tell you more. I can’t.”

I wrap my hand around her nape. “Baby, I trust you.”

As her golden gaze drills into mine, her expression changes me. When Dana sighs loudly, Jade shifts to look at her. The witch grins. “What he said.”

Well into the night, after Kaste, Ryker, Winchester, and the Witch Council agree to go to battle for Thyonian, I follow Jade to her quarters and close the door behind us.

She slams into my chest, her arms strangle my waist, and her breath hitches. I hold her tighter and kiss the top of her head while the force of her sobs jolts her body. After carrying her to her small couch where I sit her in my lap, she cries in my neck.

“We’ll get him back, baby.”

Her soft hair rubs my jaw as she nods, but her tears are still dampening my skin. I scoop her nape. Her eyes are red and wet with pain and fear. And I can’t stand it. I get on my feet and curl my hands around her shoulders.

“Pack a blanket.”

She blinks fast. “W-What?”

“Do you trust me, mia bella?”

“Yes”

Truth. I peck her mouth and steel myself against my need to shred her clothes off and fuck her until her sweet scent floods with only pleasure.

After she forces a too-thick blanket in her backpack, I take her hand and lead her out to the edge of the manor where the Weres we posted there signal their presence in were-speak.

I cup her cheek. “Let’s go for a run.”

Her brows knit, and fear pricks her scent. “In the woods? Saxton, it’s the middle of the night.”

I don’t want you to think. I don’t want you to cry. I morph before her.

After a quick lick of her hand, I lay at her feet and nudge her inner thigh. She doesn’t move. My mate is a little obtuse. When I do it again, her eyes widen under the moonlight. “You want me to climb on your back?”

When I chuff in response, she makes the lilted sound that makes her scent sweeter, and I watch her white teeth gleam in the night. Small, shiny teeth that can’t cut through skin but render her truly beautiful.

“Did you just roll your eyes at me?”

Her words don’t matter. Her scent tells me everything I need to know. I press my muzzle to the inside of her knee.

“All right. All right.”

When she straddles my back and loops her soft-skinned arms around my neck, I growl at the pleasure of having my mate's body against mine.

I stand up, and her little shriek blasts my eardrum. I take a few steps to let her get used to the motion of us. Then, I buckle and shake her off.

She yips as she tumbles on the grass.

As she gets back on her feet, the pearly sound that sweetens her scent rolls into the night. "I get it. My hold isn't secure." She straddles me again, and I throw her off again. Knowing my mate won't give up, I do this several times.

Panting, she climbs on my back, locks her arms and legs in a firm but flexible grip. "All right. Do it again."

I buck to dislodge my mate, but she holds on, and I growl with pride.

When I know she won't fall off, I trot toward the nearby woods.

"Let's run, my wolf," she whispers against my fur.

This forest is not thick or large enough, so I run fast but not at full speed. I take the paths with no low branches. The faster I go, the higher I bound, the deeper the sweet scent of her joy. I race to a small clearing lit by the moon rays, and I slow my pace. Once there, she dismounts me and touches her mouth to the top of my muzzle.

"Thank you, Saxton."

The pain in her scent is gone.

I morph back and stand before my smiling mate. She's the only person who always calls me by my full name. As if even in name, she embraces all of me.

A skittering sound makes her shriek, fear lances her scent, and she jumps into my arms. She's shaking. She's scared of the woods. Really scared.

After a soft kiss, I curl my hand around her slender nape. “There’s nothing to be scared of.”

She pouts. “I’m not a big badass wolf, so trust me, there’s plenty to be scared of.”

After spreading the blanket on the soft ground, I sit her with her back to my chest between my knees.

Eventually, tension leaves her body, and she tilts her head back to look at me. “Now what, Alpha Cavendish?”

Now, I take you. I slide my hand under her t-shirt, and when her skin puckers against my palm, I get harder. I circle her nipples, and her soft moan goes straight to my cock. I know what she wants, what we both want, but I’m enjoying her like this, squirming and moaning.

She arches her back to curl her arm around my neck, and her lips part.

I take her mouth while I glide my fingers in her waistband. Fuck, she’s wet and hot. Growling at her heady scent, I keep at her until she comes hard around my fingers.

Jade

My body’s still shaking as Saxton undresses me and lays on top of me. When he rubs his heavy penis against me, I whimper and curl my legs around the small of his back.

The stroke of his fingers is tender as he caresses my temples and my cheeks. The rumble of his voice cocoons me. “Fucking mine.”

God, I could orgasm just by the sound of his voice.

The fat head of his penis pierces me, and I moan.

“Take me, baby.”

My orgasm unfurls at his first full thrust. My body clenches, spasming around him, and I tumble headfirst into an orgasm that makes me lose my breath. Saxton’s body blankets

mine. He ploughs hard and fast while his breath seesaws against my cheek.

“Give me one more, beautiful.”

His teeth clamp on the muscle between my neck and my shoulder, and I detonate. I lose myself to him. More in love with him than I’ve ever been.

I wake up alone.

After getting ready for the day, I follow the smell of bacon and eggs. At the door jamb of the kitchen, I stop and gawk.

Saxton and Dex, standing by the table, smile at me. But I can’t stop staring at the woman between them.

“Flo?” I clear my throat. It’s not Flo. The woman who’s smiling at me is strikingly beautiful. Her long hair is adorned with fresh flowers and her silk green dress matches the most perfect green sandals. “Floralis.”

She grins wide. “Jade, sweetie.”

Her arms open, and I run to her while tears mess up my mascara. When I step back, she takes both my hands and spreads my arms wide as she peruses me.

“Still as beautiful as I remember.”

She can talk, she’s just ... wow. Warmth flushes my face, and I squeeze her fingers. “What are you doing here?”

“Atilda told me you needed my help.”

There’s something I’m missing here.

I turn to Tilda’s unreadable expression. “I didn’t know you two knew each other.”

My surrogate mom rounds the island and takes my hand.

“The princess sent me to you.”

Wait. What? “The princess?”

Flo chuckles and bows her head. “I’m Floralis Arbor Antheron, First Princess of Aggarwal and Ruler of the Seventh Realm. I’m here to offer my help in returning Vaughn Thyonian.”

It takes me a few seconds to process everything. “I’ve always thought you were extraordinary, and I wish I could say I sensed it, but ... a princess?”

Tilda and Flo grin.

“That I am.”

My throat clogs. “And you sent Atilda?”

Flo— Princess Floralis—touches Tilda’s shoulder, and her eyes soften as they set on our friend. “Atilda has been taking care of me since I was born. When you left Vosges, I knew you’d need someone to cherish you.”

I don’t try to stop my tears while I stare at Atilda. “She did. She does.” I pull Tilda into a crushing hug. “Thank you, Atilda Isabo Winterthur.”

She shifts back and thumbs away my tears. “You’re welcome, Jade Channings.”

I’m not the only one crying. Dex grunts while Saxton clears his throat as I wrap my arms around Flo. “Thank you, Floralis Arbor Antheron.”

“My pleasure, Jade Channings.”

I have so many questions. “Why would a Fae princess work in a diner?”

I think it’s the first time I see Floralis blush. “As a member of the royal family, learning about humans was part of my initiation.”

Fascinating. But still. “But the Star Diner? In Vosges?”

Tilda dips her chin, but as she does so, I catch the smile she’s trying to hide.

Floralis' flush deepens while she lifts her stubborn chin. She sounds as petulant as a Fae princess could, which is merely a slight annoyance to my human ears. "The Star Diner was a bet I'd lost to my father."

Her tone clearly indicates she won't talk further about it, so I giggle and squeeze her hand. "Well, I'm being selfish, but I'm really glad you did." When she chuckles, I ask, "What about Bernie? Is he...?"

The princess shakes her head. "Human. He passed away four years ago. His daughter is now running the Star."

Sweet Bernie. I wipe off a tear. When I left Vosges, I left my only friends behind.

Floralis' expression softens. "He was happy you left. We both were. And he was very proud of you. Of the difference you and Vaughn are making."

More tears drench my face, but because I'm not the heroin of a novel, my belly reminds me rather loudly that I'm famished. Heat engulfs my whole face as I groan. And it doesn't help that everyone laughs.

Saxton's lips twitch as he strides to me and pecks my temple. "Come eat, baby."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Saxton

The Fae princess is the first one of a long line of Mets and Weres volunteering their help to return the Fallen. Corina Kaste has rallied several healers who'll stay at the manor while we'll be fighting. Because there'll be a fight.

As Jade smiles at a werepanda, I'm struck by how many came for *her*. Her colleagues and the women she helped called on their friends, and people come from all over to offer their alliance.

Jade tells them about the promise Thyonian made to Ryzan and insists on letting them choose whether they will fight.

Most agree.

My mate is building an army of the most powerful beings on the planet, and pride fills my chest with the respect she commands.

When a couple of our agents take over the protection inside the manor, Cole joins me on the large terrace adjacent to the main living room, and we automatically switch to alphan-speak.

"You're worried about her." It's not a question.

Her loyalty to Thyonian is anchored deep, but she's the most vulnerable of us. Whatever the winged asshole said to her, I'm not letting my mate be a pawn. She won't like it, but I won't have her put herself in danger, and the only people I trust to keep her safe are my pack.

We stride to the backyard, and once we're deep into the manicured gardens, I turn to him.

"Jade's my true mate."

His brows hit his hairline before he dips his chin. "So, that's a real thing?" When I nod, he says, "That explains your

wolf's reaction.”

After I tell him how and when I found out, my friend whistles low.

“How do you think she'll take it?”

For the first time in my life, I have no answer. What if the bond she has with Thyonian cannot be broken? What if she doesn't want to break it? My wolf snarls at the idea. *She's ours.*

She is, and this is my only certainty.

Around 11:00 PM, after the last visitor exits the manor, we gather in the kitchen for dinner where Tilda cooked a feast. I settle by Jade's side. Taking her hand, I place it on my thigh.

Halfway between the main course and dessert, I squeeze her fingers while my wolf paces restlessly.

“Baby, once you've done your part tomorrow, let Cole take you to my pack. You—”

When she shakes her head, I pull on her hand. “Jade, you're the most vulnerable of all of us—”

A mix of anger coated with fear shreds through her scent. “I'm very aware of that fact, but I need to be there for Vaughn, and the last place I'd go to is your pack.”

The table falls silent. From the corner of my eyes, I catch Dana and Dex's hard expressions.

“Why the fuck not?”

My mate's eyes narrow. “Because I value breathing?”

Fuck. Having her protected is more important, so I rein in my anger.

“My pack would never hurt you—”

Jade sighs and tucks her hair behind her ear. “Saxton... You know where your pack stands on ... on outsiders.”

I clench my teeth at the careful wording as she continues. “If I wanted to be safe, I would go to the Kaste pride, the Winchester sleuth, or even the Witch Council’s house. Somewhere I’d not only be safe but also welcomed. But it’s a moot point because as I said—”

“My pack will welcome you.”

She rolls her eyes. “No, they won’t. And you know it.”

I wrap my hand around her nape. “They’ll welcome my true mate.”

Jade

Knocked out of my senses, I gape at him while the others flee the kitchen. “W-what?” I’m not sure he heard me. I can’t hear myself over my thundering heartbeat. “What do you mean your true mate?”

His expression is intense as he strokes his thumb on my overheated cheek. “You’re my true mate.”

He’s wrong. He’s— I can’t breathe. I stand on shaking legs and set my palms on the cool counter. Pivoting toward Saxton’s frowning expression, I exhale once. Twice. “Are you sure? Since when? How do you know?”

After Saxton tells me about the alpha voice, the mating call, and my scent which apparently makes him crazy, tears scratch my throat.

“Why now? Why didn’t you know before?”

Saxton’s jaw clenches, but his tone is soft. “I don’t know. I keep asking myself the same question, but I have no fucking idea why I didn’t feel the mating call fourteen years ago.”

If he had, maybe I... “Saxton, you don’t know what happened. I came to see you because I—”

He cups my face. “I know.”

My heart sprints. “You do? What—?”

Saxton pecks my lips. “Baby, I know about the money.”

“What money?”

His bass voice rolls over my lips. “Bree told me she gave you money, and I don’t fucking care. One hundred thousand dollars is fucking nothing, but I’m glad it helped you get out of Vosges.”

That’s how much I was, how much we were worth to them. My breath hitches. I step back right into the counter and wince when I hit its edge. Ignoring Saxton’s pained expression, I inhale slowly. “Where were you that day?”

The back of his fingers brushes my cheek. “What day was it?”

Like I could ever forget. “September fifth.”

His eyes harden. “We were at war with another pack, and I was gathering allies.”

A war? Dear Lord. Right now, my brain’s overloaded. I take a deep breath. Tomorrow, we’re going... Tomorrow, I need to be there for Vaughn. Then, we’ll talk about the baby ... and the rest.

“Mia bella?”

“How does the mating work?”

A small smile takes over his tempestuous gaze. “The mating part is very much like Erousia when I share my life essence with you. Then, I’ll claim you as mine.” His fingers curl under my chin. “What is it, baby?”

Do you love me? I don’t dare ask the question that churns my stomach and scrambles my heart. I can’t think straight when he’s this close, so I put the counter between us.

“It sounds so ... definitive. We’re true mates, so you want to force your pack to accept me? Saxton, I know the invitations weren’t your doing, but your pack is well-known for their intolerance for anyone who’s not a Cavendish wolf.”

When he rounds the island, I step back. “Saxton, I understand why Weres don’t trust humans, I do. But most of the Werenation has embraced Meterans and accepted humans. Your pack hasn’t. I know you believe the true mate thing is fate, but it’s a fate that laid dormant for fourteen years, and it can’t suddenly become the answer. You said your father found another mate after your mother, which means we have a choice in all of this.”

God, the hurt of his expression is ripping my heart open.

He touches my cheek. “You can refuse the mating and me. And yes, I’ll be able to mate someone else, and you can choose another partner. But is that what you want, my beautiful?”

No, all I ever wanted was ... is for you to love me. Shifting back, I slant my hip against the counter and cross my arms on my chest. “I want to be happy, and I want you to be happy.”

He reaches for me, and I draw back. “Saxton, you’re a wolf. You’re not only the leader but also the core of your pack. You need them, and they need you—”

“Temptress.”

Saxton’s hands wrap around my shoulders. “This isn’t over. You’re mine, Jade.”

I am. I’ll always be.

I take Zayn’s hand.

Saxton

“Fuck!”

Fast approaching steps precede Dana’s voice. “Where is she?”

Before the asshole snatched her away from me, — again — she was about to refuse me.

“The First Fallen.”

After scrutinizing me for a couple of seconds, she says, “Sax, what Vaughn and Jade are to each other isn’t in contradiction with the fact she’s your mate.”

I rub the heel of my hand on my chest. *She doesn’t want to be.*

“Is that why none of you objected when we got together?”

Dana chuckles and shakes her head. “Do you think that would have stopped Jade? I know you’ve met her when she was young and a direct product of her mother’s upbringing in a small judgmental town, but she’s not that girl anymore.”

As she exits the kitchen, I exhale slowly.

When I mentioned the money, I fucking hated Jade’s expression. There was hurt mixed with a kind of sadness that gnaws at me.

I stride toward the living room and pull my cell out.

Harris picks up on the second ring. “Harris.”

“Ris, get Sam back to the pack by Friday.”

“Done. Anything else?”

“No.”

“Sax, everything good?”

Ris is my brother, and yet I can’t bring myself to tell him I found my true mate. Bree might have fucked up big time, but my firm only deals with the Werenation, and that was my choice. Not because I dislike Mets, even though magic weavers creep the fuck out of me, but I just followed in my father’s footsteps, and we kept to ourselves. Without ever questioning the impact it would have on others. On my mate. Is this what we are? Protectionists to the point of bigotry? I swipe my palm on my jaw. Maybe that’s why I was blinded to my mate all those years ago, and about to lose her again.

“Alpha?”

“I’m good, Ris. Just get my father back.”

As I disconnect the call, Jade’s scent drifts in. She’s upstairs. Once on the balcony, I follow the thread of sweet honeysuckle to Thyonian’s quarters. I push the door open slowly and jolt to a halt.

In the far corner of the darkened room, my mate is lip-locked with the First Fallen, her arms curled around his shoulders while he pins her against him.

He cups her face. “Just a little more, Temptress.”

When she nods, he opens his mouth on hers. There’s no desire in her scent, but I still see red. “Get your fucking hands off her.”

His eyes on my mate, the asshole smirks. “All yours, wolf.”

As I lunge, claws out, the motherfucker smokes out.

I cage her against the desk. “I don’t fucking care what he is, this is the last time this motherfucker puts his mouth on you.”

“Saxton, it’s not what you think—”

“So, what the fuck is it?”

Her scent seals off. “I can’t tell you. You said you trusted me. So, trust me. Zayn—”

I don’t want his name on her lips, so I take her mouth in a fast, hard kiss. “You’re fucking mine.”

When she blinks fast, I step back. She’s got enough on her plate, so instead of losing my shit on my mate, I go for a run.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Jade

When the door closes behind Saxton, I sit on the edge of Vaughn's desk and exhale slowly. A soft, recognizable knock tugs me back into the room. "Come in, Dana."

She settles beside me, and after I relate my interrupted conversation with Saxton, she covers my hand with hers. "How are you?"

Shocked, scared. My scoff comes out a little choked as I interlink our fingers. "Life has certainly its own weird sense of humor." *And timing.*

"You love him," she whispers.

God, do I ever. I squeeze my friend's hand. "Tomorrow, look after Saxton for me."

Dana's perceptive eyes lock onto mine. "Who's going to look after you?"

"Zayn."

She nods and kisses the back of my hand. "I will."

When she wraps her arm around me, I lay my head in the crook of her shoulder. "I love you, my Dana."

She brushes her cheek on my hair. "Not more than I love you."

We eventually move to the sofa, and I clutch Dana's hand whose smile is a little sad too.

Minutes later, Tilda joins us carrying a tray of snacks while Dex brings in the drinks. The manor has three living rooms and two libraries, and yet we always come together in this room. We keep our voices low as we reminisce about the weird and wonderful situations being with Vaughn put us in over the years. It's bittersweet, but at least we're together.

Tilda twists her mouth and shakes her head. “Dex, that makes no sense. No sense at all.”

Dana and I howl in laughter. Dex can’t tell a joke to save his life, but what’s funnier is his long, often-fumbled explanation of the punchlines.

He crosses his huge arms over his chest. “That’s because you have no sense of humor. Eric found it funny.”

Ah. Eric, Dex’s will-they won’t-they half-human half-were mountain lion sweetheart. They’ve been circling each other for nearly a year, but from our conversations, I have the feeling Dex is the one shying away from a relationship.

Tilda scoffs. “That’s because he’s in love with you.”

Dex groans while a flush hits his handsome face. “That boy’s in love with love.”

Dana leans in. “And apparently with your lame jokes, so I’d say keep him.”

Soon, we’re all laughing hard.

After kicking off my shoes, I curl my legs under me and plop a juicy cherry tomato in my mouth. “When are we going to meet Eric?”

His jaw clenches.

“He was attacked by some purebreds werocats.” *Oh, no.* “He didn’t go through the fever, but Dad’s been tracking them, and when we find them...” He doesn’t need to finish his sentence. His expression says it all.

Good. They’ll never do that again. I’m mostly a pacifist, but I have zero tolerance for bullies. “What can we do?”

“We’ll keep this in-house.” After a swig of his drink, he wiggles his brows. “How does it feel to be someone’s true mate?”

I can barely make sense of it myself.

“For me there’re two Saxtons, the man I know, and the alpha of the very closed-minded pack. And you know how I feel about Vosges. But to be honest, the only thing that matters to me right now is bringing Vaughn home.”

They acquiesce in silence before Tilda claps her hands. “We need more food.”

What I need is Saxton’s arms around me. I pick up my shoes and stand up. “I’m going to bed.”

I hug them a little tighter, a little longer than usual, then I head straight to Saxton’s room. Tonight’s our last night together before everything changes, and I really hope his run has subdued some of his anger.

After sliding under the duvet, I push my nose in his pillow and shut my eyes.

Some time later, the sound of the door closing wakes me up and I roll to my side. I left the curtains open, which provides enough light to see the powerful silhouette he cuts under the moonlight, but not his expression. He doesn’t say a word, so I scoot up until my back rests against the headboard.

The mattress dips as he sits by my hip.

“Do you want me to leave?”

He cups my cheek. “Never.”

After hauling me across his lap, he wraps his hand around my nape. He smells of the woods. I loop my arms around his neck and open my mouth on his, pouring all my love for him into the kiss. My tongue jousts with his, and his hold on me becomes forceful.

In a flash, we’re both naked, and I’m under him. When he starts kissing his way down my body, I fist his hair. “I want you inside me.”

His second of hesitation takes too long, so I cross my ankles on his lower back, and moan as his hard penis presses against me.

“Eyes on me, baby.”

He sinks into me slowly, making me feel every inch of him until he sheathes himself deep.

He pauses. Our lips touch.

“You’re mine.”

I fracture into an orgasm that pushes tears down my temples.

Saxton

While her pussy suckles my cock, I grit my teeth. I don’t want to come yet.

Keeping my thrusts slow, I dive into her open mouth. My mate, my beautiful Jade whimpers, and I am crazed with the need to possess her. To make her completely mine.

Pleasure claws at the base of my spine, and I fuck her harder. I need her to look at me while I’m getting lost in her. “Jade, look at me.”

Her nails dig into the back of my neck as she opens unfocused eyes on mine.

I go deep until her breath catches in that half whimper half moan she does at the back of her throat. When she moans my name, my climax is so savage, it takes everything not to plunge my teeth in the crook of her shoulder and mark her.

As I roll onto my back keeping her close, the contented hum she emits brings up my smile.

A few minutes later, she tiptoes to the bathroom, and I shut my eyes. After my run, I followed her scent to my bed, and all I wanted was to hold her. I want this every day. I want to wake up and bury myself in her scent, then inside her.

The door of the bathroom opens, and I get hard. My mate is fucking beautiful. She climbs under the duvet I pulled back and burrows her face in my neck. I need her again. After

rolling her onto her back, I nuzzle her throat and nip at the lobe of her ear. “You came hard. And fast.”

She narrows her eyes before her lips curve up. “Am I hearing a complaint, Alpha Cavendish?”

I can’t help my grin. “Nope.”

My mate’s smile widens as she frames my face. She brushes a tender kiss on my mouth, locks her beautiful gaze onto mine, and her eyes brim with tears.

“Baby—”

“I love you, Saxton.”

My whole world becomes her. My mate. My life.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Jade

The manor is buoyant with activity. Everybody's waiting for Zayn downstairs. Earlier this morning, Dana, Corina, and Tiffany, a witch sent by the Council, cast the clothing spell on the Weres who asked for it.

While the alphas strategize, I escape into Vaughn's office. All those people waiting to go to a war they didn't start. Some will be hurt, some will...

Curling my shaking hands into fist, I dig my nails in my palms, hoping the slight pinch of pain will pull me out of the raging anxiety that strangles me.

After slipping Vaughn's dagger in my ankle boot, I slam the fake book shut. The walls of Vaughn's office are closing in, and the usually safe space feels claustrophobic. I settle in the armchair behind his desk and stare at the sleepy sun crawling its way to midday.

Unable to keep still, I head to his bedroom. The very large room where reds, greens, and blues compete wildly in the paintings on the walls, feels desolate.

The bottom of the curtain flutters.

Zayn's here.

He starts speaking before his body completely fleshes out before me. "I wish I'd found you first."

I slant my head back. "What does that mean?"

Zayn's eyes drill into mine. "You were the old boy's first ever instinct."

His answer triggers more questions. *Who was your first instinct? What happened to you?* "Did someone hurt you?"

He tilts his head to the side. "I hurt them more."

His smirk returns, but I want to hug him. "Zayn—"

When his expression sobers, I tense.

“You’ll get hurt.”

I exhale a trembling breath. “I know.”

Zayn dips his chin. “I’ll give you a moment with your wolf.”

He disappears as Saxton pushes the door open.

Saxton

My body hardens as I stalk to my mate, who looks gorgeously invincible in the tight black leather catsuit. And utterly fragile.

“Saxton.” Her whisper is similar to when she told me she loved me.

She’s rightfully scared of what’s coming, but it’s the grief in her eyes that weighs on my chest. She rolls on her toes and loops her arms around my neck.

“Be safe out there.” Fear pollutes her scent. “Saxton, promise me you’ll stay safe.”

Her heartbeat is fast, and her breath hitches. I take her mouth and kiss her until she moans softly. Touching my forehead to hers, I cup her precious face.

“Mia bella, stay behind me and let me take the hits.”

“Saxton—”

“I’m Were. I’ll heal, but I fucking won’t survive it if you get hurt, so, baby, stay behind me.”

Her eyes shine with an emotion that weakens me. “My wolf—”

“Temptress, it’s time.”

Jade

Zayn takes us to a skyless field where the ground is like translucent sand. Dana's on my left flanked by Dex. On my right, Saxton, Cole, Victoria, and Rowan mark the end of our lineup while Luc Kaste, May Winchester, Raine Ryker, princess Floralis, Roma, and Milan stand behind us.

Zayn will bring the rest of us only if it becomes necessary, but I pray it won't come to that. When he spreads his wings to fly to the middle of the field, surprised grunts, a few swear words, and growls erupt from our group.

Now, they all know.

Zayn's whisper echoes in the desert. "Ryzan."

I breathe deeply to calm my heart trying to break out of my chest. When Saxton takes my hand, I squeeze his fingers, drawing on his strength to ground me.

Wide, white stairs leading to ... what looks like clouds takes shape before us.

Ryzan, dressed in a red three pieces suit in striking contrast with the curtain of his long gold hair, descends the stairs slowly. Halfway to the ground, he extends his wings and lands with his hands in his pockets.

"And I thought Zayn was the drama queen," Dana whispers.

When the First Ascended turns his swirling black void eyes to me, Saxton growls.

The devil's voice makes me shudder. "Well done, Jade Channings. You corrupted all these fantastical beings." His lips curve in what should have been a smile but scares me senseless. "And leaders of their kinds, no less."

When he moves toward us, Zayn immediately steps in his path. "Let's get the show started. Shall we?"

Where's Vaughn?

Ryzan's expression turns tenebrous. His index finger jerks, and a line of people appears fifty meters from us. Then

another one. And another one.

Black and white squares form under our feet.

Like pawns on a messed-up chess board.

Zayn's voice snaps my attention back to the two firsts.
"None of your pets?"

His demons.

Ryzan scoffs. "Where's the fun in that? Besides, I wanted to keep it fair."

Fair? We're outnumbered by at least fifty to one.

When Victoria swears, we all turn to her. She points her chin up toward Ryzan's army. "Moby, isn't that your mom?"

Rowan's eyes are fixated to a muscled woman with shoulder-length hair across the field who waves at him. And I can *feel* the tension vibrating from his body. "That's her."

Ryzan chuckles, and it sounds weird. "Ah. I see you've met my master. Isn't she just perfect? Full of pointed violence and exquisite hatred. Smart too."

Not that smart if she sides with the devil. Bile rises in my throat.

Saxton shifts toward his employee. "Moby, we'll understand if you want to sit this one out."

But Rowan shakes his head. "That woman put me through the fever six times before I turned thirteen because I reminded her of my piece of shit dad. I've got dibs on destroying her."

And I thought Sylvia was bad. I look at Saxton. "Do you recognize any of them?"

"A few."

As Zayn and Ryzan glower at each other, time stretches in the hefty silence.

Where's Vaughn?

When the two firsts fly to each side of the field, the hateful cage appears in the middle between us and Ryzan's people.

Vaughn.

My angel is on his knees. His whole body is covered with open wounds. His fully extended wings are pinned to the bars. His left wing is missing its feathers while bits of membrane hang over the cartilage. His wrists are bound behind his neck by wire that loops and slices around his throat.

I cover my mouth while tears pour down my cheeks.

When I sway toward him, Saxton pulls me back. "Jade. Behind me."

Ryzan sets his eyes on Saxton's hand clamped around my wrist. "The wolf and the weakling. Much like the beginning of a bad joke."

Saxton's body goes rigid. "Fuck off."

The First Ascended hums as he peruses over our group. "Did she tell you he volunteered to be in that cage?"

I did. I told every single one of them because forewarned is forearmed. When he doesn't get the reaction he expected, the devil turns his gaze to Saxton. "She'll never love you the way she loves him."

Watching the cage, I pray Vaughn's deep sense of justice will shake him into action. Make him want to fight to stay with us. *Vaughn, please.*

Ryzan's mouth pulls into a grin that would unnerve the most demented psychopaths. "I'm going to offer you the same deal I did her. If one of you volunteers to take his place in the cage, there will be no bloodshed and the Fallen will be freed." He lifts his index finger. "Just one. I don't care who."

My heart races, but I keep my gaze straight while the deafening silence makes my ears ring.

Ryzan angles his smile toward the cage. “Traheen, look at them. The very people you fight so hard for, and yet none of them is willing to suffer for you.”

Not a twinge from Vaughn.

All right then.

I wait for one breath. Two. “Me. I’ll go in the cage.”

Vaughn’s head jerks up.

Finally.

When Saxton grabs my shoulders to spin me toward him, I hook my eyes onto his.

Trust me. Please, trust me.

As he cups my face, my body suddenly jolts backward, cutting off my breath. I land in front of the First Ascended while a shimmering ward erects, separating me from Saxton and the others.

Vaughn’s bruised voice echoes through the hermetic space. “Zayn, stop her.”

Ryzan leans in, and I pinch my lips to stop my chin from quivering.

“Are you sure, Jade Channings?” His grin slashes across his face as he chin-points at his army. “First, I’ll give you to them, so they can break you. But just enough. Then, what’s left of you I’ll give to your human brothers who call themselves the Pures. You’ll beg to die. Over and over, and maybe, one day I’ll let you.”

There’s no use trying to hide how terrified I am. The Ascended’s smile-grimace widens, and he extends his open hand. “Let’s shake on it.”

I stare at his hand, trying to shut down Saxton’s roar. When I touch his fingers, my insides split apart. Searing pain blinds me. Every cell in my body explodes. My legs cave in and I drop on my knees.

I'm going to die.

He releases me. It stops. I slump on all fours on the hot soil while sweat drenches me. Before I can catch my breath, I find myself suspended upright at eye level with Ryzan.

“This is just a little *mise-en-bouche* of what awaits you.”

On a tiny twitch of his brow, I hit the ground hard.

My throat feels like a wound. I gulp as much air as I can and raise my eyes to his.

I need to get in the cage with Vaughn.

“Let ... let me say goodbye ... to him.” I cough. “Please. I want to say goodbye... Please.”

My ears painfully pop, filled by Vaughn screaming at Zayn to get me out and Saxton’s howl.

The First Ascended’s hand appears in my line of vision, and I clench my teeth. But when my palm touches his, there’s no pain. Once I’m on my feet, surprised my legs still function, I step backward.

“Which one Jade Channings?”

I force myself to look into his eyes. “What?”

Ryzan scrutinizes me. “I’ll let you say goodbye to one of them. The beast or the Traheen.”

Without thinking, I whip my eyes to Saxton. And I shouldn’t have. His legs are braced apart and his fists are clenched by his sides, but it’s his expression that squishes my heart.

I turn toward Ryzan. “Vaughn. I choose Vaughn.”

The First Ascended points his chin at the cage. “Make it a good show, weakling.”

“Screw you.”

His lips pull over his perfect white teeth, and I shudder. Pivoting toward Vaughn, I gasp and look down at my legs. My dagger’s gone. I wheel toward Ryzan, who smiles.

Holding the point of the stiletto, he lifts a brow. “You really thought you could free him with this toy?”

I’m not that stupid. “It was worth a try.”

The devil shakes his head. “You want it back? Here.”

The blade whizzes through the air, aiming for me. Zayn’s hand catches it a second before it touches my cheek, and I let out a shaky breath.

His eyes are on Ryzan. “She steps into the cage, and his promise to you is nulled. Try to hurt her again, and you and I will talk.”

Shielded by Zayn’s wings, I can’t see the Ascended’s response. And I’m fine with that.

“Temptress, go.”

I hurry toward the cage and stop again. Instead of my protective catsuit, I’m wearing a ridiculously short white toga. And nothing else. *What is it with those Firsts and dressing up women?* The heated ground becomes warmer by the second. I race to the cage, which is much farther than I first thought, and as I near it, my heart trembles. *God, he’s so thin.*

As I push its door open, Vaughn’s eyes are downcast. “Love, go home. I don’t want you here. I don’t want any of you here. Go home.”

Stepping into the cage, I kneel before him and wince at the iciness of its floor.

I can’t force him to do this, just give him a reason to want to be free. With gentle hands, I tilt his eyes up to mine. “Vaughn, it’s not how we fight. Why didn’t you talk to us? I love you. We all do.”

His dried lips curl in a cruel expression I’ve never seen before. *What happened to my angel?*

“Jade Channings. Always looking for love in the wrong place.” His mouth twists in a sneer. “You’re more like your dead mother than you think.”

He's trying to hurt me. But I need him to feel, to be the Vaughn I came here for, so I let my tears for him roll down my cheeks.

My guardian angel exhales sharply, and his eyes soften. "Love, I'm—"

Now. I join my lips to his in a tight seal. When he jerks back, I grip his face and press harder. After shutting my eyes, I reach for the angel's speck of crux linking us to each other. *There.* I inhale through my nose, hold the little light wrapped in Zayn's crux, and exhale in his mouth. He rears back, and the tearing sound of his wing prompts my tears, but I tighten my hold.

Inhale, hold, and exhale. I can feel the energy rising through my breath and leaving my body to pour into his.

Five breaths. I need to do this five times for it to work.

As Zayn said, his crux overpowers Vaughn's, who stops fighting.

I'm lightheaded. Inhale. Exhale. Pins and needles numb my feet, my hands. I don't feel the cold anymore. I don't feel anything. I'm floating.

Behind my closed lids, memories flash in scattered images. Tammy's freckles as she tugs my hand to lead me out of the bus. *'Come on, you chicken, you'll love it.'* Bernie's bald head. Flo rolling a scented cigarette.

Inhaling is becoming difficult. My beautiful reading tree. Saxton's first kiss. Exhale. Tilda shaking her head. *'Jade Channings, eat.'* Me seated in the crook of Dex's arm, shrieking as I hold onto his big shoulder while he flexes his arm up and down. *'You could fit in a bag of peanuts.'* Dana's hands on my temples when the nightmares pour into my waking hours. Dana and I giggling so hard in a bar in Barcelona, I fall off the stool, get back up, and stumble into her. Dana's hugs. Vaughn's diamond, smiling gaze. *'Fly with me, love.'*

In ... hale. My arms are heavy. My head too. Exhale into my angel's mouth. Silver eyes. *'Mia bella.'* My lungs hurt. My tears feel cold. In... His wolf racing through the ... woo ... woods... Saxton.

Then, nothingness.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Saxton

“Jade!”

Clawing at my chest, I fold at the waist. She’s dead. My mate’s dead.

That was their fucking plan? Her dying for him?

When Jade’s body slumps on the floor of the cage, the Ascended flies to my mate but Zayn blocks him.

Dana lifts her eyes to mine, and the sheer pain across her pale face reflects mine while Dex is vibrating with rage.

She will never love you the way she loves him.

“The weakling cheated—”

Zayn’s voice echoes in the skyless arena. “The deal was she steps in the cage, he’s free. You thought I’d let you make her suffer? Her life for his.”

The Ascended hisses. “You gave her your crux. As a First, you’re forbidden to share your crux with humans. He leans close. “I’ll enjoy watching you be uncreated.”

The First Fallen smirks. “I didn’t give it to her.”

While the motherfucker who hurt my mate clenches his jaw, I keep my eyes on the cage where Thyonian, freed of his shackles, hunches over the body of my mate and strokes her face.

Ryzan twitches his fingers, bringing forth the master who gasps as she finds herself standing between the winged entities.

Moby growls.

The Ascended keeps his eyes on Zayn. “As soon as he’s out of the cage, take his wings, and I want the body of the human destroyed.”

When the master nods, he turns to Zayn. “Your pitiful army of alphas won’t outmatch my followers.”

“They’re not my army, they’re his.” Zayn chuckles. “And they’re not alone.”

He flicks his index finger, and Weres and Mets brimming with aggression appear behind us. The cavalry’s here.

The Fae princess steps forward. Flowers and vine leaves loop and snake around her arms and fingers. “My trees trap them—”

“I burn them,” Dana whispers.

The succubae twins move beside the princess and speak in the same voice. “The rest will die of heartbreak.”

The cage explodes in a ball of blue fire.

When the fog dissipates, the First Ascended is gone. *The fucking coward won’t dirty his hands.*

Thyonian rises to his feet with my mate’s body in his arms.

My Jade.

He hands her to Zayn with a gentle care that speaks of love. Those people love her and have done so for long time. I need to hold my mate. Renewed anguish punches my throat. I need to hold her one last time.

Thyonian, geared up in leather-like, full-body covering, spreads his wings. He flies to our group and stands like a general about to address his troops. “Thank you all. For Jade, and for me. But this is not your fight, and I’ll keep the ward up until you safely return to your homes.”

A communal grunt erupts from our ranks. People came to fight. To kill.

I step to the magnetic field. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Kaste moves beside me. “We came for you, but also for all the innocents those motherfuckers killed.”

“So, let the killing start,” Ryker says with a smile.

A sword appears in the hand of the man Jade gave her life for. “Very well.”

“Works for me,” Dex hisses before morphing.

Others follow suit. As the ward falls, I race to my mate in Zayn’s arm with her face resting on his chest. I graze her still warm cheek with shaking fingers. “She trusts you.”

No smirk. “She does.”

“And you protect her.”

His nod is a thread of hope. “How do I get her back?”

Hoisting my mate higher, he points his chin at Thyonian. “Don’t let him lose his wings.”

When he disappears, I zero in on Thyonian, who slashes through anyone in his path. I morph and throw myself into the fight. *Their fucking plan better work.*

Trees shoot out of the ground and eviscerate our opponents. I track the sinewy branches gutting the ground to the Fae princess’s fingers. A werecoyote yells before branches gouge his eyes out.

I swerve to avoid a force field on my left. Warded by Dana, one of the twins touches the chest of an unmorphed Were and whispers, “Die for me.”

The woman does. With a smile on her face.

Keeping an eye on the Fallen, I destroy anyone in my way. From my far right, a Met from the other side traces arabesques in the air and produces a flaming sword while another one creates a ward that keeps our side at bay. They’re coming for Thyonian from behind while others keep him busy.

There're too many of them in my way. I won't get to him in time. I morph. "Dana!"

She whips her eyes to me then to Vaughn, assessing the situation in seconds. "Go."

As I morph back, my body propels high over the Mets and Weres Dex and his mother are tearing to pieces.

An enemy Met launches up with the sword high over his head, ready for the strike.

I ram into the fucker's side. We crash on the heated ground where I rip out his carotid.

Thyonian lands beside me and dips his chin.

We lunge back into the battle. I kill as many as I can. I go swift and hard. The quicker the bloodshed ends, the faster I can go back to Jade.

Bodies shatter and burn. People explode. Mets on our side choke the breath out of our enemies, and limbs scatter the ground while the scent of blood permeates the battlefield. The witch sent by the Council teams up with Dana, restraining our enemies while allied Weres claw through them.

Cole and three of our agents in their beast forms tear bodies apart, while Kaste and his pride sever their way through the fuckers. Coming from behind me, an unmorphed Tremayne bounds on the back of a werepanda and launches herself between Moby and the master, both also in their human forms.

Moby drills his gaze on the woman who birthed him. "Vic, get the fuck out of here. It's between me and her."

Coming from Moby's side, Cole morphs and approaches slowly while Tremayne slaps her palm on her teammate's chest. "Rowan, you can't kill your own mother. Your soul will never get rid of the stain."

"Listen to your little girlfriend, boy," the mother says.

Tremayne pivots toward the master with a grin that has the taller woman swallowing hard.

“But she’s not *my* mother.”

Before any of us move, a battle cry slices the air. Ryker lands on the master’s chest. As soon as the master’s back hits the ground, Ryker kneels on her throat while two of her men in their beast form snap their jaws around her ankles, pinning her down spreadeagle. Ryker retrieves a knife from her boot. She shifts and slits the werehyena’s throat, but not enough to kill her.

The petite alpha claws at the master’s face until it’s nothing but a bloody pulp. Then, she methodically rips every limb off the master’s body. Once she’s done, she stands up and spits on the body parts. “That’s for Tati, you fucking cunt.”

Upon her death, the master’s army—what’s left of it—scrambles backward.

We fight harder. Kaste, Cole, and the two witches lead the charge of dozens of our fighters to form a net around our enemies and herd them to the middle of the field. Their Mets are the first to realize they’ve been defeated. They raise their hands in the air while some of their Weres morph into their naked human forms to beg for mercy.

We show none.

I morph back and survey the hundreds of cadavers littering the ground. Wherever we are, it’s going to be hard to conceal so many dead bodies.

A few meters across from where Cole and I stand, Thyonian turns to Dana. “Witch inferno?”

After a quick nod, she closes her eyes while her lips move silently.

The Fallen’s voice echoes around us. “Are our people accounted for?”

After alphas and leaders confirm they are, Thyonian says, “Step away from the bodies.”

We do as he asks while blue and green flames twirl around Dana. It starts at her feet until her whole body becomes the center of a contained whirlpool of flames carrying her in the dead center of the bodies. She opens her eyes, and... *Fuck*. Every dead body turns into a hovering smog at our feet.

It’s as if they never existed.

Cole, standing beside me, whistles low. “Wouldn’t want to piss her off.”

As we all gather in the center of the arena, Thyonian stands before us.

He fists his hand on his chest and bows his head. “My deepest gratitude to all of you.”

May Winchester, flanked by her son and Princess Floralis, steps forward. “What about little Jade? Is she—?”

Thyonian’s expression darkens. “I’ll take care of Jade.”

After a slight bow, he opens his palm. A pinprick of light enlarges until a large circle of light forms. “The portal will take you back to wherever you want to go. Bring your injured to the manor.”

As the groups file out one by one, Cole slaps his hand on my shoulder. “Catch you on the other side.”

Dana and Dex stay behind as Jade’s ex lover faces me.

He extends his arm. “Alpha Cavendish, good to meet you.”

There’s no second guessing like the first Fallen. I’ve just watched him destroy dozens of individuals with his sword and bare hands, but the man Jade loves is inherently decent. I take his arm and lock my eyes to his. “Sax.”

He dips his chin curtly and calls out for Zayn. In a blink, we’re in the back woods of Jade’s house.

Zayn appears with my mate—still dead—in his arms. She’s back into her catsuit and boots, and I don’t even blink when he sets her on air before him.

I reach for her hand. She’s cold. My mate’s skin is cold. “Baby.”

Thyonian gets into Zayn’s face, and when both Fallens spread their wings, the ground tremors. “Infusing her with a speck of your crux was reckless. It could have killed her!”

The winged asshole smirks. “Technically, I loaned it to her, so she could pass it on to you.”

“For fuck’s sake, Zayn—”

Zayn’s eyes turn black, sclera and all, and rolling clouds darken the clearing. “What was reckless was letting Jade go crazy with worry, causing her to put herself in danger to find you. Brother, I told you this would be the fucking price for being the Great Sorcerer, but I wasn’t going to let her get hurt because you kept all of them, in the dark.”

I need my mate back. I step toward the warring Fallens. “Thyonian—”

Dana wedges herself between the arguing angels. “Boys, you both have big wings. Bravo. So, now can we take care of the very person you’re fighting over?”

They glare at each other some more before Zayn shimmers out.

There’s fear in her scent as she turns to Thyonian. “Are you sure this is going to work?”

“It will.”

As Thyonian brushes a lock of hair from Jade’s forehead in a tender gesture, I grit my teeth. She died for him. And although she was truthful when she said she loved me, she rejected the mating.

Standing slightly behind Dana and Dex who flank Thyonian, I brace my feet into the soft ground while the pad of

his thumb parts her lips.

He touches his mouth to hers.

Chapter Thirty

Jade

Warmth unfurls slowly in my chest and radiates through my limbs, my back, and my neck. I take a breath.

Everything comes back at once, and I wake up to Vaughn's crystal gaze.

It worked.

I frame his face and grin. "Hi, angel."

Vaughn scowls as he pulls me on my feet and curls his fingers under my chin. Love—"

"Is everyone okay?"

"Some are injured, and a few will go through the fever." He leans in and his tone hardens. "Love, what you did was incredibly stupid. What on Earth were you—"

Freaking seriously? My fear and worry for him gush in my chest, wrapped tightly in anger, and I roll on my toes. "Vaughn, you left us without a word to sacrifice yourself. To someone we didn't even know existed."

"Zayn—"

I jab my finger in his chest. "It's not Zayn. Zayn helped. It's you. A lie by omission is still a lie." His eyes blacken in anger. Good. So now he knows how I felt. I poke his chest. "So, when the big angel volunteers to be tortured for eternity, it's heroic, but when I do it to save *your* dumb butt, it's incredibly stupid? Is this really how you want to play this?"

His eyes, back to their warm crystal, widen briefly. We've never argued before—but then again, he's never surrendered himself to the devil before.

He nods slowly while his lips twitch. "I understand. What I should have said is thank you?"

My Vaughn's back. I grin. "Yes, it is."

He pecks my head while Dana and Dex hug me tight.

Where's Saxton?

I wheel around, and... Oh God. His expression breaks my heart, and I rush to him.

He plasters me against him while I curl my arms around his neck, and he locks his stormy gaze onto mine. "You fucking died on me." I'm about to reply, but he pulls me in closer, and I lose my breath. "Never fucking make me lose you again, Jade. Never again."

"I promise," I whisper. I open my mouth under his and melt into our kiss.

Then, I close my eyes and breathe him in. *My wolf.*

After another possessive kiss, Saxton tucks me to his side, and I curl my arm around his waist. As we make our way through a clearing, I look around. I've been here before.

"Where are we?"

Dana frowns as she scans our surroundings. "It looks kind of familiar, but for the life of me, I have no idea."

Dex shakes his head, but his tone is amused. "We're at the back of your house."

"Ooh," Dana and I say at the same time before giggling.

God, it feels good to be alive.

Vaughn falls in step beside me, and my angel's eyes soften. "You found each other again."

His inflection holds no judgement. There never is. He just has this infinite curiosity about people. It's one of the things I love the most about him.

"When you disappeared, I went to Saxton's security firm to ask him for help, and he—"

As one, both he and Saxton stop while Dex and Dana, walking ahead of us, freeze. When Saxton pushes me behind him and scours our surroundings, my heartbeat kicks up.

Oh God. What now?

“Bloody demons.”

I pat the side of my leg, reaching for my dagger. *Shoot.* Zayn still has it.

Saxton’s expression is tortured as he cups my face. “Stay behind me.”

I touch his clenched jaw. “You can’t see me if I’m behind you. “Turning to Vaughn, I say, “I need a weapon.”

Vaughn calls a branch into his hand, taps it on the ground, and hands me a perfectly formed staff. “It’ll double as a blade.”

When the first demon appears, the five of us stand back-to-back in a circle. I roll my shoulders back and tighten my fist around the tall staff as the hulking, hunched figures stalk to us.

They have leather-like skin, feet like wide flippers ending with thick claws, and bulged, too long arms with razor-sharp, gleaming extended talons. Bile jets to my throat. They’re the same ones who attacked me fourteen years ago.

A faint, musical swish alerts me of Vaughn spreading his wings as he whispers, “Don’t morph. The ones who fly can poison your beasts.”

Saxton

With my arm hooked under the jaw of one of the fuckers, I dig my claws into the side of his neck, rip its bulbous head off, and smash it under my heel.

In one sweep of his sword, Vaughn beheads two others.

“Dex,” Jade whispers. Using Dex’s open palm as a launching pad, she spins mid-air, and severs two demons’ heads with the staff before hitting the ground. Vaughn takes flight, and seconds later, more bodies fall to our feet. Dex splits them in two, and Dana burns their bodies to ash. More demons appear, and we slash through them.

Wincing at the rotting scent of their body parts, I step back.

“No!”

My mate’s scream frays the clearing, and I leap to her.

She’s crawling backward near a tree while two demons crowd her. The staff lays beside her, easily accessible, but she doesn’t reach for it. Terror takes over her scent, and her face is deadly pale as she throws her palms out.

“No. No. No ... please. No.”

Her eyes are wide and glazed as she raises her palms to the growling fuckers.

In one quick swipe, I destroy them and crouch before her.

She digs her heels into the soft ground as she tries to scramble away.

When I reach for her, she jerks backward, and my chest constricts as the back of her head hits the tree.

I make my voice gentle. “Jade, baby...”

Tears drench her face as she kicks her legs in a panicked attempt to keep me away. She doesn’t see me. She doesn’t hear me.

“Don’t hurt me. Please, don’t hurt me. Don’t... No. No.”

Dana’s worried voice rises. “Vaughn. It’s Jade.”

When Thyonian kneels beside her, her eyes whip to him and her voice breaks. “Vaughn.”

Scraping her hands in her haste to get to him, she wraps her arms and legs around him as if she’s trying to climb inside him.

His voice pitches low while he folds his wings around her shaking body. “I’ve got you, love.”

Her muffled whimpers are breaking me.

“Hurt... hurt me ... h-hurt ... me.”

Thyonian cups the back of her head and stands up. “I won’t let them hurt you. You’re safe. You’re safe, love.”

As Dana and Dex edge close, I push on my knees. The werebear swears between clenched teeth while Dana’s eyes fill with tears.

This has happened before.

I lock my eyes to the Fallen’s. “What happened to her?”

When he doesn’t reply, I turn to Dana, who touches Thyonian’s arm. “Her house isn’t secured, and the manor is full of people. We—”

“Let’s go to my house,” Dex says.

Vaughn nods. “Dana, tap into Zayn’s powers. We need a portal.”

She does, and we step through a ring of light straight into a large living room.

I keep close, hating the helplessness that swallows me at the anguish in my mate’s scent.

Dex crosses his arms. “Vaughn, she needs to sleep.” When the Fallen shakes his head, the werebear sighs. “I know she won’t like it, but she needs oblivion if only for a little while.”

After a quick nod, Thyonian touches his lips to her head. “Sleep.”

Her body goes lax, and I take a breath as her agony stops clogging my nostrils.

I follow them into a sparse bedroom where Thyonian lays her down gently on the bed.

Dana hovers her fingers over her sleeping form to clothe her in comfortable, soft cotton. As she curls her body around hers, sadness and grief flood the room, and I exhale slowly, humbled by the love those people have for each other. For her.

When Dex, Vaughn, and I exit the bedroom, I turn to Thyonian. “What happened to her?”

He shakes his head slowly. “I’m sorry, Sax. But only Jade can tell you the cause of what you’ve witnessed. When she wakes up, you can ask her.”

I pace the wide room while my wolf claws under my skin. She’s been hurt. My mate’s been badly hurt. And he knows. They all know.

“Vaughn, tell him.”

I angle to Dana who pushes her shoulder on the bedroom’s doorjamb as her gaze cuts from me to Thyonian.

“Sax is her true mate.”

The Fallen’s eyes widen in surprise.

“And her emotions are keenly attuned to his. The pain he feels will wake her up and stop her from getting the rest she needs.”

Thyonian looks to Dex settled on the couch who nods, and I could fucking kiss my mate’s friends right now.

The Fallen scrutinizes me for long seconds. “I won’t tell you, but I can show you.”

Relief nearly brings me to my knees before blood rushes to my temples. “You were there?”

“I was.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Saxton

After Dana eases the door of the bedroom closed behind her, Dex steps out of the house, leaving Thyonian and I face-to-face.

He extends his hand toward the leather couch. “Let’s sit.”

Once we’re seated side-by-side, he leans in. “I’m going to take you into my recollection of that day. You’ll feel and see my experience as if you were me, but you’ll remain fully cognizant. For this to work, you must keep your emotions in check.” After I nod, he continues. “Sax, some of what I’m about to show you is difficult and will trigger you. If you lose control, it will taint my own memory, and I will pull you out. Do you have any questions?”

None more important than what happened to my mate.

“I need to know.”

“Very well.” He places his palm on my chest while his other hand clasps mine. “It won’t hurt. Not physically. Ready?”

“Yes.”

A flow of energy spikes through me. It doesn’t last long. When I open my eyes, I’m both in my body and his. His mind is a white, clear space where we stand side by side.

The power he possesses is unfathomable. We’re over, around, and within everything all at once. Seeing the world both in minute details and in its immensity.

His voice is a clear whisper in my mind. “We’re then.”

He knows, so through our symbiosis, I do too. September fifth, fourteen years ago. We’re at the edge of a forest I know like the back of my hand. That morning, we took

the pups and their caretakers to the mountains, and my pack's territory is deserted. *Did the Prestwoods hurt my mate?*

The afternoon sun is bright, but I can't feel its warmth, nor the wind rustling through the tree leaves.

As a young Jade rushes past the small creek, her steps are muted by the soft ground. I roll my shoulders back.

Her face is flushed, and the thin material of her t-shirt flutters over her thumping heartbeat. She stops under the tree where I found her asleep. Her head whips around before she paces the small, sheltered area while her fingers clench around the worn straps of her backpack. She gulps in big breaths, clutches her cell in her fist, and bites her bottom lip. She's waiting for me. Her ponytail swings as she paces again.

Bree's approaching. My sister inhales, and her lips pinch as she nears Jade.

A twig crackles and Jade spins around. "Saxton..."

When she sees Bree, she pales and exhales a trembling breath. "Where's Saxton?"

Bree tosses a white bag at Jade's feet, who jumps back. "Sax asked me to give you this."

The sheer contempt in her voice makes me clench my fists.

No emotions. So, I force my fingers to relax.

Jade steps closer. "Where's Saxton? I really need to talk to *him*."

"You're talking to me now. And let me be really clear. Sax asked me to come here because he has more important things to do than deal with the little fantasy you built in your head."

I fucking didn't, but it's almost word for word what I said the day I broke her heart.

Jade's chin trembles as she tries to hide the hurt visible a mile away. "Who ... who are you?"

When Bree grabs her arm, Jade flinches in pain, and I can't help the growl erupting from my chest, but before Thyonian reacts, I get myself under control.

"I'm Breanne. Sax wants nothing to do with you, and I suggest you leave my fiancé alone."

My mate shakes her head. "I don't want... Saxton, I just need him to know—"

"He knows."

My heartbeat speeds up.

Knows what?

Thyonian's voice filters through my mind. "Keep your emotions in check."

Pain dampens Jade's voice. "H-how?"

"You people are so damn predictable. We know everything that happens in that shitty pit of a town."

My sister points her chin at the bag. "Use this. Buy yourself a new life. Do whatever the hell you want as long as you crawl back under the rock you came from."

When did Bree become such a condescending asshole?

She inches closer, and Jade steps back. She's terrorizing my mate. "I'm not the patient type, Jade Channings. If I catch you sniffing around Sax, you won't like what I'll do to you. Do you understand?"

Unshed tears fill Jade's eyes as she nods, and my chest tightens. She's so young. A tender-hearted woman who doesn't deserve the way Roselyn's daughter is treating her.

"Good. Now, get the fuck off my property. And, girl, take a damn shower. You reek."

Bree. Fuck.

Thyonian's voice snaps in my mind. "Control."

I keep a leash on my anger as Bree strides away.

Jade kneels by the bag and unzips it with trembling fingers. Her small hand flies to her mouth before she digs into the bag in frenzied movements. She tilts the bag upside down, and packed bills spill on the ground. When she sweeps her hand around the emptied satchel, I realize she's looking for something that would explain why I'm not here.

She didn't ask for the money.

Her arms drop by her side as she sits back on her haunches, and her soft sob rips right through me. After tucking stray strands of her hair behind her ear, she stands up slowly and wipes her tears.

My mate touches her stomach, and what she says next hacks me off at the knees.

"It's you and me, my love. We don't need him. I'm going to love you for the both of us. For the whole universe. We'll be fine. I promise."

She's pregnant. She's carrying my pup. How...? *I'm right here, baby.* I dive for her, but my body turns to stone.

Thyonian's voice drums. "Sax. Control."

Shards of pain splinter my chest, and I fold at the waist. *Jade was carrying—*

"Let's pull you out."

When a thread of energy lassoes me away from him, I jerk up straight. "No. Please."

The Fallen narrows his eyes. "Watch. You wanted to know, so watch."

Bree's out of sight, but demons are creeping toward Jade, three mangled motherfuckers who slobber as they're surrounding her.

"Lookie lookie here," one of the fuckers hisses.

"It's going to piss itself."

"I like it when they piss themselves."

Terror takes over her damp face, and she runs. She's fast. Faster than a human could be. Because our unborn pup is lending her its strength and speed.

Two demons block her path. She sprints in the opposite direction and screeches to a halt as another one appears before her. They corral her back into the woods. She trips and falls but gets back up and runs.

One of the sinewy motherfuckers slashes his talons across her back, cutting through her flesh and one strap of her backpack. And yet she still runs. Deep into the woods. Toward the cabin. My pup's guiding her to me.

"It's strong," one of them hisses.

Its claws slit the back of her thighs. She screams and hits the ground face first. The demon grabs the back of her neck and hurls her against a tree. Her body slams into the large trunk, and I clench my jaw at the sickening crunch of her bones breaking. When she rolls onto her back, her shoulder bends at the wrong angle, and blood drips from the cut on her forehead.

Holding her broken arm against her chest, she drags herself backward. One of the monsters skews close, and she stammers. "There's money... a lot of money... over there. You... can... can have it all."

The things crowd her while her unbroken arm wraps around her belly.

"Please... Please."

"We'll take the money, and we will hurt you."

Another one snarls. "Yes, that we will. We'll do it good."

Her voice is weak as she pleads. "I'm pregnant. Please ... don't hurt my b-baby."

A tooth-grinding sound rises in the air. The fuckers are laughing. "But that's why we're here, human. For the abomination you're carrying, and it's going to hurt."

She kicks and rolls away, but one of the fuckers stomps on her knee. He digs his talons in and fists his hand inside her stomach, crushing the fetus while she screams.

My soul shreds, and I can taste blood in my mouth. My mate...

Unadulterated rage blasts through me. Overwhelming in its violence, and I realize it's not only mine, but also Thyonian's. Agony throttles his entire being. He's as close to what dying must feel like. When it stops, all his senses come alive at once and assault his mind. My feet—his—touch the ground, and the sensation is jarring. The demonic beings scatter away. As he takes a deep inhale, his lungs ignite scorching his insides.

Then, I—he can smell the acrid scent of the iron of her blood. Hear her dying pants as I—he—crouches beside her.

Blood drips out of her mouth as she turns her gaze to mine—his.

“Ang-gel... My...b-baby...my...”

“Is no more, little one.”

Tears track through the blood and dirt smearing her face. “Did... he... s-suffer?”

“He did not.”

Our pup was a boy.

On another gurgling exhale, she groans, a strangled sound because her lungs can't take in enough air. She wheezes. “I ... I w-would ... have ... l-loved him ... more than any ... anything in the w-world.”

I can't tell my own grief from the primordial rage that tears through Vaughn. “You will not go yonder.”

Jade opens her dimming gaze. “It's ok-kay ... with him.”

She's ready to die. To be with our pup. Jade exhales her last breath, and another surge of fury spikes through me—him.

“No,” he whispers. He touches his lips to hers, surprised at their softness and warmth, and breathes energy, a speck of his crux into her. He—I—inhales sharply as she takes a breath.

Jade winces under the pain of her bones resetting while her body knits itself back together. She opens her eyes. “Am I dead?”

Thyonian’s voice is soothing. “No, you’re very much alive.” He hovers his palm over her chest. “I’ll erase the pain and the memory of your suffering.”

Her breath hitches, and she slaps her palm on her lower belly. “I don’t want to forget.”

Confusion fills his mind, and he stares in her eyes. “Why keep your pain?”

Tears roll down her temples, causing a tightness in his chest that makes him flinch.

“If I forget, who will love him? Let me carry him in my body ... just a little piece of him ... so he’ll know he was loved.” She shakes her head, and her voice breaks. “Please, don’t make me forget him.”

With light fingertips, he carves a shooting star into her skin above her right hip. She’s healed. Her clothes are restored.

As he stands up, unaware of his strength, he pulls her to her feet a little too hard, and she stumbles onto him.

“My apologies. I am not familiar with ... touch. Are you well?”

Jade nods. “What are you?”

An emotion he can’t explain makes him shiver. “I am... I was Traheen ... tasked to help you through to the next plane of existence.” He rakes his hand in his hair and watches his palm, confused by the sensation. “Now, I’m just fallen.”

Her eyes grow huge. “Angels can fall from Heaven?”

Knowledge, vast and intense, floods his mind and he shakes his head. He knows. Everything. “Heaven is a human construct. Where and when I’m from is a lot more complex and arduous to explain.”

Jade gapes at him. “Oh...”

The small human has beautiful eyes, wide. The color between fudge and gold with a touch of moss green. And full of emotions that lighten or darken them.

After a deep breath, she extends her hand. “My name’s Jade. Jade Channings. Thank you for ... thank you.”

The touch of her skin sizzles through his body, and he stares at their hands.

Such a light touch triggering so much.

Sunlight kisses her skin as she blinks slowly. “What’s your name?”

Names. People have names here. Mine comes easily. “My name’s Vaughn Thyonian. Did you know your name means little wolf?”

He doesn’t quite understand what her expression means, just that he doesn’t like it. But I know my Jade, it’s pain.

She tilts her head to the side. *Her curly, long hair looks soft.* Pure fascination fills me—him—with a thrilling emotion.

As she lifts her backpack, something shiny falls out of it. She picks up the bangle I gave her for her birthday, and tears drench her face.

He points at the bangle. “Is this...” *There’s a word for that.* “Is this valuable?”

Jade shakes her bent head and lets the bracelet fall at their feet. “No.”

He nods. “I will take you back to your home.”

More pain fills her gaze. “This isn’t my home. Not anymore.” She clears her throat and straightens her back.

“What about you, Vaughn? Do you have anywhere to go?”

Not knowing creates a kind of haze in the processing part of his mind. “I know the first of us. He’s in the frozen lands.”

Her brows knit. “The frozen lands?”

The odd feeling fills me—him—again. “Yes. He said to find him in the land of ice.”

Jade blinks a couple of times. “Do you mean ... like ... Iceland?”

Another strange feeling. This one is full of ... lightness. Relief? “Yes, Iceland.”

When she smiles, warmth fills my—his—chest. *She is a true beauty. Her touch on my arm is delicate.*

As the essence of the Fallen solidifies in osmosis with this new world, my mind mutes, like a mental step back as I watch him fall for my Jade.

“I can show you where it is on a map.”

Looking into Jade Channings’ eyes, contentment blooms inside me. “I know where it is. Will you come with me? To Iceland?”

After a few seconds of silence, she nods, and another pleasant feeling flows through me.

Her brows lower and I’m not fond of that expression. “But I don’t have a passport.”

“Passport?” When the meaning of the word clicks, I shake my head. “You’ll have no need for it.”

She lets out a tiny breath. Different from the one before but just as enthralling. “How are we going to get there?”

I point my finger to the sky and spread my wings.

She sucks in a breath, and I listen. So many nuances of just... breath. Her golden eyes sprinkled with emerald get wide.

“Oh.” She clears her throat. “In the sky? It’s too cold up there, and there’s no oxygen.”

“You will not get cold, and you will breathe. My wings will protect you.”

Jade Channings smiles, and I stare.

“Are you scared?”

Her smile is ... just is. “I don’t know.”

When I open my palm, she wraps her fingers around mine, and I’m pleased by the sensation. She loops her arms around me, and a shiver courses through me. I like this feeling.

Her body is fragile, so I’m careful as I pull her close. The beats of her heart thumping against my chest are like a song. The song of her.

As I take flight, she gasps, and her arms tighten around my waist.

Thyonian’s mind goes blank. A wrenching occurs, and it’s as if my whole body has been slapped down. We’re back in Dex’s house. I push on my knees, but they fail me, and I drop back on the couch. I hang my head low between my knees. She was pregnant. I left her while she was expecting my pup, and when she came to tell me, Bree... Those things ripped our pup out of her.

Thyonian touches my shoulder.

“Are you all right?”

“You fell for her.”

He dips his chin. “I did.”

“Because you love her.”

“Only love is worth falling for.”

An angel fell for her. Gave up everything to be with her. Without him, I would have lost them both. I...

I stand up and drive my fists in my pockets. Jade deserves the pure love Thyonian has for her.

“Saxton?”

Jade steps out of the bedroom followed by Dana, and watches me with worry in her eyes, concern for my wellbeing. *My fucking wellbeing while she...* The pain I’ve been squashing explodes and burns through me like acid.

She edges closer while her frowning gaze sweeps from Thyonian to me. “What’s wrong?”

My mate, my unborn pup. What I lost. What we lost.

On wooden legs, I stagger to her and fall on my knees. Pushing my face into her belly, I wrap my arms around her waist.

“Mia bella, I’m so fucking sorry.”

Her body curls around me as she holds me against her and strokes my hair, comforting me.

But it’s comfort I don’t deserve.

I get on my feet and frame her face. “The baby...” I clench my teeth while her eyes fill with tears and pain overtakes her scent. “Our unborn pup... Jade. My beautiful, I’m going to make it right.”

She curls her arms around my shoulders. “Saxton, stay. Stay with me. We’ll talk.”

I can’t. Too much rage. Too much pain.

My wolf howls, echoing the scream boiling in my chest.

“I’m going to make things right, mia bella.”

PART FOUR

Chapter Thirty-Two

Jade

When Saxton slams the front door behind him, I turn to Vaughn. “How does he know?”

“I took him in my memories of the day I fell.”

Oh.

Vaughn cups my cheek, and his expression is troubled. “Was I wrong to do so? If I—”

I touch his chest. “No. No, but I need to talk to him.”

Dex walks in. “He morphed. He’s gone, Peanut.”

Rushing past them, I race to the backyard. “Saxton!”

The sun is setting down as I sprint toward the woods.

“Saxton, come back!” As I get past the first trees, my heart races and I stop. “Saxton. Please.” I peer through the dense forest. I can’t do this. Not today. “I can’t ... go in. Please, come back.”

I wrap my arms around myself and wait for long minutes. As I start toward the house, a faint crackling sound makes me spin around. Saxton’s wolf stalks slowly to me. I loop my arms around his neck and burrow my face in his fur.

The deep grunt coming from his body breaks my heart. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Holding onto him, I whisper, “Come back to the house with me.”

He steps back. His big muzzle nudges my belly, he licks my neck, and sprints to the woods.

Back at the house, Dex is waiting by the door. “He just needs to run.”

I loop my arm around his waist, and we enter the house. Vaughn still has the same expression, so I go to him and place

both my hands on his chest.

“Angel, I love you and I trust you.” As he smiles, I add, “But you didn’t tell us about Ryzan, and I’m going to need you to explain what you were thinking.”

“Oh, hell yes,” Dana says while Dex grunts.

Vaughn sits back against the sofa, and I settle beside him while Dana and Dex sit on the coffee table across from us. After he fills in the gaps about the Traheens, Shalens, and the Ouranos, I turn to him, but Dana beats me to it.

“Why didn’t you tell us all of this before?”

Vaughn’s gaze hardens. “I hoped you’d never need to know. Ryzan and Zayn cannot be in the same place, not in front of non-Fallen, but in typical Ouranos fashion, they don’t play by the rules. None of this should have happened. Never. Never.” He shakes his head. “But Zayn was right. The minute I unveiled myself, I should have disclosed Ryzan’s existence. He’s desperate and that’s why he’s been gathering anyone possessing magic.”

Dana’s tone is cutting. “You mean the ones we destroyed today?”

Dex’s voice is barely above a growl. “Why show himself now?”

Vaughn sighs. “Three of us have recently fallen.” Anticipating our questions, he explains.

“When we fall, we can go to him or to Zayn, and my brothers have chosen Zayn. By offering myself to him, I gave him what he’s yearned for, while protecting all of you.”

Evil is what evil does, but I ask anyway. “You gave him what he wanted, so, why did he torture you?”

His eyes flash black. “Because he demanded I proved my allegiance to him by taking back my crux from you.”

I swallow hard. “Why would Ryzan want me dead?”

“He doesn’t. Not really. But corrupting our bond would have tainted my soul forever.”

My back hits the couch cushion. “He really is the devil.” When he’s about to reply, I straighten up and sigh. “I know I’m simplifying it, but he’s the closest thing to the devil I can think of.”

“Where’s Ryzan? That bloody ballsack just disappeared.”

Vaughn sighs. “Probably recruiting damaged souls who’ll kill for him again. Ouranos are pure egos, so he won’t take what happened today well, but it’s Zayn’s purpose to keep him in check.”

Dana leans in. “Do you know how much it hurt to think you might have been ended?”

Vaughn’s lips press in a thin line and his eyes darken. “I was wrong. I am sorry.”

“Is there anything else we should know?” Dex asks.

When Vaughn shakes his head, Dex leans in. “Don’t do that shit again.”

“I won’t. You have my word.”

We’re all together again. Only Tilda’s missing.

As if she heard us, she calls Dex’s cell who puts her on speaker.

We can hear the smile in her mellifluous voice. “No family hug without me. Did you tell the great sorcerer how idiotic and selfish his decision was?”

Ouch. Tilda using that trumped up title is all we need to know how furious—Fae-style—she truly is.

Vaughn groans while we reply all at once.

“Yes.”

“Yep.”

“We bloody did.”

After a happy chuckle, Tilda's tone sobers. "We have a few people in need of healing here. Corina needs—"

Vaughn and Dana stand up. "Dana and I will be there in a minute."

After we exchange quick hugs, they fly to the manor.

Hours later, seated on the top step of Dex's back deck, I rub my arms against the chill of the breeze. Eric arrived a couple of hours ago for their date night, and Dex, being his awesome self, insisted I stayed while his gorgeous boyfriend nodded. It was selfish of me, but I didn't want to go back to the manor, or be alone, so I stayed.

When the door opens behind me, I jump.

"Peanut, come inside. I'll sense him if he comes back."

Eric's curly head slides between his boyfriend and the doorjamb. "No man deserves the cold you're going to catch."

"He's her true mate," Dex says.

Eric's eyes grow round. "Oh shit. That's real?" He clears his throat. "Your mate wouldn't want you to get sick."

I don't know what Saxton wants. All I know is how hurt he was before he ran out.

"I'm okay. Just five more minutes."

As he closes the door, I return my eyes to the dark woods. I just need a few more minutes of hope that he'll come back and talk about what we lost. It's getting cold. Tautening my fingers around my cell, I push on my knees ... and stop. A shape detaches from the dark mouth of the forest and stalks toward me. My heart jumps in my throat, and I leap to the door which opens on Dex.

"It's—" He peers over my shoulder. "Nice job, Cavendish. Scaring her like that after what happened today."

A long growl comes out of his wolf while Dex's own growl vibrates behind me. "Are you okay, Peanut?"

"I'm fine."

As Dex enters the house, his voice booms. "Babe, we're going to your place."

Saxton.

His head is hanging low.

I rush to him and throw my arms around his neck. "You came back."

When he steps back, my chest tightens, but he morphs, and the man standing before me is hurting. So much.

"Come inside." I wrap my arms around his waist and lock my eyes onto his tormented gaze. "Saxton, come inside with me." His expression brings tears to my eyes, so I place a soft kiss on his mouth. "Come inside with me."

Once we're cocooned in the warmth of the house, I sit in the corner of the couch and tug on his hand until he settles beside me. "Come here."

Curling my arms around his neck, I cradle his face in the crook of my shoulder and lie down on a thick cushion. He wraps his big arms tight around me. His chest hiccups, and I bury my lips in his hair as his first tears hit my skin.

My poor, beautiful wolf.

I stroke the back of his neck and kiss his hair while his sobs jar my body. We stay like this until his hold slackens a little. When his breathing evens out, I shift under him, and he lifts his frowning gaze to mine.

"Fuck. Baby, I'm crushing you." Without loosening his hold, he moves us to our sides, so we're breath to breath. "I ... I didn't know." He chokes on his words. "I didn't know."

I touch my mouth to his forehead. "I know."

Pressing a little closer, I take a deep breath.

“When I found out I was pregnant, I was terrified because my life was going to turn out exactly like Sylvia’s, and my worst nightmare was coming true. But the second I could think straight and breathe again, I fell in love with him.”

I smooth his furrowed brow with the tip of my index finger. “And I wanted you to be in his life because even though you were done with me...” When his lips move, I silence him with mine.

“This is what I thought at the time.” He pulls me impossibly closer, and I hook my leg over his hip. “Even though you didn’t want me, I knew in my heart that you would be here for our child.” Deep breath. “But then Breanne said that you knew and that you sent money—”

Tension hardens his voice and his body. “She lied. I’d never—”

I touch my thumb to his lips. “I know. When you asked why Vaughn and I didn’t have children, I knew.” I rub my nose to his and breathe him in. “Losing ... losing our baby that way was...” I clear my throat. “But I’ve had fourteen years to grieve for him.” I peck his pinched mouth and graze my fingers on his clenched jaw. “But for you, it just happened today, and I know you’re in pain, so I’m glad I can be here for you.”

His lips touch mine, and I close my eyes. I need his gentleness and his strength. I need him to hold my sadness in a way no one else can, and I need to hold his. We kiss slow, sharing our pain and comforting each other.

The kiss ends, and Saxton tucks me to his side where I burrow deep.

When I wake up the next day, I reach for Saxton and sigh. His side of the bed is cold, which means he’s been gone for a while. After he carried me to Dex’s guest bedroom, we laid in each other’s arms until we fell asleep. I exhale a slow breath. Where do we go from here? He’s still the alpha of the

intolerant Cavendish pack, and I'm still very human. At least now, we both know the truth. And this will have to be enough.

I jump at the knock on the door.

“Peanut. Lunch.”

Lunch? I snatch my cell from the bedside table and hop out of bed. After a quick shower, I spend a whole ten minutes making the huge bed before stepping out of the room. In the kitchen, Eric and Dex are seated side by side at the table.

“Did you sleep well?” They ask at the same time before saying, “Jinx.” And then they kiss.

Chuckling, I pull my chair out. “I did, thank you. What about you two?”

An adorable blush colors Dex's grinning face as he pours me a glass of juice while Eric winks at me.

I can't help but smile as I reach for my glass. “Thank you for letting us crash your date.”

Eric places a huge triple hamburger on my plate. After the first mouthful, I hum. “Eric, this is amazing, and just what I needed. Dex says you're a talented landscape artist. What are you working on at the moment?”

His face flushes as he peeks at Dex. “Not much. I've just started my own business, and I'm still building my portfolio.” His brows knit. “Why?”

I swallow another bite of the juicy burger. “Our chief gardener just had her second baby, and Tilda's been looking for someone to replace her. So, if you're interested...” I pinch a couple of fries.

When Eric gapes at me, I glance at Dex and clear my throat.

“Sorry. Did I overstep?”

Eric keeps staring at me. “No, it's just ... the manor's gardens have their own Instagram page, so...” He shakes his

head. “No one has ever offered me such an incredible opportunity based on my ... on someone else’s word.”

My throat tightens. Right there, in the stiffness of his back, the tightness of his jaw, and the vulnerability in his eyes, I recognize the dread of not being good enough that plagued me most of my life.

Dex catches his hand on the table. “Babe, Jade doesn’t care. We don’t care who or what you’ve been told you are. Your work is fucking great, and I believe in you.”

Hiding behind my glass, I smile. “I don’t know about incredible opportunity. There’re a lot of grounds, which means a lot of work, but if you want it, the job is yours.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Saxton

I bang my fist on Cole's front door.

Where the fuck is he?

He yanks the door open. "Wolfie, it's fucking four in—"

One look at my expression, and he pulls the door wider. I march into the house, just as a naked woman steps out of the bedroom.

She smiles before turning toward Cole. "You should have told me you invited a friend. I would have brought more toys or a girlfriend."

My friend pecks her head. "Doll, it's an emergency. I'll call you later."

After some coquettish pouting, she leaves.

As he walks back to the room, I stop pacing while rage shreds me.

"Jade..." *My beautiful mate.* "She fucking died."

"What happened? Thyonian said—"

"Not yesterday. Fourteen years ago. She was attacked fourteen years ago. And died."

After we settle on the couch, I tell him about my trip into the Fallen's memory, our pup, the angel's speck of crux Thyonian breathed into her, and Bree.

Cole shakes his head. "You think Breanne called the demons?"

If she has, she'll die by my hands. "I'll ask." *The asshole First Fallen was right. I don't ask the right questions.*

My partner clamps his hand on my shoulder. "Fuck, Sax. I don't know what to say."

There's nothing to say.

Fury churns inside me. “When she told me she wouldn’t feel safe with my pack, I got angry, Cole. I got fucking angry.”

“And Thyonian fell for her?”

“Yeah.”

He swears. “You think he’s going to fight for her?”

I shake my head. “He won’t need to. If you were her, who would you choose? Someone who kicked you out of his life for a pack who tried to kill you and your baby, or someone who chose to abandon everything he knew to be with you?”

His expression says it all.

“Cole, there’s no competition.”

My friend sighs. “Sax, I saw how she is with you, and even before you knew she was your true mate, you were obsessed with her. Hermano, she’s still your mate.”

Why doesn’t he understand? “Cole, I’ve let her down. I’ve let them both down. She doesn’t believe in fate, and she’s happy with her people. I can’t ask her to be part of a pack who’s done nothing but hurt her.”

Cole strides to the kitchen and comes back with a beer he pushes in my hand. “Will you give up your pack for her?”

Jade said I was my pack. I’m not. Not a pack who kills pups. “Yes.”

My friend sits across from me. “Tell me what you need.”

Her. “I need to make things right.”

“Need help?”

“It’s my pack, I’ll deal with them.”

Leaning against the far wall of the long assembly hall of the mansion, I drive my fists in my pockets. My pack fills the room, and I don’t need their scent—their worried looks speak plenty. Soon, the room is full of at least a couple hundred people. Through the wide bay windows leading to a vast

backyard furnished with picnic tables, customized stone pizza ovens, and Were-size barbecue grills, more of my pack awaits.

The last time I called on a meeting of this magnitude was to announce the impending war with the Prestwoods. My father and his mate arrived last night. I don't know who I can trust, so no one, not even Harris, knows what I'm about to say.

Every time I think about my mate and unborn pup, I want to claw Breanne's throat out, regardless of the repercussions on her mate and three young pups. But first, I want to understand why my sister would betray me that way.

My father, flanked by Roselyn and Carson, is on my right while Bree and Ris are on my left.

Facing them, I push from the wall and wave Bree forward. The tap of her heels bounces off the high ceiling as she steps before me and flicks her expensive haircut over her shoulder.

The rage I've been holding filters through. "I asked you what happened with Jade Channings fourteen years ago, and you lied to me."

At the mention of her name, a communal hubbub swells in the room. Bree frowns. "I didn't. She came here and demanded—"

"She didn't demand shit. She wanted to see me, and you threw a bag of money at her she didn't take. But I'm not talking about money. I'm talking about the fact that she was carrying my pup."

While I register my pack's gasp, surprise colors her face before she rolls her eyes. "Sax, come on. Now you know she's lying. For her to be pregnant without you claiming her, she would have to be—"

I step toward her as Ris edges closer to his mate. "She would have to be what?"

Her breathing quickens. "Sax, she's not. She's human. She can't ... she can't be your true mate. She—"

“You told her to take a shower because she reeked—”

Her eyes widen. “How ... how do you know that?”

“What did you smell on her, Bree?”

Doubt darkens her expression while her eyes dart toward my father. “I smelled you on her, but I thought...”

“I don’t care what you thought.”

Her eyes whip to her mother. “She was pregnant?”

Roselyn pinches her lips, and Bree slants back to me. “Sax, I didn’t know she was carrying your pup. Mom told me a human girl you f—you had sex with came to the house, and that I needed to protect us.”

Truth. I turn to my father’s mate. “But you knew. She came to see you, and you knew right away.”

Roselyn swaggers to stand beside her daughter. “Whatever that skanky piece of trash was carrying was, at best, a washed down mutt who—”

My hand fists around her throat. “You’re talking about my unborn pup.”

When I release her, Roselyn rubs her throat and looks to my father, who crosses his arms on his chest. She spins toward her daughter. “You. Can’t you do anything right? After everything I’ve done for you? All you had to do was fuck him. He was already attached to you, but no.” Whipping her hateful gaze to Harris, she snarls. “You had to mate the beta.”

Ris pushes past his mate and leans in Roselyn’s face. “If I see you anywhere near my pups or my mate, I’ll kill you.”

Get in line.

My wolf growls, ready to kill as Bree steps between us. “Mom?”

My father edges near his mate. “Rose, what did you do?”

“Sam, this pack means everything to me, you know that.” She curls her long fingers around my father’s nape. “I did what I had to do for us, for the pack, so we could stay strong. Did you really want a human to breed the next Cavendish alpha?”

Agony erupts in my chest while Samwell snarls. “What did you do to her?”

Roselyn’s eyes narrow into slits. “I wanted the abomination she was carrying to be gone. I wanted that piece of trash to disappear, so I did what needed to be done. But the demons failed, and once she started fucking the Great Sorcerer, they wouldn’t touch her.”

Abomination. Same word the demons used.

My father’s head jerks back. “Demons? Rose, what—?”

I grab her throat and lift her up until her feet dangle.

“Why the fucking charade of sending Bree to meet her? How did you contact them?”

Her face turns purple. I tighten my fist until her eyes bulge out. She wheezes. Like my mate did after they ripped her open. I squeeze harder.

My father’s hand clamps on my shoulder. “Sax. She can’t talk if she can’t breathe.”

I unclench my fist, and she stumbles on the hard floor.

Once she’s on her feet, her eyes dart toward the bay windows. When she realizes our enforcers block all the exits, she turns to my father. “Sam—”

“Your alpha asked you a question.”

The fucking snake in my pack locks her eyes to mine. “Bree was there to make sure the human stayed put.”

“Who did you contact?”

Her nose bleeds under the force of my voice. “I don’t know who he is. I sent money, a name, and he took care of it.”

My father's wolf growls. "Did you order my progeny to be killed?" His fists clench. "Sarah's progeny?"

Contempt curls her upper lip. "Sarah's dead." She spins to face the pack. "I've been leading this pack for longer than your Luna's entire lifetime." Inching closer to my father, she hisses. "Your true mate trusted humans and anyone too stupid to—"

When Carson gets in her face, fear she can't hide floods Roselyn's scent.

"That's how you did it. You used demons to kill my brother's pack. His mate. Your own mate. One hundred and four wolves." His rage becomes palpable. "Pups."

The sociopath my father mated rolls her shoulders back. "Grant befriended humans, let them inside the pack. He had to ___"

She dies now. I unleash my claws.

Carson's talons reach her first.

The last expression Roselyn's face is one of confusion as her head rolls off her shoulders and thumps on the floor, seconds before the rest of her body follows.

"Mom!"

My traitorous sister falls to her knees next to the decapitated body of her mother while the pool of blood stains the edge of her dress. The woman is dead, but it brings me no relief, no peace. I still want blood for what was taken for me. My mate. My pup. My only chance at true happiness.

I grit my back teeth. "Ris, take your mate out of here. I'll deal with her tomorrow."

While Harris carries his sobbing mate out of the hall, Samwell turns to me.

It's not the alpha talking to me, it's not quite my father either. "Let's run."

My wolf's scratching under my skin. I look at the crowd.
"Go home."

As my pack files out of the room, I shift toward my father. "Let's go."

We race through the forest, and I push my wolf hard, not as a competition—I'm faster and stronger than the ex-alpha—but because all I can see is Jade's broken, bleeding body on the ground begging for their lives. I run faster, but I can't turn off the vision of her fighting to save our unborn pup. Dying for it.

'The way he treated you was beyond cruel,' Dana said. For years, my mate, *my* gift from the universe thought I wanted to get rid of her and our pup. Howling in rage, I tear through the woods.

We run all night, and by the time we reach the cabin farthest away from the mansion, the sun has started its ascent.

Once there, we morph back, and as Samwell grabs a change of clothes, he does a quick scan of my clothed body.

"Magic," I say.

When we enter the large main room, I go straight to the fridge from which I grab a bottle of water and toss one at my father before sitting across from him on the couch.

"How long have you suspected Roselyn of ordering the hit on her pack?"

He clenches his jaw. "Before I mated her, Carson was suspicious, so he searched for evidence she was involved, but nothing came up. The Forresters' pack was pretty secretive, so when we talked to the two neighboring packs, they hadn't heard of what happened. When I asked her, she said she didn't know, and that was the truth. I realized now, she made sure she had plausible deniability."

"Why would you mate someone you once thought might have killed her own?"

Samwell shakes his head and his sharp exhale hovers between us.

“She was easy on the eye, ambitious, and she had a kid she obviously loved.” My father exhales slowly. “She took care of me, never asked for more than I could give, and cared about the betterment of the pack I was too broken to lead properly.”

For the first time, I see the shadows lurking in his eyes, the void which has been there since his true mate was taken from him. When my mother died, he didn't morph into his human form for months. And when he did, his eyes were empty. She took his soul with her.

His beta killed his mate before his eyes, and the only emotion in his scent is a vague sadness.

He locks his eyes to mine. “She deserved to die for what she did to your mate and to her pack.”

I clench my fists. “You've taught me humans were the enemy.”

My father nods slowly. “Yes, and at the time, it was the right thing to do. I had to protect the pack, and I don't regret my decision to keep us away from them. But the world was changing. I forced the dominance fight because I wasn't the right alpha to lead us into the future. And when you set up Cavendish Security, I knew I made the right decision. You saw beyond the pack while protecting it, expanded our reach into the changing world, and you've gone further than I ever would have been able to. Witches and Mets have a place in society. It's not perfect, but it gives me hope that someday we'll be able to unveil ourselves, and I'm proud we contributed to this through you.”

Getting on my feet, I put the room between us to stand by the fridge. My chest gets tight. None of this protected my mate nor my unborn pup.

“Why didn't I sense Jade was mine?”

He lifts his piercing eyes to mine and sets his bottle on the coffee table.

“From the moment I threw the dominance challenge, you started transitioning to alpha. Your wolf and you had to disconnect for him to grow into his full powers, which dimmed the instincts of the man. He recognized his mate and claimed her.”

But I knew she loved me.

I lurch to the bay window. “They fucking clawed the pup out of her.”

The next second, he’s beside me. “Does she blame you for what happened?”

She doesn’t. She told me she loved me. Held me while my soul shattered from the pain I didn’t protect her from.

“If she wants me, I’ll choose her and leave the pack.”

“Did she ask you to?”

“She’s all that matters.”

“Isn’t she erousiaed to the sorcerer?”

I swipe my hand over my face. “It’s complicated.” *Fuck. Now I sound like a confused pup.*

My father shifts to face me, so we’re eye to eye. I grit my teeth. Nothing he’s about to say will change my mind.

When his hand clamps around the back of my neck, I tense. “I would give anything for one more day with your mother. Sax, Jade’s yours in a way no one will ever be, so do whatever you must to be with her.”

I don’t know what to say. This is the closest I’ve ever felt to my father. I clear my throat. “She makes me... I—” *Fuck.*

“She nuked your world but makes you feel grounded in the chaos as long as you’re with her?”

Something like that.

He chuckles. “What you feel now, this burning need for her, the constant pull will sharpen until not being with her

gnaws at your guts and drives you fucking insane. And it'll take a few decades for it to become bearable. You'll make a lot of mistakes, real stupid shit, so she can breathe the same air as you. But she has her own things going on, and because she's your match, she won't let you coddle her, so be ready to apologize. A lot."

If I get to have my Jade, I'll get on my knees every fucking day.

"So, what are you going to do about the sorcerer?"

"Nothing, he's a Fallen, and she's alive because he gave her a speck of his crux."

My father gawks for long seconds. "He what?"

As daylight snakes through the bay windows, we settle back on the couch. It's going to be a long day.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Jade

Seated at the dinner table between Vaughn and Dana, I chuckle with Ryne, the Fae emissary of Brazil and Sonia, her human spouse. We're in one of my favorite restaurants in Lisbon where we've been invited by the lovely couple who wants to create a festival in the same vein as UnityFest.

As Vaughn explains what we do, I excuse myself to go to the bathroom. Once there, I check my cell and sigh. It's been three days since I last talked to Saxton. I set my cell face up beside the sink to wash my hands, and as I reach for a towelette, my phone vibrates with an unknown number.

I'm not exactly hard to find, but very few people have my cell number.

"Hello?"

I nearly drop my cell at the voice of my caller. "Jade ... it's Breanne, Breanne Mitchum."

My heart hurtles against my ribs. "Is Saxton all right?"

She clears her throat and I imagine her rolling her beautiful eyes. But she called me, so she can keep—

"Yes." She clears her throat again, and her voice is muffled. "I just wanted to tell you I'm sorry for what happened fourteen years ago." My shoulder hits the cold wall beside me, but I don't know what to say, so I listen.

"My ... my mother ordered the attack on you." This time, there're definitely tears in her voice. "She's been executed."

Relief, anger, sadness, and confusion rush through me all at once, so I lean more heavily on the wall. "What?"

"I just wanted to say... I'm sorry for my part in this."

"Did Saxton kill her?"

“No. He didn’t have the chance.” She pauses. “I’m really sorry.”

She hangs up, and I stare at my cell. *Oh God.*

I hurry back into the luxurious restaurant, and as I sit down, Dana touches my trembling hand. “Sweets, what’s the matter?”

“Can I talk to you for a second?” After apologizing to our guests, I tug Dana to the bathroom where I tell her about Breanne’s call.

Her eyes widen. “Blimey. That’s swift justice. Not undeserved, but ... shit.”

Vaughn appears by our side. “Did something happen to Sax?”

“I have to go to him. I have—”

“Let’s go.”

Dana groans. “Do we really have to fly Fallen-style?”

Vaughn’s lips twitch. “This would be the quickest way.”

When Dana frowns, I grab her hand. I can’t do this without her. “Dana, please come.”

She sighs, but her eyes soften. “Oh, all right then.”

We return to our guests. “Ryne, Sonia, I’m so sorry, I have an emergency at home, and I have to—”

Ryne nods with a smile while Sonia curls her arm on the back of her chair. “Family. We understand. Go. We’ll be here until the end of the week.”

Once we’re out of the restaurant, I grip Vaughn’s waist and loop my arm around Dana’s tensed shoulders.

The musical whoosh of his wings fails to bring me its usual peace. We’ll be there in minutes, but time seems to stretch. Did Roselyn send those monsters after me because I carried Saxton’s child? Although I dreamed of strangling

whoever killed my son, the thought of Saxton losing another mother figure troubles me.

As we land, my heartbeat speeds up as the mansion comes into view. *So much for never, ever stepping into that place again.*

Dana exhales slowly. “Where’s everyone?”

As if he heard us, a tall, burly man approaches us from the side of the house.

“You’re on private property—” He stops, and his brows rise high. “It’s you. Come with me.”

We follow him to a large building at the back of the mansion where—oh God—hundreds of eyes scrutinize us. Men and women of all ages glare at us.

Praying I won’t stumble, I roll my shoulders back, tighten my core, and stride toward the double doors of the large building. More people part to let us through as we enter the very crowded, high-ceilinged room. When I see Saxton standing tall at the end of the room, glorious and exuding power, I let out a trembling breath. He’s okay. And he’s angry. Very angry.

“Saxton.”

My whisper seems to reach him, and surprise flickers in his eyes before they warm up. As we get close, he holds his hand out. “My Jade, come here.”

Letting go of the safety of Dana and Vaughn’s proximity, I walk past Breanne to fold my hand into his. I suck in a breath as I face the crowd. *That’s an awful lot of people.*

Dana and Vaughn find some space next to a man whose eyes are locked onto Breanne. It must be her mate. Dressed in a blue summer dress that belies the heaviness of the room, she’s as beautiful as I remember.

On the right, beside the man who led us in, a man nods at me, and I would recognize those eyes anywhere. Saxton’s father.

Saxton's voice is quietly powerful. "For your role in the attack on my mate and the death of my unborn pup, I banish you. You will cease all contact with members of the Cavendish pack and its allies."

The silence is deafening. Her chin trembles while her eyes flick to her mate. As she nods, Saxton says, "Your mate has chosen to stay with your pups. You have one hour to kiss them goodbye and leave. Today."

Her children? No. I grab his arm. "Saxton?"

My heart breaks at the pain in his eyes, and I tighten my grip on his arm.

"You can't take her children from her. It's..." I shake my head and turn to Breanne. "How old are your children?"

Her eyes widen before she whispers, "Ten, six, and four."

They're babies. "Saxton, they're babies. You can't take her children."

His tone is sharp. Inflexible. "What she did took our pup from us."

I place my hand on his chest. "If you banish her, you're punishing them." I touch his clenched jaw. "Is she a bad mother?" When he shakes his head, I let out a short breath. "They're innocent. Don't take their mother away from them."

His jaw clenches tighter. "Her pups will have a home with their father in the pack."

Framing his face, I lock my eyes onto his. "Saxton, *she* is their home."

As he steps back, my heart drops while the tension coursing through him makes me both worry and angry. For him.

In the same unflinching tone, he says, "She will be punished for what she and her mother did to you."

This is going nowhere. I turn to Breanne. “Did you know I was pregnant?”

“No.”

I edge closer. “Had you known, would you have made a different choice?”

The blonde woman pales as she glances at Saxton. “I don’t ... I don’t know.”

At least she’s honest. Not that she has a choice. I return to Saxton’s side. I need to touch him, so I set my palm on the corded muscles of his arm. “I believe her. Is she telling the truth?”

He nods again, and I take a deep breath. “She might have enjoyed humiliating me, but that’s no reason for her children to lose their mother.” I touch his chest. There’s so much tension there. “Saxton—”

His expression is harsh. “We lost our pup.”

God, I can’t stand how much he’s hurting. “We did, but this won’t bring him back. Nothing will.” I graze my fingers on his stony face. “Send her to work for me.”

Saxton frowns. “At the manor?”

That’s not a no. “At the health center. She will be under my supervision working with women from all species, including humans. Which hopefully will teach her tolerance, and if it doesn’t, I’ll make sure she’s useful.” I inch closer. “Saxton, let something positive come out of this.”

When he cups my cheek, hope blooms. “For how long?”

“For as long as you say.”

“Is this what you want?”

I won’t punish three children who have a good mother. I set both my hands on his warm chest. “I can live with that.”

When he touches his head to mine, my heart speeds up.

“All right, beautiful.”

Tilting my head back, I smile when, really, all I want to do is kiss him. “Thank you.”

As he shifts us toward the crowd, I search for Dana’s eyes, who nods at me while Vaughn smiles.

Saxton wraps his arm around my waist as he looks at Breanne. “Stay away from the pack’s business.”

Breanne’s breath hitches, and she bows her head while tears flow down her cheeks. “Thank you, Alpha.” She leaps into her mate’s arm who holds her tight.

At Saxton’s command, the crowd disperses silently, leaving his father and the tall man who led us here behind.

As the room empties, I exhale slowly and wrap my arms around Saxton’s waist. When he tilts my chin up, I fall into his eyes. “Thank you,” I whisper.

“My Jade.”

His breath fans on my lips. I roll on my toes and—

Someone coughs.

Oh God. Heat swallows my face, and the shadow of a smile stretches Saxton’s lips, who pecks my nose. As I try to step aside, his hold tightens on my waist as he greets Vaughn with the alpha handshake. His father and our guiding host approach us with a smile—at least the father does, I don’t think the other man knows how to.

“Jade, happy to meet you.”

Suddenly eighteen again, my brain scrambles as my face burns. “Hello ... hi, I’m not sure how... Is it ... uh like the president where even though you’re retired, I should still greet you as Alpha Cavendish?”

Oh great, now they’re all smiling. He wraps my hand in both of his while Saxton pecks my head, which doesn’t seem to bother him. In fact, his grin widens. “You can call me, Sam.”

“Pleased to meet you, Sam.”

After the crossed introductions, Saxton curls his fingers under my chin. “Baby, why are you here?”

“Breanne called me while we were having dinner in Lisbon.” His stony expression returns, so I speak faster. “She didn’t ask me to come. She just apologized for what happened.” I clear my throat. “She also told me about her mother. Are you okay?”

He nods with his gaze on my mouth. “You came from Portugal?”

Vaughn chuckles. “Yes, and we left our hosts mid-appetizers.”

Carson edges close to Vaughn. “You flew across the world in a few minutes?”

As Vaughn replies we did, Saxton cups my cheek, and his gaze burns into mine. “Baby, stay. Just for a little while.”

I know what he’s asking. For me to meet his pack. I’m overdressed in a house full of strangers who could eat me, in a town I swore I’d never set foot in again. But he’s made this huge concession for me. And I’ve missed him.

Vaughn dips his chin. “I’ll head back to our guests and meet you here after.”

I turn to Dana and plead silently. I can’t do this without her.

My wonderful sister grins. “I’ll make a few calls to rearrange tomorrow’s schedule.”

My family is just the freaking best. As Vaughn flies out the room, I lift my eyes to Saxton’s. “All right, just for a little while.”

He grazes his fingers on my cheek. “Are you hungry?”

I am. I nod with a smile.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Saxton

She's here. In my pack.

When she strode forward in a fitted black dress with a high slit showing off her shapely legs and high heels sandals, I just wanted to take her away from the fucking betrayal oozing like puss within my pack.

With her hand tucked in mine and Dana by her side while my father and Carson fall in step beside me, we exit the house. My pack has been busy setting up a buffet in the backyard. The smell of roasting meat wafts from the fired-up barbecues, mixing with the crisp aroma of fresh vegetables and the creamy scent of sugar from the various desserts displayed. As we walk between the picnic tables, members of my pack dip their chins in greeting.

At the buffet table, she glances at Dana.

“Dana?”

Her best friend twitches her fingers before taking a couple of steps back.

Ward.

My mate touches my chest. “You want me to meet your pack?” When I nod, she takes a deep breath. “All right. Go. We’ll be fine.”

There’s fear in her scent, but she wants to experience the pack without me hovering.

I cup her cheek and can’t help stroking my thumb on her satiny skin. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. Go.”

My brave mate. If anyone...

I head toward the side of the house. After masking my scent, I lean against the wall of the enclave outside of the

dining room and watch.

The pups and young ones join in with the rest of the crowd. It's been ten minutes, and no one's made the effort to talk to her. There's no aggression coming from them, but no one approaches my mate who talks quietly to Dana.

Harris steps beside me. "Thank you. For Bree and the pups."

Keeping my eyes on Jade, I push my hands in my pockets. "Thank Jade. Your mate called her."

The contrition in his scent weighs on his voice. "What Bree and Roselyn did to her, to both of you, is fucking unspeakable, and—"

I turn to him and clasp my hand around the back of his neck. "Clean slate."

He clears his throat. "You can trust me."

"I do."

The pack's still ignoring her.

As Ris walks away, my father takes his place.

Enough of that shit.

As I move toward my mate, his hand on my shoulder stops me as he alphan-speaks. "If she's going to be part of the pack, they need to accept her on their own terms."

That's a fucking big 'if'. "Fuck their own terms."

"That's fair. But let her call it. Your mate's strong, and from what you told me, the witch will destroy any fool who dares attack her. Carson and our enforcers are on guard. She's covered."

When my mate and Dana head toward the house, I clench my fists. She's had enough. And, so have I.

As they reach the paved terrace, Bree strides toward them.

“Jade, can I speak with you?”

After Jade nods, they enter the dining hall while Dana stands by the door to give them privacy.

There’s apprehension in Jade’s scent. I take a step toward her, but again, my father stops me and points his chin at the crowd. Everyone’s listening, so I move to the opened bay windows to get a clear view.

Jade crosses her arms on her chest, and her tone is cold. “What do you want, Breanne?”

Roselyn’s daughter inches closer. “Jade, I misjudged you, and you’ve been ... very understanding, so thank you, and I hope—”

My mate, who hasn’t been around wolves much, pitches her voice low, unaware that most of the pack will not only be able to hear her, but that they’re actively listening. “Do you hear yourself? I’ve been *very understanding*? God, the freaking arrogance. You know what I’ve lost because you decided I was worth nothing.” She leans in. “And you seriously think I did this for you? You?”

Bree gasps, but before she replies, my mate edges closer and her voice is cutting. “Let me put it in simple words, so your entitled, narrow mind can process. Saxton loves you, and for better or for worse, you’re his family—”

“Jade, I—”

“I’m talking.”

When Bree snaps her mouth shut, she resumes. “I’ll never forget what you took from us. Never. But Saxton has lost enough. So, do better. Be better.”

She’s fucking magnificent.

My whole being strains toward her, but she’s not finished.

“And if you think you’re going to slack off while you work for me, think again. The women I work for don’t need

some self-serving bigoted princess.” She steps toe-to-toe to the she-wolf. “So, I don’t care what you do, or how you do it, but you will be what they need.”

Bree shuffles on her feet and nods. “I won’t let you down.”

The coldness in Jade’s tone turns glacial. “Oh, I know you won’t. Because the minute you do, the minute you piss me off in any way, I’ll snitch on you so fast, your head will spin. Am I making myself clear?”

“Yes.” Bree replies as she bows her head.

“Good.”

I rub the heel of my hand on my chest. Jade pleaded for clemency for someone who’s been instrumental in causing her the greatest harm, in front of a room full of people who despise her species. And she did it so I wouldn’t lose the two people closest to me. I’m still reeling from Bree’s betrayal, but Ris is my brother, and our relationship would have irremediably changed if I’d taken his mate and the mother of his pups from him.

Exhaling sharply through the tightening of my chest, I straighten up. No one has ever had my back the way she has.

Her ridiculously high, sexy-as-fuck heels tap on the hard flooring as she makes her way out back to Dana followed by Bree.

As she steps outside, Georgie, Bree and Ris’s youngest pup, runs to his mother, bounces off my mate’s legs, and lands on his ass. He springs back up as Jade crouches before him.

“Are you okay?”

He nods and frowns the way only pups do, before leaning in to sniff her neck. “You smell funny.”

Breanne’s breath rushes out as she grips Georgie’s shoulder. “Jade, I’m sorry. He’s just a baby. He—”

Eye to eye to my nephew, Jade smiles. “Funny how?”

Georgie blinks before his eyes swallow his face. “Huh?”

“Funny how? Like um ... swamp water ... or burnt chocolate?”

The pup gawks at her.

“Funny like ... rotten frogs?”

A giggle escapes him as he shakes his head.

“Oh, I know. Like rotten frogs in burnt chocolate.”

Little Georgie laughs hard. “You’re silly.”

My mate’s chuckle is soft. “A little bit. Are you sure you’re okay?”

When he nods, she pushes on her knees, but Georgie catches her wrist, and I suck in a breath. Pups are pure instinct, and only make physical contact with strangers when they feel safe.

“I like chocolate cake.”

Jade grins. “It’s my favorite too.”

When she stands up, Bree picks up her son who points at the buffet table while the whole pack is suspended to his babble. “There’s chocolate cake over there.”

My mate giggles. “Do *you* want chocolate cake?”

I can’t help but smile when he chuffs and nods.

“You have to ask your mama if it’s okay first.”

Bree swallows hard and pecks her son’s head, who jumps out of her arms and peers up at Jade. “She said yes.”

“All right then. Let’s get some cake.”

Georgie races to the table, followed by his mother, my mate, and Dana.

As Jade places a generous slice of cake on a plate, two pups line up to the table. “Can we have some too?” They point at Jared, one of our enforcers. “Our dad said it’s okay.”

When he dips his chin, Jade's grin widens while Dana hands her an empty plate. Soon, she's surrounded by a dozen pups all claiming their slices. Then, Ashley, one of the omegas, steps close. "Jade, I'm Ashley. Do you need some help?"

My gorgeous mate angles her grin at the she-wolf. "Hi, Ashley, and yes, please." As more pups gather around them, she chuckles. "I think we're going to need more cake."

And it's as if a dam breaks, women and children flock to the table. The women introduce themselves to my mate who, like she did at Ryker's compound, greets them, kind and charming. So goddamn beautiful, it hurts.

Pride swells my chest while my wolf rumbles in contentment.

My father shifts closer, and his voice is laced with emotion. "Sarah would have loved her."

Locking my eyes to his, I'm too choked up to speak, so I dip my chin.

I return my attention to Jade standing amidst the small crowd and track her glance to the table farthest away in the backyard shaded by an oak tree.

Seated by herself is Oriana Clarke, the ten-year-old pup whose parents Linda and Seth Clarke, a talented painter and one of our accountants died in a plane crash three years ago. The pup, who lives with Cath, her mother's sister, is hunched over the table focused on her drawing. That's all I've ever seen her do: tracing on paper, immersed in her art. Like her mother used to be. Jade takes a serving of chocolate cake with two spoons and makes her way to the orphan while Dana stays behind.

Once at the table, she slants over slightly while her eyes soften. "Hi, I've noticed you didn't have any cake, so I brought you some."

Without looking up, the little she-wolf shrugs while carrying on with her drawing. "I don't want cake."

After setting the plate by Oriana's hand, Jade asks, "Can I sit with you?"

Oriana gives another shrug. When Jade settles beside her, she sits up. "Are you the new Luna?"

Fuck.

Now, my whole pack's listening again.

Jade frowns, but her tone is soft. "I don't know what that means. I'm just Jade."

No, baby. You're everything.

"What's your name?"

"Oriana. Oriana Clarke."

"Such a pretty name. Nice to meet you, Oriana." She spoons a bit of the cake and hums.

"The cake is good but something's missing."

Oriana's fingers still as she snaps her eyes to my mate. "I know what you're doing."

Jade smiling eyes widen as she sets her spoon on the table. "What am I doing?"

"You're saying the cake's missing something for me to try it."

My mate inches closer. "Is it working?" After another dismissive shoulder roll from Oriana, Jade points at the drawing. "She's beautiful. Who is she?"

"My mom. She died when I was little. My daddy too. I live with my aunt Cath, now."

From the far corner of the backyard, Cath starts toward the table, but Dana whispers something to her that makes her nod and stop.

Jade breathes out slowly, and my wolf whines. "Can I see?" When the pup dips her chin, she slides the page toward her and smiles. "You look like her."

“You think so?”

“Absolutely.” My mate shifts closer. “Can I touch you?”

The young she-wolf just stares. Jade wraps her arm around her small body and whispers, “I’m sorry you lost your mom and dad. So sorry.”

Orianna doesn’t hug her back but doesn’t pull away either.

Jade takes her hand. “I lost my mom too. I was older, but I was sad for a long time.”

“You were?” When Jade nods, the pup blinks slowly. “Are you still sad?”

“Sometimes. But it’s okay to be sad, it reminds me of the love I had for her. What do you remember about your mom?”

The pup’s snuffle tightens my chest. “She taught me how to draw.”

Jade grazes her fingers on the page. “You’re very talented. She would be really proud.”

Oriana leans closer. “You think so?”

“I know so.”

While they smile at each other, bonding over their loss, Dana and Cath settle across from them. After Cath introduces herself to my mate, she turns to her niece, and her voice is almost tentative.

“Your mom taught me how to draw too, but I could never do it as well as she or you.” She chuckles. “When we were small, and I wanted her to play with me, I would hide her crayons and she would get so mad, she’d chase me all around the house.”

Oriana giggles. “Did she catch you?”

“Every single time.” She reaches for the pup’s hand and clears her throat. “I miss her too.” After a pause, she adds, “I

still have some of her drawings from when she was your age if you want to see them.”

Oriana nods, grabs a spoon, and digs into the slice of cake under my mate’s soft gaze.

“What about my daddy?”

More people join in to talk about the Clarkes to their daughter who, inch by inch, leans deeper into my mate’s body.

Entranced by the scene, I almost flinch at the sound of my father’s voice. “I’m sorry, Sax.”

“What for?”

“For not doing what your mate just did for that pup.”

I roll my shoulders back. “It’s fine. I was—”

He grips the back of my neck. “No, Son. When your mother lost her fight to the fever, I ordered the pack to not talk about her. You were a pup who just lost his mom, and it was on me to take care of your loss, but I was fucking selfish in my grief. I’m sorry for not being there for you when you needed me.”

The back of my eyes burns. When he folds his arms around me, I wrap mine around my dad.

I need my mate. As I stride to the table, my chest expands. The pup is snuggled up against her.

Jade lifts her eyes to mine, and the warmth in them hits me hard.

“Oriana, can I have Jade for a minute?”

Pinching my lips around my smile as Oriana hesitates, I extend my hand to Jade who gracefully stands up. I bring her fingers to my mouth, but we’re merely two steps in, when Thyonian appears.

Fuck.

As Jade and Dana wave goodbye to the table, Oriana leaps out of her seat.

“Jade!” She grabs my mate’s hand.

“What’s wrong, sweetie?”

“Saturday’s my birthday. Can you come?” She turns to Dana. “You too, Dana.”

Jade looks over the girl’s shoulder at Cath, who nods with a smile. When she turns her gaze to mine, I peck her lips. “You’re always welcome here.”

My mate grins at Oriana. “Yes, I would love to.”

She’s coming back. She hasn’t been scared away.

After saying goodbye to Dad and Carson, she places her hand on my chest. “I’ll see you on Saturday.”

And I’ll make sure we have alone time. “Yes.”

My wolf’s frustrated growl makes her lips stretch into a slow, sinful grin.

“It’s not that long.”

“Love?” Thyonian says.

The Fallen moves far from the crowd with Dana and Jade by his side, and I slide my fists in my pockets. In a blink, they shoot up to the sky before disappearing. *Fuck.*

My father taps my shoulder. “Son, come—”

He stops as Jade appears seemingly out of thin air while Vaughn and Dana stand back.

“Saxton.”

She runs the few steps between us and throws herself in my arms.

Crushing her against me, I take her open mouth and dive into her taste. I kiss her hard, hungry. Needy.

When she pulls out of the kiss, I bury my face in her neck and inhale deeply before setting her on her feet.

“Five days,” she whispers.

I wrap my hand around her nape and kiss her again. Her moan against my tongue makes me so hard, I have to force myself to pull my arms down. “Four.”

Her smile widens. “I’m still in Lisbon time. Four days.” She hurries back to Thyonian.

Ris gawks at me. “A fallen angel? With wings and halo and shit?”

Carson, Cole, and Dad laugh. We’re sprawled out on the couch in the most isolated cabin on our territory. I cross my ankles on the coffee table—a block of polished wood older than I am— and lean back while Cole tells him about Zayn and Ryzan.

It’s the first time I’ve invited Cole to the pack, and after the lighthearted exchange of cats and dogs jabs, he fit right in. I kick myself for not realizing sooner how much he missed pack dynamics.

Carson leans in. “So, what’s the story between Thyonian and Jade? Is he going to let her leave him to be the Luna of the pack?”

This is the second time someone has referred to Jade as my Luna. And I fucking love it. But this place holds a lot of pain for her, so I need to go slow and gentle with my mate. Let her decide whether pack life is for her. It’s the least she deserves.

“We’re not there yet.”

Cole shakes his head. “Hermano, get there.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Jade

After carefully wedging Oriana's birthday gift in the trunk of my car, I smile at Vaughn striding toward Dana and me. My angel is so very handsome.

"Are you sure you don't want to come with us?"

He shakes his head. "I'm sure, love. Besides, I wasn't invited, but Sax said he'll join us at the next meeting." His grin turns into a chuckle. "And, I think Dana's had enough of flying with me."

Dana groans as she climbs onto the passenger seat. "Not that Jade's driving is any better."

I tend to drive a little too fast for her liking.

Vaughn touches my cheek. "I hope saying goodbye to your mother will bring you peace."

When Sylvia died, three days before my twentieth birthday, I was still plagued by night terrors, jumping at my own shadow, and terrified of leaving the safety of the manor. So, Vaughn and Tilda took care of her funeral in Vosges. After my conversation with the adorable Oriana, I decided to follow my own advice and tell Sylvia that although she never loved me—not even liked me—I loved her.

As Tilda waves us goodbye from the door, I squeeze Vaughn's fingers. "Have you heard from Zayn?"

His crystal eyes narrow. "No. I'm still angry with him for putting you at risk."

We need to leave, but I need to say it. Again. "He didn't. He gave us a way to rescue you from the stupidest decision you've ever made."

When he grunts, I peck his cheek. *Two pig-headed Fallens.*

After one last wave at Tilda, I get in my car and take a deep breath, inhaling the scent of the large bouquet of flowers on the backseat.

Before I start the engine, Dana touches my wrist.

“I’ll be there the whole time. You won’t have to do any of this alone.”

God, but I love this woman. “Thank you, my darling.”

Dana cranks up the volume of the pop song playing, and winks as she curls deeper into her seat.

My best friend and I are never short of things to talk about, whether we see each other every day or once a month. But between the heavier workload at the center and our search for Vaughn, I’ve missed my Dana-time. So, I’m looking forward to the three plus hours of one-on-one, on our way to Saxton’s territory.

We’re just out of the city limits and discussing the expansion of Whole of Us when Dana’s lips pinch, and she sits up.

“What’s wrong?”

She slides her sunglasses up. “The wanker lives here.”

Her ex.

I hate the pain that darkens her green eyes, so I take her hand. “What happened between you two?”

After a heavy sigh, she says, “When my powers matured, the Council deemed them uncontrollable and wanted to clip them, so I told them to bugger off, and I left. That pompous garden witch, Esmée, who was the high Priestess at the time, retaliated by telling him I was dangerous. The alpha of his claw got scared, and the softdick dumped me.”

I don’t know what to say, so I just squeeze her hand.

Dana’s scoff is loaded with sadness. “He wants to see me. It took him fifty bloody years, but he wants to apologize.”

That's right. Even though Dana and I look the same age, she's a lot older.

"Do you want to see him?"

She shrugs. "I haven't decided yet."

I stop at the railway crossing and turn to her. "What do you need?"

Her grin is wide. "A perfectly grilled steak and a cold beer will do, for now."

Okay.

Driving past the Vartan sign, I take a deep breath. We're on schedule. According to Saxton's message, the birthday party will start in an hour. Between the whirlwind of meetings with Meterans, our visit to one of the biggest European covens, and the time difference, we didn't get to talk.

As we park outside the cemetery, clouds give way to a happy sun. I clench my fingers around the thick, bunched stems of the bouquet while Dana rounds the car to give me a hug.

"I'll wait here. Go say goodbye to your mum."

I make my way to the simple marble tombstone. *Sylvia Elizabeth Channings*. She was three days shy of thirty-eight. After brushing off the twigs and leaves from the cool gravestone, I place the bouquet down.

"Hi, Sylvia. You probably don't want me here, but I wanted to say I'm sorry for not loving you the way you needed me to. You did the best you could, and I forgive you. I'm doing well. I found a wonderful family who is loving and kind, and I wish you had that. I hope you'll find your great love story wherever you are. Bye, Mom."

I wipe off the last tears I'll shed for Sylvia and walk back to my life.

Back at the car, Dana lifts her eyes from her cell and slides her sunglasses up.

“How was it?”

“Liberating.”

Dana sits up. “According to the G.P.S., our hotel is half a kilometer on the right.”

I veer toward the Ellison hotel and glance in the mirror. “I think we’re being followed.”

She chuckles. “It took you long enough to notice. They’ve been tracking us since we entered Vartan. Don’t worry, I’ve put a ward on the car a couple of hours ago.”

The concept of fiefdom comprised of several towns owned by a single family is beyond strange. When the car following us parks on the opposite side of the street, I exhale slowly. I thought the first meeting with Saxton’s pack had gone well, but when we returned to Lisbon, Dana told me that people had heard my altercation with Breanne. I meant every single word, but I guess telling off the crowned princess of the pack didn’t endear me to them. I have no intention of moving in, but that’s where Saxton spends most of his time. This is where his pack lives. And I love him so much. But if they hate me, how are we—?

Dana places a soothing hand on mine. “Sweets, you’re spinning out. I wouldn’t let you go back if I thought you’d get hurt.”

She’s right. And it’s only one afternoon.

As we park in front of the grandiose mansion, my heart races, and I smooth my palms over the silk pants of my jumpsuit.

The front door opens on Catherine and Oriana grinning at us.

The little girl bounds to me and loops her arms around my waist. “You came!”

I hug her back. “Happy birthday, sweetie.”

While she greets Dana with the same enthusiasm, I smile at Catherine and hand her the two heavy bags containing the gifts I bought.

Oriana tugs Dana’s hand and pulls her into the house. “Come look at all my presents.”

Catherine chortles. “Come on in. Everybody’s at the back.” As I fall into step beside her, she stops and throws a wide grin at me. “Come in whenever you’re ready.”

A little taken aback by the sudden change, I frown at her retreating silhouette. Then, a heated shiver runs down my back, and I still. My heart stumbles before racing as I do a quick one-eighty.

Coming from around the house, Saxton prowls toward me with his burning gaze trained on me. His long legs are encased in faded jeans and the muscles of his broad shoulders are rolling under his navy-blue t-shirt.

Trapped in the sheer masculinity emanating from him, I inhale deeply while my heart somersaults.

His husky voice grazes over my skin. “Mia bella.”

“Saxton, hi,” I whisper, breathless.

He wraps his hand around my nape, pulls me up on my toes, and plunges his tongue in my waiting mouth. Every languorous stroke draws my belly tight while my body heats up. Curling my arms around his shoulders, I open my mouth wider and moan. Plastered against the hard ridges of his body, I drown in his kiss until I whimper with need.

When I break from the kiss to catch my breath, his voice flutters on my tingling lips. “Welcome back, baby.”

“I missed you,” I pant.

His hold tightens. “Fuck, baby.”

As he takes my hand, I tug on his fingers to stop him.

He frowns. “Mia bella, no one will hurt you. I—”

I lower my voice. “We were followed on our way here.” Something I can’t name flickers in his eyes, and I lean back while my heart bleeds a little. “Your pack doesn’t want me here?”

He clenches his jaw. “No, baby, I asked them to follow you.”

“Why? Saxton, if for any reason, I shouldn’t be here, you—”

He yanks me to him. “You belong with me.”

What’s happening? He looks.... “Saxton, what’s wrong?”

He cups my face in his big hands, and I hold my breath. His heartbeat is fast. Faster than mine.

“Baby, I’ve lost you twice, and I’m trying not to crowd you, but I need to know you’re safe. I need to.”

The emotion in his eyes is fear.

My heart breaks open, and I curl my arms around his neck. “Okay, but next time, just tell me. Because being followed is...”

I shiver, and he clasps his hand around my nape. “A fucking bad idea. I realize that now, but in my defense, they were supposed to be discreet.”

But I have a sorceress on my side. When I touch my mouth to his, his tongue demands mine while he makes love to my mouth, owning me.

By the time he slants his head back, my whole body is aflame.

Saxton locks his scorching gaze onto mine. “Baby, I need to be deep inside you.”

And I want to kneel before him while he grips my hair and ... God. I shut my eyes while my belly clenches. When he senses it or smells it, his growl births a full-body tremor.

“Mia bella—”

“Jade, come in!”

Oriana’s cheery voice snaps me out of my trance. A little, but just enough.

My eyes on my wolf, I smile. “I’m coming.”

He touches his lips to my ear. “Not yet. But soon.”

Shivering again, I whisper, “Promise?”

Dear Lord. The buffet tables are at least ten times larger than last time. And twice as numerous.

Families mingle under the baking sun while children whiz through the park—at this point I can’t call it a backyard anymore—surrounded by thick trees. In the middle of the picnic area, a huge rectangle table is caving under the weight of dozens of colorful wrapped gifts.

As we cross paths with more people, I squeeze Saxton’s fingers.

“How many people are in your pack?”

Without stopping our progression, he replies with pride in his voice. “Three thousand and eighty-nine across the territory. In Mordsen, a little under five hundred.”

My God, he’s leading more than three thousand people? When I gawk at him, he pecks my nose.

I tense, rattled by the very public, affectionate gesture. He stops in the middle of the crowd and tilts my chin up. Acutely aware of the hundreds of eyes on us, I hold my breath, and my whole being suspends on his words.

He tucks a curl of my hair behind my ear. “Jade, you’re mine.”

Tears press behind my eyes, and I wrap my arms around his waist. “I am.”

This time, when he slants his mouth toward mine, I lean up and sigh into our short kiss.

As we make our way to the buffet, a man stops before us. The vaguely familiar stranger smiles, and it hits me, he’s one of the men who welcomed Saxton in the restaurant before the hostess ... never mind.

“Hi, Jade. I’m Tobias.”

When I extend my hand to shake his, Saxton’s wolf growls, so I lower my hand while Tobias dips his chin. “I hope to see you soon at SCs.”

I have no idea what he’s talking about. “Sorry?”

He grins. “I’m the chef of our steakhouse on the edge of Vartan.”

Oh. Probably not then.

After a slight bow, he walks away, and Breanne’s mate approaches us. I know better than to shake his hand, but when he reaches for mine, no growling comes from Saxton nor his wolf. There’re obviously rules I’m not aware of, but I’ll ask Saxton when we’re alone.

Saxton’s beta has warm eyes, kind. “Hi, Jade. I’m Harris, Sax’s beta and Breanne’s mate.”

“I’m Jade, but you know that since you said my name.”

His expression turns solemn. “My deepest gratitude for keeping my family together. And I’m so very sorry for your loss.”

Breanne can’t be that bad if she’s mated to such a nice man.

“Thank you, Harris.”

As he returns to his family seated at a table, I nod at Breanne who responds in kind.

Oriana, standing beside Catherine, beams at me from across the buffet table before waving me over. I lift my eyes to Saxton's. "I've been summoned."

"I want you with me."

His possessive expression makes my heart quiver, so I peck his sexy mouth and whisper, "Soon, my wolf."

I curl my arm around Oriana's shoulders while she loops hers around my waist. Peering through the vast backyard, I look for fiery red hair and grin at Dana who's chatting to a couple of very attractive men. My stomach pleads for food, so after pulling my little friend toward the other end of the table, I unfold the wrapping foil on a hotdog and salivate. When Oriana scrunches her nose and bares her teeth in distaste, I can't help my giggle.

Her tone is almost accusatory. "Do you like that?" At my nod, she rolls her eyes. "I'm going to get a burger."

"All right." Without thinking, I kiss her head, and she snaps her eyes to mine. "I'm sorry, sweetie. I should have asked—"

She wraps her arms around my waist—Lord, she's strong—and grins. "I love you too."

I hug the little girl and melt into her love for a few seconds before she saunters to one of the barbecue grills.

As I'm about to bite into my hotdog, a feminine voice coming from behind me stops me. "Aren't they the best?"

I whip my heated face at a grinning young woman who rounds the table to come beside me. "You used to work at the Star Diner, right?"

"Mmm hmm. For three years."

Her huge eyes twinkle. "I only got sixty of them because the pack is snobbish with their meats. Their burgers are so-so, but their hotdogs are the best." She leans closer and her tone becomes conspiratorial. "The secret is to wrap them up with everything for an hour or two, so—"

“It all melts together.” We say at the same time.

A woman after my own heart. We’re still giggling as Saxton joins us. He glances at the hotdogs and pecks my nose. “You missed out last time, so I asked Jodie to get them for you.”

I want to kiss him so bad, but I smile instead. “Thank you.” I lift the hotdog to his mouth. “Taste. I know they’re nowhere near as good as what you cook, but they’re yummy and messy.”

Under Jodie’s amused expression, he slants his head back. “All yours, baby.”

“Fine.” I wink at my hotdog ally. “More for us.” I bite into the mushy, greasy, overly salty, dripping heart attack in a bun and groan. “So. Good.”

As I’m about to take a second mouthful, Saxton grabs my wrist and bites off the rest of my hotdog. All of it. “Did you just—?”

He grins. “Yes, and it tastes better than it looks. Which isn’t saying much.”

Maybe it’s because of my hug with Oriana or maybe it’s because Saxton is smiling happy, but joy bursts out of me, and I laugh hard.

Dana, Carson, and Sam meet us at the table. After peering over the hotdogs, they each grab one, except for Dana who shakes her head.

“Not in this lifetime.”

A few minutes later, Catherine mouths something to me, and although I can’t make out what she’s saying, I guess it’s cake time.

After we congregate in the middle of the open space, flanked by Saxton and Dana, I sing happy birthday, glad that my off-key rendition gets drowned in the loud chorus.

As Oriana blows out her candles, I watch the crowd of happy faces and lean against Saxton who tightens his arm around me.

Oriana, throning on an emptied table, unwraps—rips her way through—her gifts in a joyful frenzy. After a few minutes, she turns to my present. “I want to open the big one.”

Catherine brings my gifts to her niece, and I take a deep breath. Oriana frowns as she uncovers the foldable easel and shrieks at the hundreds of pencils in every possible shade, as well as all the different types of paper I could find. She reads the card, whips her eyes to me, and hops toward me to hug me.

Dana, Catherine, and I crouch in front of her before I retrieve a jewelry box from my pocket I place in her hand. “This is from Catherine, Dana, and me.”

My little friend lifts the velvet box open and pulls out the small gold locket.

“Look inside. Catherine sent me the picture, and Dana put a bit of her magic in it.”

She unclasps the locket and a hologram of her and her parents in a hug raises from the medallion. She gasps, but when her chin quivers, my heart drops. *Oh, no.*

She throws her arms around my neck, and I hold her little trembling body against mine.

“I love it, thank you.”

“You’re welcome, sweetie.”

After she hugs Dana and her aunt, Dana says, “I’ve put a spell on it, so you won’t lose it when you swim or when you morph.”

Oriana’s eyes widen. “You can do that?”

“Yes.”

“Holy shit,” someone says.

“Amazing,” another person whispers.

Standing back up, Catherine mouths a ‘thank you’ to Dana and I before returning with her niece to the dozens of packages waiting to be ravaged.

I squeeze Dana’s hand as we rejoin the audience of smiling faces.

Saxton kisses the top of my head as I wrap my arms around his waist.

A few hours later, as I close the bathroom door behind me, a gorgeous brunette exuding sex appeal smiles at me. Her slightly accented voice is warm. “Hi, Jade. I’m Gianna.”

I smile back. “Hi, Gianna, nice to meet you.”

She peruses over me quickly. “Sax has really good tastes.”

Okay. “Thank you?”

Letting out a throaty giggle, she whispers. “If there’s a man who deserves a name that sounds like sex, it’s him, right?”

She’s one of the eleven.

Keeping my smile firmly in place, I exhale slowly while my heart whines. “I guess.”

When she touches my wrist, I tense. “I’m glad he’s found you. A good man should be with a good woman.”

There’s not a sliver of malice in her expression.

Why does she have to be nice?

“Thank you, Gianna.” I shift to the side. “Have a good evening.”

“You too, Jade.”

I head straight to Saxton’s table, who frowns and gets to his feet.

“Baby, what’s wrong?”

“Can I talk to you in private for a minute?”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Saxton

Someone upset her.

My wolf frets as I close the door to the soundproofed office behind us.

When she crosses her arms on her chest, I cup her face. “Who upset you?”

Anger crowds her scent as she steps back, and I fist my hands.

“Baby, tell me.”

She snaps her eyes to mine. “No alpha voice.”

Still amazed at her ability to do that, I settle on the edge of my desk. “If I don’t know what’s upsetting—”

“Out of the eleven women you slept with, how many are in your pack?”

Ah fuck. She met Gianna or Val. “Two.”

She strides toward me, and I can’t help but inhale deeply, which elicits her little snarl that only makes me harder.

“Your gorgeous ex told me you had good taste in women.”

Gianna. “I do, look at you.”

Jade fists her hands by her sides and groans. “I don’t need compliments! I just...” Another groan. “Why only two? I’m sure women throw themselves at you.”

“I don’t date within my pack. As the alpha, there are too many expectations attached to my relationships, and it tends to complicate things. Val and Gianna joined the pack after we were over.”

The scent of her heated anger makes me salivate for the need of fucking it out of her.

“They followed you here *after* you guys broke up?”

“Yes.”

“Did they want to get back with you? “

They didn't. Val had enough of the cold winters in Québec and Gianna moved from Italy to become a movie star.

As she paces again, I watch my agitated mate. I must admit I like my Jade possessive. I fucking love it.

“No, they had their own reasons to be here.”

The little grunt of frustration erupting from her chest makes me so hard, I clench my fingers around the edge of the desk to refrain from pouncing on my beautiful mate.

Rolling her eyes, she says, “Their reason is you.” She pinches her sexy pout in a thin line. “Saxton, they came for *you*.”

“The world can be a dangerous place for unmated she-wolves. They asked for shelter, and I wasn't going to leave them out because we fucked each other.”

Something I don't like overtakes the anger in her scent as she dips her trembling chin.

“No. I... Of course not. I'm sorry.” She clears her throat. “We should go back.”

When she spins toward the door, I catch her arm.

My mate is hurting.

“Baby, tell me what's wrong.”

The little shaking breath she lets out is killing me. I cup her nape, but she steps away from my touch.

“Saxton, I've been in their shoes. I know how it feels to have my heart broken by you.” She scoffs a sad little sound that pierces through my chest. “And look at me. I'm ranting during a little girl's birthday party because the idea of you with someone else is ... breaking me.”

Why doesn't she get it? She's my soul, my everything. I draw her in my arms. "Baby, they mean nothing to me." I fucking hate this. "Mia bella, talk to me."

She clamps her hands around my face, and I grunt at the bite of her nails digging at the sides of my neck. "Are you're mine? Only mine?"

I hook my hands under her round ass and as she wraps her legs around my waist, I cage her against the door. "I fucking am."

Her breath hitches before she slams her mouth on mine. When she sucks on my tongue, I feel the pull in my cock and take over the kiss.

The scent of her hunger is so fucking sweet. I lick at her throat and rake my teeth on the muscle on the side of her neck. Almost rabid with need, I devour her mouth and nearly come at the throaty sound she makes. She breaks from the kiss, panting hard, and pushes on my shoulders.

"Saxton, we should stop."

I nip at her swollen bottom lip, but she shifts back. "Saxton. Stop."

"Why?" I know I sound pissed off. I am.

She locks her eyes to mine. "I don't want your pack to smell ... us on me."

I want my scent on you, so everyone knows you're mine. My pack can go to hell. "Baby, I don't fucking care."

A curl of hair teases her lashes as she tilts her worried face. "But I do. It's Oriana's birthday and only the second time I've met your pack."

Fuck. I get it, she's being careful and probably doesn't feel as safe as I want her to. Not that I can blame her. So, I rein in my impatience and let her legs glide down until her feet touch the floor. I tilt her chin up. "Jade, I will have you, and you will carry my scent."

Her face flushes, and she wraps her arms around my neck. “That sounds so weirdly sexy. I have a room at the Ellison.”

My eager cock jumps in anticipation, and I nip on her bottom lip. “Tonight.”

“Yes.”

As I reach for the door handle, her hand flies to my chest, and I stop.

“What’s the rule for shaking people’s hand?”

“What do you mean, baby?”

“Your wolf wasn’t happy when I was going to shake Tobias’s hand but didn’t react when Harris shook my hand. So, what’s the rule?”

My wolf was warning him off. “Toby’s unmated.”

She blinks. “All right. But...” Her expression turns wounded. “You don’t trust me?”

No, I don’t want them basking in your scent. “It’s a wolf thing. Any male who approaches you agitates my wolf, but if they’re unmated, I want to rip their head off.”

Her hazel gaze widens for a second before she nods slowly. “I guess that makes sense, because I wanted to scratch Gianna’s eyes out even though she’s really nice.”

My mate will be the death of me. Grinning, I cup her face and breathe her in. “Let’s go before I change my mind and tie you up to my bed.”

She digs her index finger in my chest while her eyes narrow. “You can’t say things like these and expect me not to get ... smelly.”

She’s doing it again, making me laugh while I sport a raging hard-on.

The music is blaring under the low setting sun. Settled next to Dad at our usual table, which is far enough for us to be able to see most of the crowd, I sit up as Jade, Carson, and Dana join us. Jade rounds the table and gasps as I haul her in my lap.

“Saxton...” When she shuffles, I tighten my hold around her waist pressing her ass on my cock. “Oh.”

Fucking adorable. She loops her arm around my neck, and I inhale her sweet scent seconds before Carson opens his big mouth and ruins it.

“Jade, when are you moving in with the pack?”

Fuck. She’s not ready for that. Jade’s whole body goes solid, and I throw a quick glance at my dad’s beta who swears low and apologizes in were-speak.

When she settles by my side, I clench my fist, but she pushes her fingers between mine and lifts her warm gaze to mine.

“Saxton and I have many things to discuss, and when we make a decision, we’ll let you know.”

We.

Her smile makes my heart race, and I bring her hand to my mouth, now grateful for Carson’s elephant-in-a-chinaware-store question.

Then I get harder as she turns her grin back to the table. “But tonight, Alpha Saxton Cavendish is mine alone. You can have him back in the morning ... early afternoon.”

Fuck, baby.

Dad chuckles while Dana smiles.

“Sweets, can I borrow your car?”

“Of course.” She squeezes my fingers. “I’m going to say goodbye.” My wolf growls with impatience, and her grin widens before she pecks my lips. “I won’t be long.”

As Dana and Jade make their way to the crowd, Dad's brows hit his hairline. "She can hear *and* read your wolf?"

My amazing mate certainly can. "Yeah."

Jade

Hand in hand, Saxton and I are nearing the elevator of the hotel.

"Jade?"

Saxton tightens his fingers around mine as I turn toward three smiling women I've never met before.

The one who must have called out steps closer. "I knew it was you!" The stranger swivels her head toward her friends. "I told you it was her!"

After pulling—hard—to disentangle my fingers from Saxton's, I meet her in the middle of the reception area and smile. "Hi, how are you?"

The rest of the group edges closer, but she seems to be the spokesperson for the trio, and her voice bubbles with excitement. "How does it feel to come back to your childhood home? Is Vaughn with you?"

Ignoring Saxton's wolf who growls low, I answer as succinctly as I can—unexpected and no. When their inquisitive gazes shift to Saxton, I edge closer to her.

"My friend and I have to go. Selfie?"

After several selfies from every cell, I wave them goodbye and return to Saxton. In the elevator, he cages me against the mirrored wall, and my heartbeat quickens at the seriousness of his expression.

"A friend? Is that what I am?"

I curl my hand around his neck. "It is if you don't want your picture splattered all over social media."

He grazes his lips over mine while his deep voice skitters over my skin. “Hmm. Something else we’ll have to discuss.”

The light touch makes me shiver, and I pull on the waistband of his jeans. “We will. Later.”

Saxton nips at my jawline, and the sharp caress triggers a heated zap that travels straight to my lower belly.

“Hungry, baby?”

I trace my knuckles along his hard length bulging under the faded denim. “Famished, my wolf.”

The next second, I wrap my legs around his waist, flattened between the heat of his body and the cool mirror. With his gaze on mine, he rocks his erection between my legs, and I bite hard on his lip. I need him inside me.

Once in my room, I toss my purse ... somewhere, while I moan into his devouring kiss. He’s about to lift me off the floor again, but I step back, eliciting a frustrated grunt from Saxton that makes me smile.

I push on his chest until his back is against the wall and nip on the softer skin just under his jaw.

“Baby—”

I palm his erection through his jeans. “Me first.”

After another scorching kiss that lights up my whole body, I attack the buttons of his jeans and kneel before him.

He fists my hair. “Fuck, baby.”

Curling my hands around his heavy penis, I wrap my lips around the hot, bulbous head.

When Saxton hisses and tilts my head back, I release his penis with a pop while my sex clenches. The pull on my hair and his heated eyes on me birth a violent shiver.

His voice is more wolf than man. “No hands.”

Panting, I lower my hands to my thighs and wait. Saxton wraps his other hand around his penis and traces my lips with his glans. When I lick off the pre-come, he swears while his grip on my hair tightens just to the verge of pain.

He taps his sex on my lips. "Open your mouth."

He slides the thick mushroom head on my tongue, and I moan again.

After several unhurried back and forth, his voice rumbles. "Suck, mia bella."

When I do, he groans and pushes in deeper. Stills. Withdraws slowly. I lave his penis with my tongue and grip the back of his legs. His languid thrusts never reach the back of my throat, but tension turns his legs into stone.

"Jade, look at me."

Pinned in place by the command in his voice, I obey. He thrusts deep and strokes the distended skin of my cheek with his fingertips. "I'm going to fuck that gorgeous mouth of yours, and you're going to take all of me, aren't you?"

"Mmm."

His penis swells in my mouth, and both his hands wrap around the back of my head. "Take it, baby."

When he reaches the back of my throat, my eyes water, and I swallow around him.

He does this twice, three times. More.

Faster. Until he roars and bathes my throat in his orgasm.

Grinning, I sweep the back of my hand on my mouth, and gasp as he pulls me to my feet.

He curls his fingers around the V-neck of my jumpsuit.

I catch his wrists. "Saxton, wait. The zipper's at the—"

He yanks, ripping the silk. Shredding it. *Oh.*

He does the same with my underwear, and in a blink, we're both naked on the bed. Saxton crushes his mouth on mine, and I welcome the bruising kiss while I dig my nails into his back.

His hands and mouth are everywhere. He kneads my breast, and when he suckles my nipple, liquid fire curls my toes, knots my belly, and shakes my legs.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Saxton

I want to drown in her scent. When I spread her legs wide, she opens her darkened gaze on mine.

Perfect.

I dive in my personal heaven. I fuck her with my mouth until she starts pulsing around my tongue. Painfully hard again, I blow on her wet, hot flesh.

She grabs my hair and lifts her hips. “Saxton. Please.”

“You want to come, mia bella?”

Her face is flushed as she raises on her elbows, and I can’t help but chuckle at her throaty snarl. “No, Alpha Cavendish, I want to be aching for you after you’ve come in my mouth.”

“And you loved it.”

My gorgeous mate tilts her face to the side while her eyes fasten on mine. “Of course, I did. I love everything about you.”

Truth. Glorious truth that spreads warmth in my chest. I lie on top of her while keeping my weight on my elbows and wrap my hands around her shoulders. Damn, she’s beautiful.

I align my cock to her pussy. “Everything?”

Her moan is soft, and her panting breath mingles with mine as she loops her arms around my neck. “Every single thing. Including the baby’s arm between your legs.”

How does she do that? I chuckle as she grins.

She touches my cheek and traces my lips with her fingers. “You’re so beautiful when you laugh.”

Fuck, Jade. I lunge.

Her eyes widen on a silent scream, so I pause.

“Too hard, baby?”

She locks her ankles on the small of my back, tightens her arms around my neck, and speaks in my mouth. “Everything, my wolf.”

And I let go. I rut deep into her hot, tight body.

She moans and closes her eyes.

“Look at me.”

Gasping, she opens her eyes. “Saxton...”

“Give it to me, baby.”

“With you...” She pants.

And I give myself to her. I come deep inside her, yelling my climax while she bites on my shoulder.

Still inside her—I don’t want to be separated from her—I roll us to the side and hook her knee over my hip. I fucking love the way her body molds around mine. When she shifts her hips, I palm her plump ass to stop her from moving.

My mate raises smiling eyes to mine. “Alpha Cavendish, I don’t know how you’re still hard, but I need a little rest.”

I take her mouth and aim for a short peck, but she makes that sexy purr, and I move her to her back to deepen the kiss. When she throws her head back, I suck on the muscle between her neck and shoulder. The place where I would mark her during the claiming. The idea of making her completely mine makes me harder.

When I unfasten my mouth from her hard beating pulse, she frames my face and grins. “You seem to like that spot. Is it your way of telling me vampires exist and hide within werewolves?”

It’s the way I embed my scent into yours. If you let me.

Her smile turns into a frown. “What’s wrong?”

My heart speeds up. I’m scared. Scared of losing the person who gives meaning to my very existence.

Her body tenses under mine, her pulse quickens, and anxiety swirls in her scent. “Saxton, tell me what’s wrong.” When she tries to sit up, I shift more of my weight on her.

“Baby, I want you with me.”

“I am.”

“I want you with me every day, every minute. To be my mate in every sense of the word and share my life.”

Her hands slide to my shoulders. “Let me up, Saxton.”

Too soon. “Jade, baby—”

Her soft lips touch mine. “Let me up. First, I need to pee, and we’re not having this conversation while I’m naked and all ... hot under you.”

I rock against her. “I think it’s the perfect time to talk.”

She rubs her nose against mine, going all tender kitten before locking her gaze onto mine. “It’s too important, and did I mention I needed the bathroom?”

“Fine.” After a quick taste of her mouth, I roll on my back.

As she struts to the bathroom, I groan at the sight of her naked body.

The little minx winks over her shoulder. “I’m going to take a quick shower.”

That’s more like it. I leap on my feet, but she raises her palms and shakes her head.

“Nuh huh, Alpha Cavendish. We need to talk, so you and your god-like body stay right here while I get cleaned up.”

Then, she slams the door of the bathroom in my face. I rub my chest and grin. *God-like body.* Perfectly matched to the goddess she is. I put on my jeans and sit on the bed waiting for her.

Ten long minutes later, she steps out of the steaming bathroom wrapped in a short towel. Her damp curls curtain

down her shoulders, and her skin glistens. She smells fucking fantastic.

She giggles, and I realize she heard my wolf's grunt of admiration. As she picks up her clothes—what's left of them—from the thick carpet in the hallway, she sighs.

Her scowl is cute as she turns to me, but I know better than to smile. “You have to stop shredding my clothes.”

I brush off the internal wince as her fingers graze the deep green cloth, but when she sucks in a breath, I close the distance between us to cup her cheek. She liked that one. “I'll buy you another one.”

She gives another sigh I like even less. “You can't. When Vaughn and I were invited to Paris, this was made especially for me by one of the first Fae couturiers, the first time she dressed a human.”

Shit. “Baby, I didn't know—”

My mate pulls away from my touch and lifts a smile that doesn't reach her eyes. “It's all right.”

No. It was a one-of-a-kind, something meaningful she chose to wear to meet my pack. And I destroyed it.

The careful way she folds the shredded garment before placing it in her open suitcase on the commode makes me grind my teeth.

After grabbing a change of clothes, she returns to the bathroom, and I pull on my tee. *Fuck.* I'm doing the same shit I did fourteen years ago. Not learning the small things important to her.

When she steps out, I take her hand and sit her beside me on the bed. I kiss the inside of her wrist. “Baby, I'm sorry about your outfit.”

“Saxton, it's fine, I promise.”

I cup her cheek and lock my eyes onto hers. “It's not. You tried to tell me, and I went at you like a fucking savage.”

She shakes her head, but I frame her delicate face. “Baby, I didn’t listen. Like I didn’t listen to what you were not saying all those years ago when you worked full time and had your own shoe box of an apartment at the age of seventeen. Or when your only friends were your coworkers, and your only family was your violent mother. When it comes to you, I’m a selfish asshole because you’re my happiness.” I clear my throat. “I want you happy. I want to make you happy.”

The tear running down her cheek makes my wolf whine. I pull her close and kiss her trembling breath. “Baby, I know my pack has been a fucking nightmare, and that’s putting it lightly, but I won’t let them—”

She straddles my lap facing me and touches the sides of my neck.

I need her so much, my hands are shaking. I pull her close and her expression makes my heart race.

“Saxton, I love you, always have and always will. I also love my work with Vaughn and Whole of Us because that makes me happy too.”

She didn’t say anything about not being with me.

“I have my own firm outside of the pack, and I don’t see why you wouldn’t do the same.” I touch my forehead to hers. “We’ll make it work, mia bella. All I need is you. The rest is just logistics.”

Her smile blinds me. “I don’t want to live without you either, but how are—?”

My cell rings, and I get to my feet, taking my mate up with me as I answer Ris.

Jade

Saxton pockets his cell. “Fuck.”

That’s not good. “What’s wrong?”

Tension tightens his jaw. “I’m needed back at the mansion—”

Of course, he is. “I’ll wait—”

Saxton pulls me to him. “Baby. You’re *with* me.”

“I am.”

After a drugging—but too short—kiss, I slip in my shoes, grab my purse, and minutes later we’re on our way to the mansion.

I text Dana in case she comes back before I do and turn to Saxton. “What happened?”

He traps my hand underneath his on his thigh—I love when he does that—but I can feel the tension coming off him. “One of our omegas has called a meeting.”

“What do omegas do?”

“They’re the keepers of our history and traditions. Packs can’t function without them.”

Oh wow. It sounds like someone I’d need to talk with.

As I shift to face him, Saxton adds. “You’ve met one of them.”

“Who?”

“Ashley.”

I remember the smiling woman who helped with the cake. As I’m about to ask more questions, Saxton pulls over at the front of the mansion.

My hand in his, we stride across the house straight to the huge backyard, and I nearly stumble at the crowd waiting silently behind Sam, Carson, and Harris.

Does everything have to be so public?

A pretty brunette strolls toward us with her gaze on Saxton. My mind races. Alpha, omega. The Yin and Yang. The perfect match.

Her girly voice is at odds with the shrewdness of her expression. “Jade, you’re exactly the person I wanted to see.”

Saxton snarls. Not his wolf. Him. I straighten my spine because I know I’m not going to like what’s coming. Crushing my rising anxiety, I smile. “Who are you?”

She leans in to sniff my neck and smiles. “You’re not mated yet.” She slants back. “I’m Lisa.”

Saxton’s muted growl ripples against my back, and I feel like growling myself.

“What do you want?”

Her smile turns into a sneer. “To challenge your position as the alpha’s mate.”

I gape at her. “Excuse me?”

Saxton pushes me behind him while his father, Carson, and Harris close in around us.

Saxton’s voice is loaded with anger. “Lisa, what the fuck are you doing? She’s my true mate. You can’t challenge her.”

Challenge me how?

As I step beside Saxton, she lifts her narrowed gaze to his. “As an omega, I can.”

She must be telling the truth because Saxton’s expression chills the already cool air.

“What do you mean challenge me?”

“Baby, —”

When Saxton moves to shield me again, I touch his bicep and face the omega. “How can you challenge me for my relationship with Saxton?”

The woman’s lips pinch. “It’s not just a *relationship*. Mating Sax will make you the co-leader of the pack, and as an omega, my sole purpose is the long-term wellbeing of the pack.” She scoffs. “I have nothing against humans, but you’re

not Were. How could you possibly understand what we need? Let alone lead us.”

She stands back, and I swear she’s ten centimeters taller. “So, Jade Channings, I hereby, challenge you to a dominance fight. If you win, I’ll leave the pack, but when I do, Sax will have to wait for seven years before he can claim you. And I will be right here, waiting to throw the next challenge.”

What in the hell? I stare at her while anger swirls up my chest. “And that has nothing to do with the fact you’re in love with him?”

She rolls her eyes. “Humans and their—”

Those wolves are so condescending. I take a step and lean in until I can see her pupils dilate. “You do not get to condescend. And you can pretend all you want you’re doing this for your pack, but I know your only goal is to get Saxton.”

Turning to Saxton, I touch his cheek. “If she wins, will you have to mate her?” When he shakes his head, my urge to beat the omega to a pulp lessens. “Can she kill me?”

A thundering growl rises from his chest, and I hold my breath as he cuts his glare to the omega. “If she tries, she dies.”

Lisa gasps. “Alpha—”

“Recall the challenge.” This is his alpha voice.

The unfiltered rage vibrating from Saxton makes me tremble. And I’m not the only one. The omega is as pale as a ghost.

Lisa straightens her back. “Alpha, I’m exercising my right as omega of this pack.”

Then, he shocks me and his pack as he pivots to face them. “Find another alpha. My mate and I are leaving.”

The crowd rumbles. His father and Harris block us.

“Son—”

“Sax—”

“Move.”

When the two men clear the way, I touch his chest to get his attention, and my heart breaks a little. He’s hurt. And serious.

“Saxton, you’re not leaving your pack.”

His scowl is almost scary, but his hands around my face are gentle. “I’ve waited fourteen years for you. I’m done waiting.”

Touching his cheek, I whisper, “So, let me fight.” I spin back to Lisa. “When?”

He grabs my shoulders, twists me to him, and his wolf flashes in his eyes. “Jade, you’re not fighting her.” He’s scared. I am too. “Baby—”

“Saxton, she challenged *me*.”

I face the omega. “When?”

“Full moon is tomorrow.”

Tomorrow? My throat tightens, but the sneer on her face makes me clench my fists. “Fine. Full moon it is.”

Catherine’s voice cuts from the crowd as she makes her way to us slowly with her eyes on Lisa. “Then you’ll have to fight me.”

Lisa frets and her face turns crimson. “The law says—”

“The law says I can. So, even if you beat Jade, I’ll definitely beat your thirsty ass.”

Saxton’s gorgeous ex approaches. Then me.”

“And me,” another woman says.

“And me too.” *Thank you, Ashley.*

More women file behind and around me, and the outpouring of support clogs my throat with tears. I squeeze Saxton’s fingers while Lisa’s eyes widen, and her face flushes.

“And if you’re still standing, I’ll turn you into a cockroach. Even if you’re not, I’ll bloody do it anyway.”

The omega’s head swivels toward Dana who strides toward us, and I exhale slowly.

How long has she been there?

My chosen sister winks.

Long enough.

When I hug Dana, she whispers, “I leave you for two minutes. Two bloody minutes.”

As we shift back, Lisa grunts. “You can’t use magic!” She points at Dana but looks at Saxton. “She can’t use magic!”

Witches can’t turn people into other living beings, but since the battle against Ryzan’s followers, Dana’s been embracing her sorceress nature. So, maybe she can. Her Wicked-Witch-of-the-West impression is working though, and I’m enjoying the terror on the omega’s face.

Standing before the wall of my supporters, my badass friend slants her head to the side. “Will you morph tomorrow?”

The pest in love with my wolf crosses her arms, which props her breasts higher. “I won’t need to.”

I exhale slowly. *She probably won’t.*

“But you’ll use your claws.”

The omega smiles. “Yes.”

Dana lifts a brow. She has a hysterically funny spiel about Weres and magic I’ve heard before, but thoroughly enjoy.

“Then if you’re using Were magic, it’s only fair that Jade can use magic too.”

“Weres don’t use magic,” Lisa snaps.

Her British accent spices up my friend’s caustic tone. “Really? Where do you think your kind comes from?”

The omega's eyes turn into saucers. "What?"

As Dana leans in, Saxton drags me away from the crowd and toward the house. He's walking so fast that my toes barely touch the ground. "Saxton..."

He stops. When he carries me like a freaking damsel in distress—which I not-so-secretly love—I nuzzle his neck. His very tensed neck. In seconds, we're in the same room we were in earlier.

As Saxton plasters me to him, I brace for his too-sexy, low, angry voice. But he smashes his lips on mine. I wrap my arms around his neck and soften under the hard kiss. Our kiss deepens, slow, searing, and his chest rumbles as he lifts me against him.

I loop my legs around his waist and lick his tongue while need tightens my nipples, rushing rivulets of heated shivers over my skin. When Saxton trails his open mouth down my neck, I moan long.

As he lingers on the sensitive spot, I throw my head back. *Please, bite. Please...*

He doesn't, and instead dives his gaze into mine. The intensity of his expression squishes my heart, so I tauten my arms around his neck.

"Saxton, you're not leaving your pack."

His hold becomes bruising. "You're mine, and I will mate you."

Elation bursts inside me. I'm his. Wholly, unconditionally. Which means I have to kick Lisa's butt tomorrow because the pack is his home.

I kiss his forehead, his nose. "I know you're scared. I'm scared too, but I'm doing it. So, ask me again tomorrow."

"This is me asking now, mia bella. Be mine."

My breath cuts off and my face hurts from smiling. "Ask me again tomorrow. Now, let me down, so I can go thank the

women who will, for sure, kick Lisa's butt.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Saxton

As we return to the backyard, the women who stood by my mate and Dana are waiting for her. My Jade has found her pack. I bury my hands in my pockets and signal Ris and Dad.

As we enter the house, Bree calls out. “Sax, I can protect her by fighting in her stead.”

“She accepted the challenge, and she’s got Dana and the she-wolves.”

When I move back, she shifts closer. “I’m one of the strongest fighters here. You can give the order and let me fight Lisa. Alpha, let me do it for her.”

She’s shitting me. “Bree, Jade may have spared you, but I haven’t forgiven you. When she’s here, stay the fuck away from my mate until I can trust you again.”

She steps back. “When would that be?”

“Not today.”

In the war room where Carson followed us, I sit at the head of the table. “Those fucking backward traditions are gone.”

Ris’s elbows hit the table. “Ash and Nadia are looking into it. Jade accepted the challenge, but she’s human, so maybe there’s some kind of loophole we can—”

I shake my head while pride and anger mix in my tone. “Jade won’t accept a loophole. She—”

Honeysuckle. I open the door on Jade and Dana.

Once they’re inside, she touches my chest. “I’m going back to the manor to prepare for tomorrow. Vaughn should be here soon.”

She’s in danger, so she called her angel. The protector she rightfully trusts.

Is she ever going to feel safe here? It's one fucking thing after the other.

Thyonian appears beside her. After a curt dip of his head, he turns to Jade. "Love, are you ready?"

Why aren't her friends trying to stop her? Don't they understand she's about to fight a she-wolf who won't fight fair?

She slides her hand in mine which somehow pacifies my wolf. "Would you mind asking Victoria if she can meet us at the manor?"

Once again, my mate amazes me. I wouldn't have thought of Tremayne, but the werefox is about the same size as Lisa's wolf, and she fights rough and vicious.

After sending a text to my agent, who replies with a thumb-up, I turn to Jade whose small hand curls on the side of my neck.

"I'd understand if your pack needs you here, but will you come to the manor for a bit?"

I frame her face and breathe her in. "I'll be there as soon as I'm done here."

It's one in the morning. Standing across from Vaughn on the opposite side of the manor's dojo, I watch Tremayne in her beast-form as she slants back on her forelegs. My agent leaps at Jade who plants the staff on the ground using the impetus to launch herself to the side.

But the werefox spins as fast and clamps her jaw on Jade's knee.

When she yelps in pain, I grit my teeth. Tremayne is not biting hard enough to draw blood, but she'll leave a bruise. Adding to the dozens already covering my mate's body.

Panting, with her face flushed with exertion, Jade pivots to face her. "What did I do wrong this time?"

The werewolf morphs and grins. “Nothing. I’m Were, so I’ll always be faster. But you’re a good strategic fighter. Trust your instincts and strike when she least expects it.”

My mate nods. “Thank you, Victoria.”

“Anytime, Jade. Make the asshole yield.”

“That’s the plan.”

Tremayne winks before making her way to the stairs leading out of the basement.

Thyonian and I speak at the same time.

“Love—”

“Baby—”

She sweeps her golden gaze between us and smiles. “Let me guess.” She points at Thyonian. “You’re going to say, ‘Love, you don’t need to do this,’ to which I’ll say, ‘Yes, I do.’”

He chuckles, and Jade lifts her grinning gaze to mine. “And you’re going to try to convince me to run away with you. But, as I said before, you’re not leaving your pack.”

I push off the wall, but my mate shakes her ponytail. “I’m going to ask Dana to heal me, have a shower, and hop in bed.” She walks to me and pecks my mouth while her scent sweetens. “See you upstairs.”

Left with the Fallen, I step closer until we’re face to face. “When I asked you, you said you loved her, but Zayn said I wasn’t asking the right questions.”

He grunts. “Zayn Ombrandt is a narcissistic, unruly, snarky asshole.”

Fucking agreed. “When you fell for her, I felt your emotions. Do you still feel that way?”

Thyonian nods with a smile. “I do. But Zayn’s right, you’re not asking the right questions.”

Those Fallens with their questions. “Why do you call her ‘love’?”

“Because that’s what she is. She sees into people’s hearts because hers is wide open. Haven’t you noticed how children are drawn to her? They sense it. They see her.”

I have, but that’s not the answer I’m looking for. “You’ve slept with her.”

He nods again. “She gave me this incredible gift of her.”

It annoys the fuck out of me, but I can’t bring myself to hate the guy.

But she’s mine. “Will you make it difficult for her to be with me?”

“No. She deserves love and happiness.”

My hands curl into fists. He’s not as cryptic as the asshole First Fallen, but he’s not exactly an open book. “Why did you fall for her?”

He dips his chin.

This is the question he was waiting for.

“Shall I tell you of my experience?”

I actually want to hear it. “Please.”

“Let’s sit.”

Two armchairs appear in the room. I settle across from him.

“For centuries, I’ve watched humans wasting the short time of existence they have to hurt each other, and I despised the savagery of humanity. As far as I could see, humans were thoughtless, uncontrolled, and lashed out at the world by harming the ones who are most vulnerable.”

His expression hardens. “They claimed to love, and yet committed the most abominable acts in the name of it. I grew so indifferent to their pain, I asked to be relieved from my guiding duties. But what I was, was frustrated and

disappointed. Then I saw Jade, and the shift I'd started experiencing rooted itself. She was another innocent like so many others before her. But that day, I saw more than a girl going through a violent death she didn't deserve. I saw her fear, but I also saw her hope. Where there should have been only torment and rage, her dying breath was about love for a being who had not yet fully formed. And the injustice of her death angered me. Which was my first forbidden feeling, and the beginning of my fall."

He shakes his head. "But I have no regrets." Chuckling, he adds, "Another feeling."

His face sobers. "Jade has been hurt, betrayed, and yet she opened her heart to Atilda, Dexter, Danayel, and I. There's an admirable fearlessness in the way she lets herself be at the mercy of more pain and heartache. Through her, I discovered a side of humanity I will die to protect. Jade *is* love. In all its nuances and many more she has yet to experience. I fell for the greatest power of humanity. I fell for love."

Not for her. For what she embodies. A weight lifts off my chest, and I exhale.

As he gets to his feet and extends his arm, I shake his hand.

After he vanishes, taking the armchairs with him, I make my way to my mate.

Closing her quarters' door softly, I inhale.

She steps out of the bathroom, and her tank top and tiny shorts display unmarred, smooth skin.

"Come here, beautiful."

Her smile cleaves my chest open as she glides toward me and wraps her arms around my neck.

After carrying her to the bed where I sit her across my lap, I tuck a silky curl behind her ear. "Tomorrow, don't attack her up front."

When she nods, I tell her how to read wolves during a fight and where to strike. Once I'm done, she smiles.

“Thank you, my wolf.”

I hold her tight. “Baby, I don't care if you win. Just keep yourself safe for me.”

Jade

Snuggling deeper into the warmth of Saxton's body, I nuzzle his neck. “Morning.”

His voice, husky with sleep, makes me shiver. “Morning, baby.”

He hooks my knee over his thigh, opening me to him, and when his fingers slowly glide up the inside of my elevated leg, I curl my fingers around his hard penis.

The tip of his index finger grazes the edge of my sex before tapping lightly on my clit. The heat he creates starts in my lower belly, and I clamp harder on his penis, rubbing the pad of my thumb on its head.

When he pushes his finger inside me, I gasp. He withdraws. In. And out. Slowly.

“Saxton.” I reach for his mouth with mine.

Without stopping his maddening ministrations on my sex, he plunges his tongue in my mouth and tautens the arm around the back of my neck to devour my mouth.

He adds a second digit, and I moan. His talented fingers retract, and I suck on the skin of his neck. *My orgasm is so close.* “Saxton...”

His chuckle rumbles from his chest to mine. “I know, *mia bella.*”

As his finger glide from my vagina to—*Oh Lord*—my strokes on his penis become erratic.

His fingertip circles the doorway that's never been breached while his breath caresses my ear. "I want to fuck you there."

Saxton kisses me again, and I whimper when he pushes his finger in my butthole. He pauses, and I relax.

This feels so ... strange.

"Let me in, baby."

His thick digit feels huge. I hold my breath as he goes in. Out. Slow and gentle. Again, and again. A hot shiver floods under my skin, and I push on his finger. "Saxton."

He rocks in my hand, and his finger pistons faster while his penis sprouts hot fluid I rub over the mushroom head. I shift closer, seeking the friction I need.

"Saxton, I need..."

In one swift move, he sits up with his back on the headboard, taking me with him.

Straddling his lap, I place his heavy penis against my core. *God... So good.* I slap both my palms on his chest and slowly lower myself onto him. I love the burning stretch of our joining. Tilting my hips, I look for... There. The perfect angle.

I move up and down on his length.

Saxton clamps his hand on my nape while his finger finds my puckered entrance again. His voice is rough. Hungry. "Take it."

My eyes rooted in his, I scoot my knees forward and arch my waist before lowering myself onto his penis and finger.

The dual penetration lights a different type of pleasure. My body ignites. I take flight. And plummet into a blistering orgasm.

"My beautiful."

Saxton's warm hand cups my nape as he touches his forehead to mine, and we breathe each other. It's time for him to go back to Mordsen. When he slants back, my racing heart breaks a little at the emotions in his eyes.

"Jade, you're my mate, and I'm yours."

Being an alpha is as much a part of him as his wolf. What chance do we have if he has to give up his pack?

After pouring my love into our kiss, I whisper, "Go. I'll meet you there."

I will win this fight.

I won't lose Saxton.

After dropping my luggage at the Ellison hotel where Dana and I have booked the biggest suite, Vaughn takes us to the mansion at around 9:00 PM to meet Saxton.

His pack is already gathered in the woods.

The cavernous house, made of two houses attached by a long foyer, is empty, except for a few people who glance at our little quartet with curiosity.

As we step outside, Saxton kisses the back of my fingers.

Curving my hands around his tight jaw, I trace his furrowed brows, graze the pad of my thumb on his lips, telling him without words how much I love him.

The clearing is unfortunately a short distance from the house. Sam, Carson, and Harris lead us through a crowd that parts silently as we walk to the defoliated space. Werewolves in great numbers are waiting in thick ranks along the tall pine trees.

The little light there is, catches the wolves' eyes, making them gleam in the dark, and I freeze.

"Dana?"

“Got you.”

She flicks her fingers up, and suspended projector-like beams light up the clearing.

My heartbeat is crashing against my ears, and I feel like a Roman gladiator. I swallow hard. More like an appetizer for lions.

As Saxton takes position a few meters away from me, his dad, and his beta stand beside him.

Too frozen to smile, I nod at the women who took my side.

No one will intervene before one of us says, ‘uncle’.

I roll my shoulders back as the woman who challenged me strides in. Her steps are measured and her gait confident as she reaches the middle of the clearing. She’s in shorts, a halter neck white top, high wedges sandals, and earrings. *Freaking dangling earrings.*

As I braid my hair back, the catsuit feels a little tight. Dana inches her mouth close to the shell of my ear.

“Take the earrings first.”

When Vaughn hands me the dagger, I shake my head.

“I have the Bo staff doubling as a sword. It should be—”

Dana groans and puts a ward around us.

“Sweets, she has claws and fangs, and she’ll use them all on you. Take the bloody knife.”

“You’re bossy,” I mumble.

I strap the dagger to my thigh and nod at Vaughn. “Thank you, angel.”

He cups my cheek and smiles. “You have everything you need.”

Do I? Once geared up, I look at Saxton behind me with his arms crossed on his chest and his eyes on the omega. Even if she wins, she won’t be popular.

“Saxton?”

His eyes, full of icy rage, remain on Lisa. “Baby, if I look at you, I’ll grab you and run away from this clusterfuck.”

The omega’s voice cuts through the chilly air. “It’s not too late for you to change your mind, you know.”

I march toward her. As I stop a few meters away from her, she scoffs.

“Aww, bless. You’ve got your little stick and your Swiss knife.” After a quick once-over, her smile widens. “And you dressed up for the occasion. Cute.”

Oh. I am so going to wipe that conceited smirk off her fully made-up face. I tighten my fist around the staff. “I thought this was a fight, but if we’re just going to chitty-chat, maybe we can take this inside?”

She growls, and there’s nothing nice about that sound. Nothing at all.

Blood drains from her face, and when her fingers curl into fists, I shift to my side and plant the Bo staff against my inner foot.

She pounces.

Chapter Forty

Saxton

Twisting in the air, Jade socks Lisa's jaw with her staff, knocking off one of her earrings. The pack howls in cheer.

They've been fighting for nearly ten minutes. Jade evades every blow and lands a few of her own. When the Bo staff catches Lisa's cheek, she growls, touches her ear, and glares at her bloody fingers.

She sets angry eyes on my mate. This is the moment the she-wolf realizes Jade isn't the easy opponent she expected.

When the omega morphs, I clench my fists. My mate is going to get hurt.

As I step forward, my father touches my shoulder and alphan-speaks.

"If you go get her, it'll be the same as forfeiting. Your mate chose to fight, and I know I haven't been much of a father to you, but alpha to alpha, if you don't trust her to do whatever she can, so you can be together, she'll resent you."

Vaughn edges in. "Your father's right."

Dad and I both cut our eyes to the Fallen who notches his chin down. "It took me a few seconds to connect to the frequency you're using."

Is there anything that man can't do?

Using alphan-speak, he adds, "Show faith in her."

"I have faith in her." *I just don't want her to get hurt.*

At Lisa's snarl, Dana, Vaughn, and I step closer to the two women.

The she-wolf launches at full speed, claws and fangs out toward my mate who won't be fast enough. Jade's catsuit won't parry the omega's velocity, nor protect her against broken bones. *Move, baby. Move!*

She doesn't. *Jade*. A few seconds before Lisa's wolf reaches her, she spins twice, jabs the Bo staff in the ground, and slams it hard on Lisa's neck, using the she-wolf's momentum to send her barreling against a tree.

Lisa's body rolls on the ground before she reels back on her paws. She attacks again. Jade catapults herself over the wolf and lands half crouched, one palm on the ground, the other fisted around her Bo-staff.

She's not trying to match the omega's speed or strength. She's looking for the signs we talked about, learning her opponent as she fights.

Minutes stretch. My mate jumps to avoid another lash of the she-wolf's claws. Too late. Her muffled scream is all I can hear. She groans as blood drips from her shoulder to her wrist and side. The material of the catsuit stitches itself over her wound, but blood loss will weaken her faster. The omega's ears paste to her head, and she bares fangs.

They circle around each other some more. Then my mate, staff in hand, runs toward the omega whose hackles raise.

What is she doing? Baby. No.

The omega lunges. She knocks into Jade. My wolf howls as her body slams on the ground in a sickening thud.

My mate stays unmoving for long seconds while her breath wheezes out of her chest. When the she-wolf clamps her jaw on her calf, Jade's yell stabs at my chest. She rams her heel into the wolf's muzzle and kicks several times before the omega releases her bloody leg.

Once freed, Jade gets to her feet slowly and toes her weight off her injured leg. Her pale face is awash with pain. Curling both her hands around her staff, she leans heavily against it.

Baby, tap out.

It takes everything I have not to race to her, but Dad's right, and I won't dishonor her courage.

When the Bo staff falls by her feet and she bends at the waist trying to catch her breath, the she-wolf growls in satisfaction. She flings herself against my mate whose back hits the ground.

As Lisa sets her fore paws on her chest, and throws back her neck to claim victory, Jade pulls her dagger from her thigh and drives it deep in the she-wolf's inside leg, right at the joint. She twists the blade, and tendons and muscles shred.

The omega yelps and staggers off my mate's chest. Jade leaps onto Lisa's back. She hooks her right arm under the wolf's neck, anchors it into the crook of her left elbow, and shackles her legs around Lisa's wolf.

The she-wolf bucks wildly to get rid of the magnificent woman who has her in a choking hold, but my mate puts her whole body into it. And I know she won't let go because she didn't slip once during our run in the woods. When her arms tighten around the she-wolf's throat, the din coming from the pack grows louder.

As I step closer, the pack follows, narrowing the circle around the fighters.

My mate holds on. Time suspends, extending until Lisa's legs buckle and her belly hits the ground.

When the oxygen deprived omega morphs to heal, I exhale slowly.

Hold on just a little longer, baby. Just a little longer.

Still on the naked woman's back, Jade pulls the dagger and pushes it against Lisa's carotid. "Say it."

Nothing but a rasp comes out of Lisa, so she presses the blade until blood pearls.

"Say it."

Coughing, Lisa taps her palm on the ground, and a sharp breath rushes out my chest.

My Jade won.

But that's not enough for my mate who doesn't let go of Lisa's neck. "I want you to say it."

Lisa coughs. "He's ... yours. Sax is yours."

My beautiful mate stands up on unsteady legs and steps back from the omega. "Damn right, he is."

Her golden gaze locks onto mine. Tears, blood, and dirt cover her face as she throws me an exhausted smile. She's fucking breathtaking.

As I reach for her, she wraps her hand around my neck to pull me down for a short, hard kiss.

"You're mine."

I curl my arm around her waist. "Fuck yeah, I am."

She turns toward the pack. "He's mine!"

While the pack howls in response, I tense. Her breathing isn't right, and her scent is poisoned with pain. As I shift to carry her, she shakes her head. Her expression is both fierce and vulnerable.

"I want to *walk* out of here," she mouths.

My chest expands in exploding pride at the true warrior she is. One who understands how projecting strength is as important as strength itself. I tuck her to my side, supporting her back upright while keeping my pace slow.

When louder howls fill the woods, she grins, and I stare at her, awed. *My mate.*

Ris points his chin at the omega. "I'll take care of Lisa."

"She's out tonight."

Jade tries to hide her wince as she turns to me. "What's going to happen to her?"

Not nearly enough to appease my rage. “I don’t fucking care.”

Flanked by Dana, Vaughn, Dad, and Carson, we walk out of the clearing followed by the crowd.

As soon as we step over the threshold of the mansion, the pack disperses, already in celebratory mode.

Jade whimpers, and her knees give in.

Gently, I wrap my mate in my arms and leap up the stairs five steps at the time to my bedroom where Vaughn and Dana appear a second later. My wolf whines, frenzied at the scent of her blood as I lay her gently on the bed. When I slide a pillow under her head, she sucks in a pained breath. The strain of the fight carves into the lines bracketing her pinched lips.

I cup her pale cheek with shaking fingers. “Baby.”

She covers my hand and presses her soft lips against my palm.

When Dana touches the back of my shoulder, I straighten up. “She’ll be as good as new, I promise. Just a little tired but nothing a juicy steak won’t cure.”

The Fallen pecks her forehead. “Zayn called on me. I’ll see you soon, love.”

My mate nods. “Say hello to him for me.”

“I certainly will not.”

Her smile is more of a grimace as Vaughn follows me out of the bedroom.

As soon as I shut the door behind us, he pivots to face me.

“She’s a gift.”

She is. One I’ll cherish for the rest of my life.

Thyonian’s eyes flash black and my wolf’s hackles rise. “If you ever give her reasons to call on me, it’ll be the last

time you ever lay eyes on her.”

Fuck you. I clench my fists. “Won’t happen.”

A curt dip of his chin, and he’s gone.

I shove my hands in my pockets and wait for my mate, my woman who fought valiantly for us.

Jade

Dana scowls as the healing energy flows through her fingers and into my skin. “That bitch broke two ribs.”

While the gentle fire of her powers moves across my chest, I tense. The healing part is almost as painful as the injury. To distract myself, I peruse the large room. Saxton is a big man, and it’s reflected in the size of the bed that could easily sleep six of me. The classic furniture has simple, elegant lines, and the humongous couch and armchairs in the seating area are a deep navy blue that contrast nicely against the bare cream walls.

Spartan, strong, and quiet. Like him.

Dana sighs loudly and puts a ward around us before tending to my lower body. “Is it even insulting if I call her a bitch?”

My chuckle is cut short by the shard of pain throbbing in my calf. “What?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know what you call female wolves who are also evil arseholes.”

Peeking at the top of her head, I sigh. “She’s in love with Saxton. That’s not a crime.”

“No, the crime is to dig up some sodding ancestral law to stop you from being with your mate.”

There’s that.

“All done, sweets.” She sits up. “Do you realize I’ve healed you more times in the last three weeks than I’ve done

in the past fourteen years?”

I do. “Thank you, my Dana. So much.”

Scooting up against the bedhead, I close my eyes and exhale slowly to stave off the roiling bile rising to my throat. *Adrenaline crash.*

When I open my eyes, she tilts her head to the side and takes my hand.

“What’s the matter?”

Tears I can’t stop, roll down my cheeks. “There’s so much ... violence and pain. Roselyn ... I expect it from demons, they’re created for chaos and thrive on it. Then ... the Pures, Ryzan ... and now here. Again.”

Dana frames my face. “Just let it out.”

“I’m not sure... Tonight I had to fight a werewolf because some Were law says she could challenge me for the man I’ve loved all my life.” I snifle. “Dana, I wanted to kill a woman tonight. And ... and I don’t know. It’s a lot.”

“Is it too much?”

“Right now, it is.”

She holds my hands. “Just breathe through it, sweets. One second at a time, then one minute.”

I take a deep breath. “Saxton never told me he loved me.”

“What do you mean?”

More tears burn my cheek. “I love him, and I’ve told him, but he never said the words back to me. He just says, ‘you’re mine’ and ... I know we’re fated mates, but fate doesn’t mean love. Sometimes, I think if whatever powers-that-be hadn’t decided we were true mates, he wouldn’t be with me.”

“Jade, this is rubbish. Sax adores you. Does it really matter where it comes from?”

I nod. "It does. Because I'm not Were. I don't feel the call like he does. All I have is my heart."

Curling her warm fingers around my face, she says, "That man is so into you it's almost scary. But I get it. Ask him. He might be able to smell the truth, but you have your heart. You'll know."

She's right. So, I smile at my friend.

"I kicked a werewolf's butt."

Dana grins. "You did. Sax wasn't doing well. I swear I could hear his teeth grinding."

The door shakes under heavy pounds, and we both jump. "Baby? Dana, is she okay?"

"So impatient," I whisper. After Dana fells the ward, I say to the door, "I'm all right. Just a minute."

My heart sister grins and spells the ward back up. "When it comes to you, he's a lot of things." The glint in her eyes is impish as she mouths, "All of them huge."

As we stand up, she flicks her fingers to restore the bed to its original state and smiles. "Think of one of the thousand outfits you've packed for tonight."

I roll my eyes. "I've only packed ten." *Okay, maybe fifteen. Not more than twenty.*

When her brow lifts, I giggle.

"The blue strapless dress. And gold platform wedges."

"He won't know what hit him."

After I'm dressed, I sit on the bed and pull her down beside me. "What happened with your ex the other night?"

She shrugs and her lips curve down. "He reached out because he heard of the battle with Ryzan through one of his friends. I saw him, we talked. He apologized and said he wanted me back."

I scoot closer. "And?"

The sadness of her smile pinches at my chest, and I curl my arm around her shoulders.

“What happened?”

After a deep sigh, she shakes her head. “Nothing. I looked at him and saw a ruggedly handsome, selfish, spoilt man-child. And I felt nothing. Not even anger, and that’s the saddest part of it all.”

I hold her tighter and kiss her hair. “What do you need?”

Dana shifts to face me, and her expression bubbles with mischief. “A rough tumble with a hard cock.”

Chuckling, I whisper. “What kind of rough are we talking about?”

She wriggles her brows. “The kind who can take magic and dish it back.”

“Good luck to him.”

She grins. “Luck is overrated, he just needs stamina. And a hard cock.”

We giggle while I bask into our loving complicity.

Saxton

When the door finally opens, I inspect my mate’s body while Dana stands behind her. The navy blue dress bares her unblemished shoulders and arms, her face has a healthy glow, and her gait is back to its sexy self.

“Baby, are you okay?”

When she nods and smiles, I pull her to me and breathe her in.

“Ahem.”

Dana grins as she points her finger at the hallway. “This way to the party?”

“Dad and Carson are downstairs.” As she brushes past us, I step before her and dip my chin. “Thank you, Dana. For everything.”

I extend my hand, but she ignores it and squeezes my forearm instead. “I didn’t do it for you, but you’re welcome.”

Left alone with my mate, my need for her sharpens to the point of pain. “Come here, my beautiful.”

She grins. “*You* come here. I won—”

I swallow the rest of her sentence. Her tongue strokes mine, and I lose myself in her taste, her scent. Her.

Jade yanks her mouth from mine to catch her breath, and fear coats her scent while the pulse at the base of her neck races.

As she lifts her darkened eyes to mine, I wrap my hand around her nape. “Baby, I won’t let anything—”

She shakes her head. “It’s not that.”

Tension fills my body. “What is it?”

Her breath rushes out. “Do ... do you love me?”

How many times...? I can’t help the growl in my tone. “Jade, you’re—”

“I know. I know I’m your true mate, and that we’re fated to be together and all that. But if we weren’t fated, would you ... would you still—?”

The knot tightening my chest loosens, and I cup her face. “Would I choose you?”

Her golden gaze brims with tears as she nods.

I hook my eyes onto hers. “My Jade, I’ve loved you from the moment I first saw you. I loved you when everything I was taught was telling me I couldn’t. I loved you when I thought you belonged to another man. But love is too weak a word. You make me both hard and soft, and your smile is my

rising sun. I want to make my world a better place for you, because it has no meaning, no value if you're not in it."

On a trembling breath, she places her soft hands on my chest. "My wolf."

I eat at her mouth. Rough. Too hard. She's been through too much violence tonight, and I should... She moans while she claws at my neck, and the next second, she's flat on my bed while I push my cock between her legs, desperate to be inside her.

Half-crazed, I reach under her dress, but she clamps her hand around my wrist.

"Saxton, wait."

My wolf comes out in my voice. "Baby—"

She pushes on my chest. "We should stop."

Fuck, not this again. "Because you don't want my scent on you?"

My mate curls her fingers around my face and rubs her nose against mine, snuffing out my anger. "No, Alpha Cavendish, we're each other's now, and I want you all over me. I'm just hungry and I want to dance."

I rock my cock against her. "We can dance right here. Naked."

My mate giggles, which makes me smile and gives me the strength to get on my feet, taking her with me.

After another kiss, I pull her hips to mine. "All over you. Tonight."

"Yes, and me all over you."

I grit my teeth against the heady scent of her arousal, and before I change my mind, I lead her out of the room.

Chapter Forty-One

Jade

As soon as we reach the last step leading to a high-ceilinged foyer, Dana, Sam, Carson, and Harris smile at us.

Sam is the first to speak. He takes my hand, and his expression is warm. “Jade, great fight. How are you feeling?”

“I’m well. Thank you, Sam.”

He turns his grey eyes to his son’s, and emotion fills both their gazes as Saxton tucks me tight against him.

As Carson and Harris congratulate me, a bullet of a child tears through the French windows.

“Jade!”

Oriana barrels across the room, and we hug each other tight.

“How are you, sweetie?”

She giggles excitedly. “Cath said you’re our Luna, now. Is it true? Are you going to live here and stay with us forever? Can you come to our house? We have your hotdogs.”

I gawk at the little girl. Wow. That’s a lot of questions. I peck her head. “Thank you for the hotdogs, sweetie.”

She grins. “Will you sit next to me?”

When I promise I will, she races back outside, and I turn to Saxton. “What’s a Luna?”

The room goes quiet, and his expression is ... I’m not sure, so I touch his chest. “Tell me.”

Saxton’s fingers graze my cheek. “It’s a term of respect and endearment for the female alpha of a pack.”

Speechless for a couple of seconds, I blink fast. “The...? Oh, wow. So, this is a good thing then?”

He grins. “It’s a great thing.”

My heartbeat slows down a little. “But people will still call me Jade, right? Luna sounds a little ... odd.”

Everyone chuckles, but only one smile matters, my wolf’s. He’s happy. “They’ll call you whatever you want.”

When Saxton pulls me to him, I loop my arms around his shoulders.

“We’ll get mated next week and make it official.”

Is he insane? My arms fall to his sides, and I step back—or try to—but Saxton’s hold tightens while his jaw clenches. “Saxton, I can’t—”

He cups my cheek. “Baby—”

“A week? You want me to plan our wedding in a week?”

His brows shoot up. “A wedd—?”

“The pack needs to be protected, and since the world thinks you’re human, it’ll have to be a wedding, then an Erousia ceremony. So, I’ll need two dresses, probably three. Vaughn and I need to issue a press release to announce it, so the public and our sponsors are not blindsided and continue to support UnityFest and Whole of Us. Which means interviews and all that jazz. Then, I need to find the perfect location, locations, plural, send invites to our friends, organize my bridesmaids, and—”

Saxton kisses me, effectively silencing me, and when he enfolds me back in his arms, his eyes brim with laughter. “Okay, beautiful. We’ll do it your way.”

I smile so hard, my face is hurting. “Really?”

He curls his hand around my nape. “Really.”

My heart bursts wide open. I throw my arms around his neck, and my voice comes out as a whisper. “We’re getting married?”

He pecks the tip of my nose. “And mated.”

“And mated.”

“Congratulations?”

At Dana’s amused quip, I whip my eyes to her and jump in my friend’s hug. We laugh and talk at the same time, then hug again. I’m so giddy, it takes me a minute to realize the men are laughing while they’re watching us. Even Carson.

Leaping back in Saxton’s arms, I kiss him fast. “Let’s eat, I’m starving.”

Once outside, we’re welcomed by a lot of grinning faces, some I know, most I don’t. It’s a big, big crowd. I step back—straight into Saxton’s warmth and lift my eyes to his. Heated desire and love swirl in liquid silver. Tears swell at the back of my throat. *God, I love him so much.*

I don’t need to say it. His wolf growls. A happy noise that makes me both shiver and giggle.

Ashley and a woman I haven’t met near us.

I smile at Ashley and angle my face at the stranger’s big brown eyes enhanced by her curly red pixie haircut.

“Luna, my name’s Nadia. I’m a Cavendish omega. We wanted you to know that Ash and I never shared Lisa’s views and were happy to help Sax change the law.

He did?

“Thank you, Nadia. Please, call me Jade, and this is my friend Dana.”

As they greet each other, I touch Ashley’s hand. “Saxton said you were the keepers of knowledge and traditions of the pack, and I have millions of questions. Probably not tonight, but whenever you’re available, I would love to talk with you.”

Both omegas laugh, and my cheeks heat up. *Did I make a faux-pas?*

Ashley grins. “Luna, we’re at your service.”

I’m not sure how to take that, so I just smile.

Saxton

My mate nods at something Cath says while Oriana trots back to their group and hands her a plate piled with food.

After thanking the pup with a kiss on her head—something she does often and to which the girl responds by burrowing into Jade’s body—she smiles at me, and her expression shoots straight through my chest.

“A mating will be good for the pack’s morale,” Ris says, and as I turn to him, he grins. “Have you thought about a ring for the wedding?”

Fuck. I haven’t. Weres don’t typically wear jewelry that’ll likely be lost during morphing. But my Jade wants a wedding, and that’s what she’ll get. Ring and all.

When Carson slams his bottle of beer on the table, his eyes on my mate, I sit up. “Is the witch mated? Lot of power in those small hands.”

You have no fucking idea.

He grunts. “I’ll ask her myself.”

I glance quickly at my father and Ris, who hide their smiles behind their beers. We’ve never seen Carson with a woman nor a man.

Without losing a beat, Dad’s beta says, “I liked what Jade said about protecting the pack’s secrecy. She was making plans for your mating, but she still thought of the pack first.”

Dad raises his bottle in a cheer. “To the Luna.”

When the dancing starts, Dana waves goodbye at the small assembly while Oriana hugs my mate, who whispers something to her that makes her giggle. They’re leaving. She still doesn’t feel safe here. As they approach our table, I get on my feet and exhale slowly. *She needs time.*

My beautiful Jade interlaces her fingers with mine and grins. “Can you give us a ride back to the hotel?”

Patience. “Sure.”

She beams at me. “Thank you. Dana’s going to cover for me at the center for a few days, so I need to pick up my suitcase.”

“*Suitcases,*” Dana says drawing on the end of the word while Jade rolls her eyes, but she’s grinning.

She staying. I tuck her to my side. “Whenever you’re ready, baby.”

As Dana’s about to reply, Carson appears next to her. “I can give you a ride and bring back Jade’s cases.”

Jade’s friend points her chin at the back of the house toward Carson’s bike. “I’m not getting on that death trap.”

I don’t know how she knows the bike is his, but since I’ve had a glimpse of her powers, nothing surprises me anymore.

When Carson says he also has a truck, Dana’s smile is slow as she peruses over him. “I think I’d like that, thank you.”

The beta growls low. “My pleasure.”

After hugging Jade, she follows Carson to his truck while Dad steps beside me and were-speaks.

“Didn’t see that coming.”

Me neither.

As my father strides away, I fold my mate in my arms. “You’re staying.”

She angles a cute-as-hell grin to me and nods. “I want to get to know my people.”

The explosion in my chest makes my wolf howl.

Tugging on my hand, she giggles. “That’s a happy sound. Come dance with me.”

Fuck yeah. When I paste her hips against mine, she laughs harder and shakes her head.

“Just one dance. Here.” She curls her arms around my neck. “Then, we’ll *dance*.”

Whatever she wants. Always.

So, I make her twirl and spin while her laughter cascades in the warm evening.

Jade

Saxton kicks the door of his bedroom shut and drives his hands in the pockets of his jeans. His smoldering gaze roams over me. “Off.”

Shivering at the low command, I reach for the back of my dress while my heart races. The hiss of the zipper precedes the faint whisper of my dress sliding to my feet. In my underwear and heels, my skin puckers up at the heat emanating from him.

His eyes set on my covered breasts. “Jade. Off.”

I unhook my strapless bra and let it slip to the thick rug.

My nipples harden as his gaze travels down to my panties.

“Bring them to me.”

God. I slide my lace panties down my legs before placing them in his open palm. When he lifts them to his nose and inhales deeply, I nearly orgasm at his low growl.

His crotch is bulging.

A heated tremor shakes my body, and all I want is...

“Baby, eyes on me”

I tilt my eyes up and grin. “But they are, Alpha Cavendish.”

Saxton’s lips twitch. “Turn around and walk to the bed. Slowly, so I can look at that beautiful ass. Then, place both your hands on the bed.”

Oh, that's new. I sway my hips as I move to the bed. I bend at the waist over the high bed and set my palms on the mattress. My body is so hot, the breeze blowing through the open windows makes me pant, and I clench my fingers on the thick duvet.

“Spread those gorgeous legs for me.”

I angle my head to watch him prowl to me. *Oh God.* My head hanging low, I do as he ordered, and shut my eyes. When the denim grazes the back of my legs, I gasp.

His booted foot kicks my feet farther apart, and he presses his hand on the small of my back. “Down, baby.”

I set my heated cheek on the comforter and fist the soft duvet, shivering harder because I can *feel* his gaze on me. “Saxton, please.”

His low chuckle swirls over my burning skin. “Shh, *mia bella.*”

This is torture. Sweet, but... “Saxton, if you don't hurry up, I'm—”

He pushes two fingers inside me, and I bite on a moan.

Yes.

“So wet, baby. Tight.”

His thick digits scissor, stretching me. In. Out. *Yes...* When I lose his fingers, I whimper. *Please don't stop.* “Saxton...” His breath is against my sex.

I scream into the mattress as his tongue glides along my sex from my clit to my core. Long leisurely laps that make my belly clench. When he stops, I rock back into his face.

He slaps my butt cheek.

I freeze, shocked by the noise before closing my eyes as the slight sting spreads into warmth.

His words fanning over my sex birth another shiver. “I've waited all day for this, so stay still and let me enjoy my

juicy pussy.”

A giggle escapes me. Soon cut off by another moan as his tongue plunges inside me. He goes deep, mixing slow licks and fast lashes over my clit. *Oh my God.*

“Saxton... God... Saxton!”

“Give it to me, baby.” The vibration of his voice against me tips me over and hurls me into an orgasm so sharp, I sob into the duvet.

I’m still shaking when he grabs my waist and lifts me to place me on all four in the middle of the bed. The mattress dips as he kneels behind me. I’m open. Craving.

His hands grip my hips. “Mine.”

Always.

“Baby, I’m going to fuck you hard, but I’ll make it good.”

It’s already good. Perfect.

He’s waiting.

When I watch him, his skin is pulled tight around his jaw and his wolf is in his eyes.

“I’m yours.”

He impales me.

Saxton

She screams, and I pause. I don’t want to hurt her. Never.

“Baby?”

Raising on her elbows, she flicks her curls over and opens her clouded eyes on me. “Please.”

I ram into her. Going deep. Hard. I watch my cock coated with her juices drill inside her and go faster. When she pulses on my cock, blistering pleasure shoots up my spine.

It's too good. I won't last.

“Come for me, beautiful.” I wrap my mate in my arms to pull her up. “Baby. Now.”

She moans while I crash my mouth onto hers, coming so hard I'm seeing stars.

After I lower her onto the bed, she rolls on her back and spreads her arms wide.

My mate is in my bed, with her hair fanning around her flushed face and her eyes closed. I kiss her swollen lips.

“Don't move, baby.”

A small, raspy chuckle shakes her chest. “I don't think I can.”

After unlacing her shoes, I wet a towel with warm water and sit by her hip.

Her satisfied smile as she spread her legs makes me hard. She opens her soft gaze on me. “It was the shoes, wasn't it?”

I peck her mouth. “It's you.”

When I glide the damp towel between her legs, she makes a throaty sound and shuts her eyes. She's so fucking beautiful. Smooth skin, tiny waist... The scar.

Pain knives through my chest. She's been through so much.

I kiss the shooting star carved into her skin. As I sit up, she straddles my lap, and I hold her close because I always need her as close as possible.

She wraps her arms around my neck. “Saxton, it was a long time ago.” After a tender kiss, she smiles. “Dana cast a contraceptive spell, so it won't happen again.”

Will you ever want to carry my pups? “You don't want it to happen again?”

Fear and sadness splice her scent. *She doesn't*. And she's all that matters, so I shut down the vision of her heavy with my pup and hold her closer.

“It's been a long day. Let's go to sleep.”

I kiss her slow until she softens in my arms and pull the duvet over us.

She burrows her face in my neck, glides her hand on my chest, and hooks her knee between my legs. When she yawns, I kiss her hair.

“When was that?”

“Mmm?”

Shifting, so I can see her eyes, I touch the smooth skin of her cheek. “When did Dana cast the spell?” *That will stop you from giving us pups.*

“The night I met Victoria and Rowan.”

“You were in a mood for a little orgy?”

Her little snort is cute. “It was also the day you told me why you broke up with me.” She lifts her smiling eyes to mine. “Then, I met your gorgeous wolf and that closed the deal for me.”

Tightness churns up my guts, and I press her closer.

“You'll meet plenty of wolves here.” *Unmated. Salivating at your delicious scent.*

She grazes her fingers on the side of my mouth. “But none of them will be my gorgeous, playful, silver-eyed wolf.”

I bury my nose in her hair.

Chapter Forty-Two

Jade

After waking up to slow morning sex, then shower sex, twice, I get dressed and call Dana, who updates me on the center. We've been busier than usual in the last few months, so I make it quick.

"How's Breanne doing?"

"She keeps to herself. I put her on cleaning duty tomorrow."

Yikes. Gore and vomit cleanup. Dana's fierce in holding grudges.

"I'll be back the day after tomorrow. We can catch up then, and you can tell me why Carson brought my cases late this morning."

There's a smile in her voice. "Let's just say *I* needed a time-out, and he's definitely on my list for a repeat performance."

Which doesn't happen often. "I'll need details."

Dana chuckles. "All right. Then, we'll organize the wedding of the century."

My heart races. "Yes."

After we say goodbye, I put on some lip gloss. It's time to meet the pack as Saxton's mate. I take a calming breath before walking out of the huge bathroom. Clutching my hands together, I smile at Saxton seated on the couch tapping on his cell.

"I'm ready."

After pocketing his phone, he wraps his arms around me. "After breakfast, we'll go for a tour of the territory."

"Should I get changed? I've brought more outfits, so if ___"

He cups my face. “Jade, you’re my perfect mate. There’s nothing I would change about you. Nothing.”

I read the truth in his metallic eyes, and tears swell in my throat. I roll up on my toes and graze my lips to his. “My love.”

His eyes lock onto mine. “Is this what I am, your love?”

“Yes.”

Our lips meet. The kiss is slow, hot, and wet. He opens his mouth on my neck while his palm slides under my top, and I shiver.

In quick moves, he undresses me and lays me down on my back on the bed. Standing up, his chest vibrates with a growl as he watches my body. His gaze stops on the apex of my sex, and my nipples harden.

He lowers himself on the mattress, spreads my legs wide, and licks his lips. “I promised you breakfast, but first, I eat.”

When we finally make it downstairs—he has access to both houses, but the second house is entirely his and only opened to invited guests—we stride to the large table of the sunbathed living room where Sam and Harris are already settled side by side.

They both get to their feet to greet us.

A young, heavily pregnant woman walks out from what I guess is the kitchen. She grins. “Good morning, Luna. Would you like some coffee?”

My gaze drops to her belly. “Call me Jade. I would love some, but I can get it myself.”

The curly haired brunette shakes her round face. “Oh no, no, no. I have four little ones at home, and cooking here is my happy, calm place. Are you hungry? I read somewhere that

you like parmesan. I can make you a cheese omelet with wild mushrooms.”

This is her fifth child? I gawk at the woman who looks like she’s in her mid-twenties.

She dips her chin. “My apologies, Luna. I didn’t mean to remind you—”

When I touch her hand, she snaps her frowning gaze to mine. “What’s your name?”

“Brittany,” she whispers.

Inching closer, I say, “Brittany, please call me Jade, and I apologize for staring. It’s just that you look very young to be a mother of ... nearly five?”

Her grin returns as she rubs her belly. “Yeah. It’s been a long four months.”

I can’t help but chuckle. “Can you imagine nine?”

She giggles. “I could have two in that time!”

Still feeling a little guilty, I grin at the happily pregnant woman. “The omelet sounds wonderful, thank you.”

She has a lovely smile. “It’s my own recipe and if I say so myself, it’s pretty good.”

“I’m salivating already.” And I am.

Sam chuckles. “How come I didn’t get offered your special omelet?”

Harris grins behind his mug. “Me neither.”

Brittany scoffs. “Because I was going to make it just for the L ... just for Jade.” She turns to Saxton almost as an afterthought and grins. “And for you too, Sax.”

Saxton kisses the inside of my wrist. “It’s all right. I’ll taste Jade’s.”

I shake my head. “I’m not sharing my food with you. You’ll eat half of it before I have my second bite.” I look at Brittany, whose almond-shaped eyes shine with laughter. “Can

you please cook two? Are you sure I can't help? I'm a decent sous-chef."

Brittany readies to reply but Saxton says, "You're *my* sous-chef."

He's possessive about the weirdest things.

Chuckling, she waddles back to the kitchen.

His territory is much, much larger than I thought. We've been driving for hours. Every time we stopped, we were met by his pack members, families mostly, business owners, architects, artists, accountants, and medical professionals. All were nice and welcoming.

Back in the car, with my hand in his on his thigh, I pull up my sunglasses and just watch my mate. He's truly beautiful.

His eyes on the road, he grins and kisses my fingers. "If you keep looking at me like that, we won't make it to SCs."

Saxton told me the name of the restaurant stands for Sarah Cavendish.

"How am I looking at you? Like I'm dying to feel you push into my throat? Or like I'm craving you deep inside me, to be filled by you. Or—"

A snarl is the only warning I get before the car veers abruptly onto a dirt road.

Laughing, I peer at his profile. "Where are we going?"

The heat in Saxton's tone mirrors the need seizing my body. "One of our cabins is up the road."

I press my thighs together. "How far is it?"

Seated comfortably at the large table in Catherine's backyard, I grin at Oriana and her friends who gesticulate animatedly as they tell us about their day. Saxton and I have

been invited for dinner with a few of Catherine's friends. James and Cyrus brought their daughter Sally, while Colin and Rachel are with their daughter Reece. More people will join us later.

After the first few minutes of easy banter, the men fire up the barbecue, and I lean back in my armchair.

As I set my glass of dangerously delicious sangria on the table, Catherine's posture stiffens while Rachel, seated across from me, sits up. I track Catherine's gaze over my shoulder.

Harris, Breanne, and a girl approximately the age of Oriana approach slowly.

Oriana claps her hands while Sally and Reece shriek. "Janis is here," Oriana says before running to hug a mini version of Breanne.

When Saxton's sister sees me—or smells me—she pales, and her eyes snap to Saxton, who strides across the backyard toward them with his jaw clenched.

I quickly make my way to them and slide my hand into Saxton's, who turns to me.

"They're leaving, baby."

Harris notches his chin down and wraps his arm around Breanne's shoulders. As they start to pivot, my heart breaks a little. I hate seeing people being ostracized. Absolutely hate it.

I touch Breanne's arm. "How did it go at the center, today?"

She gapes at me for a couple of seconds. "Um... Busy. Very busy. I was helping with intakes."

Intakes is by far the most draining—and heartbreaking—job at the center. For each of our visitors, we must decide who needs our help the most, then determine who will be most harmed if we don't help. We've drawn guidelines and protocols, but none of us has ever turned down a woman who's had the courage to come through our doors. Which

means we're often overwhelmed by the sheer number of people who need our help.

"I see. And what did you think?" When she just blinks, I smile. "Do you want a drink?" When she glances quickly at Saxton, I say, "Come have a drink. I know I need one after a day of intakes."

Harris rubs her arm as she nods. "I'd like that... Thank you, Luna."

"Jade."

She clears her throat. "Thank you, Jade."

I squeeze Saxton's fingers and turn my smile up to him. "Would you like a drink, my love?"

His eyes soften. "I'm good, baby." He pecks my nose before turning to his beta. "We need more elk."

"On it," Harris says before following him to the grill.

As Breanne and I walk to the table, Catherine grins. "I made my sangria."

Saxton

It's late. A breeze cools down the air as we're walking back to the mansion.

My mate tightens her arm around my waist.

"Are you cold, baby?"

When she shakes her head and lifts her beautiful gaze to mine, I stop to stroke her cheek. "Why are you being nice to Bree?"

She sighs. "I don't know. She's your sister. She's just lost her mother, and I... Sylvia wasn't... Sylvia was my mother, and for a long time I believed her views of the world were the world. For Breanne, it's... The pack is what she's known all her life, her family and support system. And I want to think she can change, but that won't happen if she can't be a

functioning member of her pack.” Her gaze softens and she wraps both her arms around my waist. “I know you’re keeping her away from me, and thank you for that, but I’ve been on the outside, and I don’t want to do that to anyone.”

She is love. I touch my forehead to hers and breathe her in. “Okay, mia bella, I’ll follow your lead.”

Leaning back, she chews on her bottom lip. “Do you think I’m too soft?”

I think you’re one of the strongest people I know. “No, baby. I think you’re perfect.”

Her expression turns cute. “If you keep telling me that, I’m going to get a big head.”

And you’d still be perfect. “Let’s go for a run.”

Pricks of fear cut through her scent. She tenses and presses closer against me. “Here?”

Fuck. We’re close to where she was attacked. I frame her face. “Mia bella, if you don’t feel safe here, we can settle anywhere else on the territory. I don’t want you to ever feel scared. Here, or anywhere.”

My beautiful mate places her cheek on my chest, and I tighten my hold on her. “Thank you, my love.”

I fucking love when she calls me that.

“I just miss our tree.”

Slanting back, I tilt her chin up. “What?”

She smiles. “My reading tree, where you found me before we made love for the first time. It was my favorite place on Earth.”

“And you call it ‘our tree’?”

Her nose scrunches up. “Well, it was always your tree since it’s on your land, but for me, it’ll always be the first place I felt safe and happy.”

She's killing me. I take her mouth and kiss her hard, long, losing myself in her. When she moans, I palm her ass and groan as she links her legs around my waist.

She pulls away and grins. “But we can run on the other side, can't we?”

The joy and excitement in her scent are almost matching mine. After another taste of her mouth, I set her on her feet and morph.

As her soft skin wraps around me, I chuff and roll my body against hers as her breath puffs against my fur.

“Let's run, my wolf.”

My mate likes speed, so I run at full velocity. I jump and dart through the forest, our bodies as one as we race through the woods.

Thyonian gets to his feet and dips his chin at Princess Floralis. “Princess Floralis Arbor Antheron, welcome, and thank you for joining us.”

The Fae Jade calls Flo tilts her head to the side. “Thank you, Vaughn.” She scans our group. “My father and sisters are either too stubborn or too arrogant to take the threat of the First Ascended seriously, but I won't make that mistake. I saw Fae folks dying for him that day.”

Seated in the large living room of the cabin located on the Kaste pride territory, we report and discuss disappearances and unexplained deaths amongst Mets and the Werenation.

After Anya, the high priestess and head of the Witch Council reports the disappearance of all members of a small coven in New England, Vaughn's tone turns hard, a reflection of what we're all feeling.

“I'll scout the land. If demons are involved, I'll find a trace.”

Kaste, Ryker, Winchester, Cole, Hassan—the werecoyotes’ alpha—and Arkin—the weretigers’ alpha—nod slowly.

I should have been doing this years ago. “We’re in. I’ll dispatch one of our team there.”

The high priestess dips her chin. “Thank you, Alpha Cavendish.”

We all know it won’t take long before Ryzan recruits another army of psychopaths, rapists, and murderers seeking magical juice.

When the meeting ends, we grab some drinks, and our meeting relaxes into more of a social gathering.

Kaste slaps my shoulder. “Congrats on your upcoming mating. And thank you for inviting us.” He shakes his head, and his grin gets wider. “Man, two ceremonies?”

For the wedding, nearly four hundred people—most of them humans—have been invited to the manor. Our mating will be in Mordsen.

Two weeks ago, Jade and I sat with journalists, telling them how we met fourteen years ago and fell back in love with Vaughn’s blessing. The public lapped up the second chance love story we painted, and somehow leaves us in relative peace, only asking for selfies. Mostly from my mate who’s been happily running around between the center, the pack, and the manor. So much so that we’ve only seen each other six times in the last ten days. I crave my mate.

“Yeah. Vaughn’s going to officiate both.”

None of the witches nor Fae he knows has ever performed a mating between a Were alpha and a human revived by a Fallen’s crux.

Ryker narrows her eyes on Vaughn. “The press is saying you’re heartbroken over Jade marrying a human.” She sets her glass on the coffee table. “At least the Pures will lay off your

back. Even though those cocksuckers are taking credit for Jade ‘making the right choice.’”

Thyonian’s chuckle is low. “There’s that.”

She cuts her gaze to me. “Cavendish, are all of us on your territory going to agitate your pack? Tati will be there, and I would prefer not to have to kill anyone.”

When they all turn to me, I clench my jaw. “Their Luna’s human, they’ll deal.” *And the ones who don’t won’t remain in my pack.* After Jade won the dominance challenge, a few have already left in search of another pack. They’re on the pack’s kill-on-sight list if they come near my mate.

“Their what?” The weretiger asks.

After I explain, May Winchester grins. “And they call her that?”

I don’t hide my pride as I nod. My mate’s earned her title by being her fiercely beautiful self.

After more banter, the other alphas say their goodbyes, and Floralis glides toward me. “Sax, you had a question for me?”

I clear my throat. “Yeah.”

Chapter Forty-Three

Jade

Vaughn and I land in the living room of my house, fully decked with the best alarm systems and a ward Dana designed. He smiles while the glamour of his eyes vanishes.

“You look tired.”

I’m exhausted. As I kick my shoes off, I grumble, “Thanks, angel. That’s what every girl wants to hear.”

The trip to Joburg was the last one planned before I can focus fully on the wedding and the mating ceremonies.

Tilting his head to the side, Vaughn frowns before nodding his understanding. “I see, it’s one of those instances when I shouldn’t say what I observe, isn’t it?”

I smile. “I’m just grumpy because I’m tired.”

“Which was my point, love. You remain your beautiful self, but you’ve been working non-stop on your wedding and mating, and I know you can only rest in your mate’s arms, whom you haven’t been with for thirteen days.”

And twelve nights.

He chuckles. “He seemingly cannot rest without you either. See you soon.”

Saxton’s here? Vaughn’s barely out of the room before I yank the front door open. *My wolf.* I jump him, arms and legs tight around his big body. “God. I’ve missed you.”

“Ba—”

I mesh my lips to his grin and dive in his mouth. When I suck on his tongue, he groans and takes over the kiss, but too soon, he slants his head back and lowers me to the floor. And that’s when I notice he’s not alone.

My eyes widen at the grinning, slim brunette standing behind him.

“Sandrine?” I whip my eyes between Saxton and the designer. “What are you... How are you here?” I tug on her wrist. “Oh, my God, come in, come in.”

Once we’re all inside, Sandrine says. “Sax told me you were getting mated, and that the jumpsuit I made for you got damaged.”

Saxton went to Paris?

As the French woman continues, I snap my attention back to her grin. “He asked if I could help with your wedding dress.”

I gape at her. “And would you?”

Her fingers swat my question away, but she does it in the elegant way French women seem to be doing everything. “Of course, but I’m surprised more established couturiers haven’t offered to make your dress.”

“They have, but I haven’t had time to sit down with any of them. I need two dresses.”

Sandrine touches my hand. “We’d better get started then. Let’s meet tomorrow. My team arrives in the morning, and your mate loaned us a house not too far from the manor.”

He did?

I look at Saxton and get lost in the warm silver of his gaze.

She kisses both my cheeks. “Tomorrow, twelve-ish?”

“That would be great.” I squeeze her hand. “Thank you, Sandrine. Um ... how are you getting home? I can—”

The gifted designer chuckles. “Earth will show me the way.”

Such a Fae answer. Any other day, I would ask what she meant, but my gorgeous wolf is in my living room.

After shutting the front door behind her, I rest my back on the sleek surface and drink in the sight of him while the

world fades around us.

He extends his hand. “Come here, beautiful.”

My chest heaves, and before I can run to him, my vision blurs and my breath hitches.

When tears roll down my cheek, he frowns, and the next second, I’m in his arms.

“Baby, what’s wrong?”

Nothing’s wrong. I’ve just missed him something awful. I grip his waist and lift my eyes to his, but my words drown in the deluge of my emotions. “I... I...”

He carries me to the couch, where I straddle his lap and bury my face in his neck. “Shh, mia bella. Tell me what’s wrong, and I’ll make it better.”

All I can do is cry harder.

Saxton cups my face. “Is it about the designer? Because I can send her home if—”

I crash my lips onto his so hard our teeth clash. My tongue stabs his in jerky movements while I try to devour him.

Saxton takes over the kiss, and my whole body tunes up in sync to his.

When it ends, I lean back and cup his stubbly jaw. “Thank you for Sandrine.” I rub my nose on his. “You’re amazing.” I nip his bottom lip. “And thoughtful.” When I shift back and yank on the button of his jeans, his already heated gaze turns scalding. “Wonderful.” His warm palms slide under the skirt of my dress. “And after we mate...” I wrap my hand around his hard penis and thumb its slit while his fingers hook on my panties. “...I never want to be separated from you.” The bite of my lace panties ripping against my skin makes me shiver. “Because I can’t breathe...” My eyes on his, I kneel up, glide the head of his shaft in my wetness and place it against my core.

When I lower myself onto him, we both moan. I pause. His breath is as heavy as mine. "...without you." His grip on the back of my legs hardens and I fall into his wolf's eyes. "Saxton Cavendish..." I brush my lips on his. "Every part of me loves every part of you."

He slams me onto him, and I throw my head back.

God. So deep.

Pleasure sizzles, starting in my toes, and swirls up my back and my chest. Burning as it reaches every part of my body.

Saxton grabs my waist to lift me up slowly, and my sex pulses around the thick mushroom head. "Eyes on me, baby."

Yes.

He surges inside me. Hard. So incredibly deep. His growl echoes through me, and I shatter into a brain-melting orgasm.

Saxton

"Baby, wake up."

Jade nuzzles deeper in my neck. "Five more minutes."

I should feel guilty for keeping her awake most of the night, but it's been too long since I've been balls deep inside my mate. The way she climbed on my cock while telling me she loved me... Fuck.

Her soft lips stretch against my neck and her hand wraps around my eager cock. "Mmm, Alpha Cavendish, what a big hammer you have."

Chuckling, I press her on her back and peck her nose. "The better to pound you with."

She giggles. "That's so dorky."

After a slow kiss, she touches my jaw. "Thank you for bringing Sandrine over. It's the best wedding gift."

“You’re welcome, my beautiful.”

When I rock against her, she pushes on my shoulders and shakes her head. “I need to be at Whole of Us in an hour, and it takes me forty minutes to get ready.”

I nip her bottom lip. “So, that gives me at least five minutes to make you come.”

Her body shakes with laughter. “I like your math, but it’s not what—”

After positioning her, so her back is to my chest, I cup her warm pussy. She’s wet, ready for me. I want her dripping. I roll her clit between my fingers and suck on the crook of her neck. Her arm shoots out to hold my mouth to her. Her skin is already sensitized, preparing her for the claiming.

“Take me in, baby.”

She arches her back, and I thrust deep into heaven.

Four days later, two weeks before our human wedding, and nineteen days before our mating—but who’s counting?—I cross the threshold of the manor where I can come and go as I please, thanks to Vaughn’s angelic permission. Or something along those lines.

As soon as I walk in, Tilda’s purple mop of hair appears in between the archway of the kitchen. “Hey, Tilda. Jade upstairs?”

The peaceful Fae smiles. “She is, but I wouldn’t recommend going up just yet.”

I glance at the grand stairs. “Why? What’s wrong?”

She waves me into the kitchen. “Everything is perfectly well. The Princess, Sandrine, Dana, May, Corina, Tatiana, and the twins are with her.”

I like my balls intact, so I’ll stay downstairs.

“Sax.”

I almost flinch at the voice coming from behind me. Thyonian has no scent and makes no sound. It's like being blind around him. A feeling I could do without. I turn toward the Fallen. "Vaughn."

He points his chin toward the stairs. "There's a ward around her quarters." He shakes his head. "I've been told I'm not allowed in for this rite."

Tilda scoffs before climbing up the large staircase as we head for the living room.

An hour or so later, Dex and Eric join us. The company is pleasant, so I lean back on the black leather couch and enjoy the conversation while I wait.

Honeysuckle.

Jade and her friends walk through the open double doors, and we all stand up as they approach.

Her smile erases the last hours. She's luminous and radiates happiness.

My wolf chuffs, and my mate's grin gets wider.

"You're here." She closes the distance between us, wraps her arms around my neck, and rolls on her toes to lay a hard-on inducing kiss on my mouth.

After she hugs Dex and Eric, we settle on the couch. Jade curls up under my arm with her back to my side. When she tucks her head under my chin, I hook my arm across the top of her chest. We fit perfectly.

Dex leans in. "Peanut, heard you kicked some bitch's ass. Very proud of you."

I tense, but she just chuckles and places a kiss on my forearm. "She wanted my Saxton, so she had to go down."

The possessive tone makes me harder, and I peck the top of her head. "How was the dress fitting?"

“Elle va être splendide,” the designer says. *She’s going to be gorgeous.*

Which is the prompt for the other women to speak all at once.

Dana winks at me. “She looks phenomenal in both. You’ll see.”

“Our little Jade does.”

“She’s going to be the most beautiful bride.”

The twins nod in concert. “True beauty.”

Kaste’s mate flicks her fingers and Champagne appears on the table. “I’m so envious you get to have two parties and two dresses. When I mated Luc, I was pregnant with Tonie.” She winces. “He’s always been protective, but he went insane, so I was lucky to have a party at all.”

While the group is chatting away, Jade lifts her frowning gaze to mine while worry seeps into her scent. “We agreed I’d be driving up tomorrow. Is everything all right with the pack?”

I touch my mouth to hers. “Everything’s fine. I wanted us to drive together.”

Her eyes soften. “Thank you, my love.”

When I wake up the next morning, my mate’s scent is fading, which means no late morning sex. After a quick shower, I make my way to the kitchen.

Brittany glances over her shoulder. “She left with Sam.”

“Thanks, Brit.”

No coffee either.

I stride to the other side of the mansion. She’s not there.

As I stalk through the grounds on the east side, the knot in my chest loosens. Jade is seated at a small table surrounded by Ashley, Nadia, and Dad. My father didn’t exaggerate when he said my need for her would be painful. All I want is be

buried deep inside her every second of every fucking day. And if I'm not, I need her close enough to breathe her in. Or hear her voice. Or see her smile.

My mate nods at something Ashley says that makes Dad laugh. When she spots me, she throws her megawatt smile at me, and I get harder.

There are only four chairs at the table. Perfect. After a short kiss, I pull her up, take her seat, and settle her in my lap.

She loops her arm around my neck, oblivious to the others' amused looks. "We were talking about your traditions and customs. It's fascinating."

I inhale her nape. "Yeah?"

Touching my cheek, she says, "Have you eaten?"

"I'm still hungry."

Jade blinks fast before her face flushes.

Dad stands up, and the omegas follow suit after promising they'll catch up with her later.

When I finally have her all to myself, I nuzzle her neck. I'm almost shaking with need. When she frowns and shifts back, I pull her tighter.

"You don't want me to learn about your pack's traditions?"

What? "I do. Why?"

Something I don't like flickers in her gaze, so I make my voice gentle. "Baby, why do you ask?"

Her scent seals off. "I was asking for the mating because I want to make you proud. But then you made a sexual innuendo, and everyone left."

She twists her fingers in her lap, and the nervous gesture pulls at my chest. She's such an integral part of me that I forget how foreign the pack still is for her. A world she's embracing for me.

“No, mia bella, I woke up alone not knowing where you were.” When she lowers her eyes, I tilt her chin up. “Baby, the way I need you is making me fucking feral. I’m trying my best to control it, but I will fuck up. When I do, just tell me, okay?”

After a deep breath, she nods and wraps her arms around my neck. And as her shoulders relax, mine do too.

“I just want our mating ceremony to be perfect.”

I stroke the satiny skin of her cheek. “Jade, you make me proud every second of every day.”

Her smile starts small and when it reaches her eyes, my wolf stops pacing. I go in for a gentle kiss, but she sighs, so I eat at her mouth until she moans. I force myself to pull away.

“I have a surprise for you.”

She grins big. “What is it?”

Fuck, she’s cute. “It wouldn’t be much of a surprise if I told you, would it?” Another kiss because I need to, then I get us on our feet. “Let me show you.”

Her giggle is sweet. “Said the big, badass wolf.”

Chapter Forty-Four

Jade

I take Saxton's hand and step out of the truck. The large cabin nestled in the woods is the same as I remember. I grin at Saxton, who points his chin at the house.

“Do you remember this place?”

I curl my arms around his waist. “It looks like the cabin where I gave my virginity to the man I love. Oh, and had my first orgasm. And the first delicious meal he cooked for me.” I shake my head. “But it was such a random day I can't be sure.”

He pulls me closer. “We're going to have to do something about this sassy mouth of yours.”

I giggle. “I have a few ideas, but first, I want my surprise.”

Hand in hand, we round the back of the large cabin through a narrow path leading to a small meadow bathed by sunlight. I slow down, taking in the awe-inspiring little piece of heaven. “Saxton, this is beautiful.”

Saxton kisses the back of my hand and I grin at his expression. “Ready?”

“Yes.”

He hitches me up, and I wrap my arms and legs around him. I love feeling the strength of his body in motion. We walk past a trickling stream before he sets me on my feet. I close my eyes as he pivots me slowly and closes his arms around me from behind.

“Open your eyes.”

When I do, I gasp and turn to Saxton's smile. That's not... That can't be... I check our surroundings. We're nowhere near the road. And yet, standing proudly before us is

an exact copy of our willow tree. I point at the wooden coffer laying on the ground beside its roots. “What is this?”

“Go look.”

Saxton follows me underneath the curtain of hanging leaves. I lift the lid, and tears clog my throat. The interior of the crate is divided in two. There are fluffy cushions and a thick, folded blanket on one side, and a space for books on the other.

After closing the large chest, I graze my fingers on the coarse trunk. The striations on the bark are strikingly similar. “It looks exactly like our tree.”

He chuckles. “It *is* our tree.”

Spinning toward him, I gawk and shake my head. “How?”

“I asked Princess Floralis to help.”

I was told about Floralis’ powers, which sound amazing. And freaking scary.

“And what did she do?”

He scratches the back of his head while his sharp cheekbones flush, and I bite on my smile.

“I told her what the tree meant to you, so she ... asked it if it could move here. And the tree... accepted.”

Oh God, Saxton. Falling deeper in love with my wolf, I loop my arms around his waist. He touches his mouth to mine in a tender kiss and grazes the back of his fingers on my cheek.

“Baby, I know the pack can be overwhelming, so maybe this can be your happy place again.”

I throw my arms around his neck. “Will you cook when we stay here?”

His gaze burns into mine. “Whatever you want.”

“Naked?”

As he chuckles, I reach for a kiss, but he shifts back and pecks the back of my fingers. His expression makes my heart race. He digs into his pocket and slides a ring on my finger.

The oval-shaped, vivid green jade stone is surrounded by baguettes diamonds. It's breathtaking.

My voice comes out as a choked whisper. "Saxton..."

He kisses the inside of my wrist. "Do you like it?"

"I love it."

I yank his head down and latch my mouth to his. What starts as an I-love-you-thank-you-kiss, flames up, and I feed on his taste. My body softens while his hardens, and I moan.

Saxton trails his lips down the side of my neck and stops at the spot which has become extremely sensitive. The rumble rising from his chest cascades against my skin, pulls on my nipples, and I shiver violently. His teeth graze the small area, and my sex clenches. I clamp my hand on his nape for a deeper touch.

"Saxton..."

"Here or bed?"

"Bed."

We race—he does, I just hang on to him—to the cabin.

As I push the button on the keyboard to send the monthly report to the Veterans Affairs There's a knock on the glass door of my office. I wave our office manager, Lou Reynard, in. "Come in."

When she shuts the door behind her, I close my laptop. "How are our new arrivals settling?"

The Fae steps farther in my beige and pale green office. "Everything's fine. Dana went to Sacred Cross Hospital with Alana Barnes—our new Seelie resident OBGYN—and our new mothers. She asked me to remind you to go home."

My Dana. I smile at the young woman with long, navy-blue hair. “Are you and Alice coming to the reception?”

“Yes.” She reaches for the doorhandle and grins. “Go home. You’re getting married in two days.” Before closing the door, she chuckles. “Jade. Go.”

A few minutes later, just as I reach the back hallway leading to the parking lot, Breanne calls out. “Jade, do you have a minute?”

Wearing jeans and a t-shirt—sort of our unofficial uniform—she clasps her hands behind her back. She’s been very good. Never late, hardworking and surprisingly patient with all our clients.

“What is it?”

She clears her throat. “If there’s anything I can do for Saturday or next week, I’ll be happy to.”

She sounds sincere, but we’re not there yet. “Thank you, but I’m okay.”

It’s 4:00 AM, and I’m getting married in a few hours. Soon, the manor will be bursting with activity. The schedule is a little insane, but my girls will be there.

I sit on my bed and take a deep breath. I’m not sure it’s going to work because I’ve never called Zayn before. He just appears whenever he wants.

Keeping my voice low, I talk to my ceiling. “Zayn? I’m not in danger, I just want to share my happiness with my friend. Will you come tomorrow?”

I wait for long seconds. “Zayn?”

Please? A little sad, I slide under the covers before eventually falling asleep.

Dex grins. “Ready, Peanut?”

I curl my hand in the crook of his elbow and grin back.
“Yes.”

“*Attends, attends,*” Sandrine whispers. *Wait.* I’ve heard this word so many times in the last two weeks that I automatically straighten my back and stand still.

She fixes whatever minute detail doesn’t fit her vision of the rose-shaped lace band that cinches the waist of my otherwise deceptively simple wedding dress. The halter neck silk confection is absolutely divine. As we step before the closed double doors of the ballroom sized living room of the manor, one of the two photojournalists covering the event calls my name.

After shooting her flash at me, she lowers her camera.
“Jade, you’re glowing.”

I am because I’m marrying my love.

A little bit more than a hundred people wait for me to walk down the aisle to my wolf. More will arrive later.

The double doors open on my friends, colleagues, and UnityFest partners. Dana and Atilda walk in first, while Sandrine slips inside the room. Then, Corina and Tatiana. At the altar, Saxton is beyond handsome in his designer black suit contrasting nicely with the crispy white shirt open at the collar.

When the harpist starts the classical version of ‘*Insatiable*’, Dex walks me down the aisle under my wolf’s burning eyes and my family’s grins.

At the altar, he pecks my head before joining Cole, Sam, and Harris standing on Saxton’s side.

Saxton opens his palm. Shivering at the warmth of his hand, I stand before my gorgeous husband-to-be who wraps his arms around my waist. “My beautiful.”

“You’re beautiful,” I whisper back.

Vaughn chuckles. “I’ll be quick.”

A humming chortle rises from the crowd as we turn to my angel.

Saxton

Damn, but my mate's beautiful. Her hair is pulled back and her curls gathered in a sleek bun on her nape. My Jade glows with happiness. And her scent... *Fuck*.

After she slides the ring on my finger, I kiss the back of her hand.

"I now declare you husband and wife."

I haul my wife in my arms while she wraps her arms around my neck.

When I peck her beaming smile, she whispers against my mouth, "I love you."

We opened the dance floor under the watchful stare of hundreds of humans who stink of a mix of happiness, envy, greed, and lust. Then, it was time for the cutting of the cake. And during all this time, my Jade was all charm with everyone we talked to.

I haven't kissed my mate in hours.

I shake hands with another politician whose wife's perfume clogs my nostrils while she openly eye fucks my wife. After he promises his financial support for a satellite health center, Jade smiles while leaning into my side.

Clocking Cole who's on the other side of the ballroom with Dad, I alphan-speak. "Need an escape plan."

My partner approaches us and extends his hand to the politician. "Senator Chadwick." After the man shakes his hand, Cole turns his grin to the human's much younger wife and kisses the back of her hand. "Mrs. Chadwick, pleasure."

While the man wraps a proprietary arm around his spouse, I usher Jade out of the room, gather her in my arms while she giggles in my neck, and climb up the cordoned off stairs four steps at the time.

Once in her bedroom, I kick the door close and take her mouth.

She moans while I stride to the waiting bed where I sit her down.

Kneeling on the thick carpet, I admire my gorgeous wife and slide my hands underneath the smooth silk of her dress. “I don’t want to damage your dress, so pull it up and keep it up for me.”

Her face is flushed as she giggles. “Saxton, hundreds of people are waiting for us downstairs.”

When I part her legs, she shivers. “I know *mia bella*, but I need a taste. Just a quick one.”

As she raises the material up her smooth legs, I clench my fists by my side. “Higher, baby.”

I’m fucking salivating. After shoving her panties in my pocket, I open her legs wide and eat my wife.

With her hand in mine, we walk to the small stage where the MC brings her a mic.

Ever the public figure, she clears her throat, which brings everyone’s attention to us. Her smile is bright as she addresses the crowd. “Hello, everyone, Saxton and I want to thank you for celebrating today with us. The party will keep going until the last one of you stumbles off the manor.”

Loud, drunken cheers welcome her announcement, and under thundering applause, I bend my wife over my arm to kiss her smile.

I take the mic from her hand. “The beautiful Mrs. Cavendish—fuck, I love the sound of that—and I are now

leaving.”

It takes us almost an hour to reach the front door where Dana, Dex, Atilda, and Vaughn are waiting for us. The hairs on the back of my neck raise. A ward. *Why didn't I think of that an hour ago?*

Jade exhales a shaky breath before falling into Dex's embrace.

Then, it's Tilda's turn who cups her crying face. “I love you, Jade Channings.”

My mate nods before squeezing the Fae in her arms. I can't stand her tears, even her happy ones. Standing back during the emotional send off, I wait beside Thyonian.

When Jade turns to Dana, the witch shakes her head.

“Unless you're planning on being a kept woman, I'll see you every day.” It works, and Jade giggles.

Vaughn hands her a book-sized polished wooden box. “This is our wedding gift to you both.”

She opens the box where a dagger and smooth dark mahogany baton lay nestled in red velvet.

The extra protection for my mate is a stark reminder those demons are still out there. I wrap my arm around my wife who grins while tears track down her cheeks.

“You won't need to carry them with you. And when you call to them, they'll call to me, if necessary.”

Magical weapons she can command at will, doubling as a bat signal.

Dana says, “I've spelled them with a new bodysuit I instilled with a healing spell.”

As Jade closes the box, it disappears. I'll never get used to magic, but right now, I'm damn grateful for it.

Jade touches her forehead to her friend's, and the love the two women share infuses the foyer. “I love you, my Dana.”

“Not more than I love you.”

When Jade throws herself in Thyonian’s arms, I clench my fists. “Thank you, angel.”

They smile at each other, and when she steps back, I tuck her to my side and shake the Fallen’s hand.

Time to take my mate home.

We head to the waiting chopper.

Three days later, seated under our tree with Jade settled between my legs with the back of her head resting on my chest, she points at the page of a magazine.

“My love, look.” The picture was taken when I hauled her in my arms after the rings exchange. Her bare arms are wrapped around my neck, and the way she looks at me chokes me, so I nuzzle her cheek.

“You’re beautiful, baby.”

My wife sets the magazine on the blanket and straddles my lap. “We’re beautiful together.” She curls her hands around my face and grins. “I had thousands of comments on social media telling me how lucky I was to share my life with such a, and I quote, ‘a sexy beast of a man who exudes raw masculinity.’”

Jesus. When I groan in her neck, she giggles. *I’ll never tire of that sound.* I nibble the spot in the crook of her shoulder, and she moans. Unable to resist, I suck on her skin.

Her scent floods with need, and she grips the back of my neck to hold me there. Her panting whisper is charged with arousal. “Mmm. I could orgasm just from that.”

Fuck. It takes all my strength to unlatch. I shift to put her on her back on the thick blanket. Her gaze is soft as she sighs and loops her arms around my neck.

Since we’ve been back, we don’t even try to keep our hands off each other. But between the preparations for the

mating and the organization of her move here, she's been running non-stop.

“Mia bella, you're tired.” I get on my feet with my mate in my arms and head for the cabin. “I'm going to run you a nice hot bath. Then, we'll take a nap.”

She pushes her face in the crook of my neck. “That sounds heavenly, my love.”

By the time we reach our house, she's fast asleep.

After undressing her, I pull the duvet over us and wrap her tight in my arms.

Chapter Forty-Five

Jade

Standing in front of the large mirror in the bedroom of our house, I grin at Sandrine who takes a step back and smiles. “Perfect.” Shifting to my side, she asks my reflection, “What do you think?”

Emotion crowds my throat, so I squeeze her hand and nod.

The dress is dreamy. It has a deep V-neck trimmed by gauze-like lace at the front, held by wide ribbon-sized straps, making it completely backless while the small train is the perfect finish. My hair is down, and my only jewelry is a pair of diamond stud earrings, and my rings.

Sandrine peeks her head through the doorjamb of the double doors behind which my girls are waiting. “Ladies, are you ready?”

Their loud response makes me giggle.

When I walk into the living room, Dana’s fingers fly to her mouth. “My God, sweets.”

The only women who haven’t seen it are Victoria, Catherine, Nadia, and Ashley. They edge close.

“We have the most gorgeous Luna in the world,” Catherine whispers while her eyes fill with tears.

Floralis claps her hands. “Let’s add the last touch.”

I grin as her fingertips graze my hair. She’s adorning it with flowers which will hold... well... by magic.

When she steps back, Victoria says, “I want a Fae princess in my friends’ group.”

Flo winks and glances over her shoulder. “Consider me one. I saw you on the battlefield, and Jade told us you trained her before the fight with that nasty bitch.” She winces and

turns to the omegas. “No offense intended to you two. Jade said you were wonderful.”

Ashley winks back at the princess. “None taken.”

After hugging Floralis, I turn to Nadia and Ashley. “Can you walk us through the ceremony one last time?”

Once we’re briefed, May takes my hand. “He’s one lucky wolf. Don’t let him forget it.”

Corina giggles. “Dana and I are going to reinforce the wards. Tonie told me some human influencers heard of the party and were going to try to crash it.”

Floralis touches my hand. “Sweetie, the ground is all paved, so you won’t snag your heels while you blow Sax’s mind away.” She turns toward the group. “Who needs my flowers in their hair?”

Tatiana raises her hand while Roma and Milan bookend her.

“Hi, I’m Roma and this is my sister Milan. We’re succubae.”

Tatiana’s eyes widen. “Sex goddesses?”

The sisters let out an identical giggle, and Roma nods. “Women are so clever. Men call us sex demons.”

“Are you Fae?” Milan asks.

She shakes her head. “Werejackal.”

As they get acquainted in an animated conversation, happiness presses tears behind my eyes. My friends are fierce, strong, beautiful women.

After a short bang on the front door, Dex enters before anyone has time to answer. He stops dead in his tracks. “Peanut... Fuck.”

When his mother growls, he grins. “Sorry, mama. But she’s ... wow.” His smile widens. “Sax’s getting squirrely.”

Vaughn appears next, and his eyes soften as he nears me. “Love, you’re happy.”

I am. I let out a trembling breath.

As he edges closer, Dana wedges herself between us and pushes on Vaughn’s chest. “You can’t make her cry. Not today. So, shoo, shoo.” As the house empties, I reach for Nadia’s hand. “Thank you again.”

She pecks my lips and bows. The kiss of acceptance of my position as the pack’s Luna. A gesture I appreciate even more since I’m not mated yet.

After she eases the door closed, I take a deep breath. Vaughn will be here soon to get me to the park on the east side of the mansion which has been transformed into an open-air chapel.

A soft whoosh of air announces him. When I turn around, my breath hitches and I grin.

“Temptress.”

“Zayn. You’re here.”

The corner of his mouth lifts. “I heard you last week, but I wanted to wait for the real thing.” He curls his fingers under my chin. “Thank you, Jade.”

My name. “What for?”

“For adoring me, of course.” As I’m about to reply—not sure what, because I’m really happy to see him—he leans in and fake-whispers, “I won’t tell your wolf if you don’t.”

I can’t help the chuckle bursting out of me. I wrap my arms around his waist. “I know you find hugs stupid, but today’s my—”

He holds me tight for a long moment before I step back. “Take me to the love of my life?”

His smile is soft. “I’d be honored.”

The next second, we're standing at the edge of a wide paved aisle strewn with flowers where men and women line up on both sides. The sun is warm while the breeze caresses my skin. Everything is perfect and my heart is at peace.

I lift my eyes to Zayn's who winks. "I'll be watching."

As he shimmers off, I lock my gaze onto Saxton's.

Saxton

My wife beams at me, and my throat tightens. Eight people stand on each side of the aisle representing the sixteen laws of the Cavendish pack, the pillars of our sacred traditions. As she starts her slow procession, she spreads her arms and touches everyone's extended left hand in acceptance of them.

Dad, Carson, and Harris are at the end of the line across from Dana, Dex, and Tilda while Vaughn stands beside me.

When she reaches Dana, she squeezes her fingers. The same with Atilda. Dex pecks her knuckles, and she grins.

She did this. All of it. Every time she rushed around, talking to the omegas and to my dad. Learning everything she could to put together a mating ceremony the like our pack hadn't seen in centuries. If ever.

My pack watches her in awe. Some cry openly while other's wolves chuff in joy and pride.

As she steps before me, I kiss the inside of her wrist. "My Jade."

Once we join hands, Vaughn turns to Jade. "Love, the process itself is relatively short, but Sax's bloodline is one of the oldest ones, and I don't know how the joining will affect you. So, I'll go slow to let your body adjust."

There's only happiness in her scent as she smiles and nods.

The Fallen cuts his gaze to mine. "Sax, once your shared life essence flows between you, you'll sense it first and you'll

be able to let go of her hands.”

I never will. I dive into my mate’s eyes.

Thyonian swirls his fingers and a thread of light flows from them to entwine around our wrists.

“Saxton Cavendish, Jade Channings, by the ancestral magic ruling this plane of existence, will you be joined, linked by a shared life essence? You will be hers, and she will be yours. United in the same breath of life.”

“I will,” we say together.

“Let it be so.”

Vaughn touches our interlinked fingers, and warmth spreads from his hands to ours. Jade’s eyes widen for a brief instant as buzzing energy flows under our skins. Our life forces twirl, mingle, and mesh. She blinks fast and her breath rushes out. When her body goes lax, I hold her to me while Thyonian takes his place beside Dex.

Her soft pants brush against my shirt, and I bury my mouth in her hair. We’re unbreakably bound, tethered to each other. I hold her tighter. After a few seconds, my mate grips my waist, inhales, and exhales slowly before raising her gaze to mine.

She’s mine. Finally.

Her smile weakens me as she loops her arms around my neck.

“My wolf.”

My chest bursts open, and I take her mouth. Slow, tender, grateful.

When the pack howls in joy, a beaming smile lights up her beautiful face. I take her hand, but as I turn toward our pack, she touches my chest to stop me.

“What is it, baby?”

After a quick glance at my dad flanked by Ashley and Nadia, she kneels before me.

My heartbeat thunders. *Fuck. I never hoped...*

Curling her fingers around mine, she lifts her hazel gaze, and I can't look away. I'll never look away.

"Alpha Saxton Cavendish, on this day and forever more, I pledge my allegiance to you, and to your pack..."

I swallow hard as she continues.

"... I avow to trust and follow your guidance. To fight by your side and protect us against all enemies."

Lost in her, I fall on my knees and wrap my hands around her beautiful face.

"Jade little-wolf, I pledge my allegiance to you. My wife, my mate, my everything.

When we stand up, she breaks into a grin, and I can't help but stare. Awed by my Luna.

As we turn to face the crowd, my father approaches first to honor my mate.

Pride pouring out of him, he bows and touches his head to the back of her hand. "Luna."

When he straightens up, she wraps her arms around his neck. "Thank you, Sam," she whispers.

Carson and Harris follow suit, and her fingers tighten around mine.

Then, it's the omegas' turn to pay their respect. Ash and Nadia kiss her lips and bow.

"Luna."

Enough people have put their mouths on my mate. I press my fingers under her chin. "Luna Cavendish."

My gorgeous mate throws her arms around my neck and the pure love flooding her scent almost knocks me over. "Alpha Cavendish."

My wolf growls in need. *I* growl in need.

But she shakes her head and giggles. “I want to dance with our pack until I can’t feel my feet.”

Jade

Saxton and I spend the next few hours partying with the pack and our friends. My face hurts from smiling, my feet are numb from dancing, but I’m walking on air. And I need a break.

In the dining hall inside the mansion, as I reach for a pineapple slice from one of the fruit towers, Raine Ryker strides toward me.

“Must say, you know how to throw a party. Never seen so many different Weres and Mets partying together.”

I grin at Raine Ryker. “Thank you, Alpha Ryker.”

She does this half growl, half chuff noise I’m not sure how to interpret. “Call me, Rae.” The alpha’s unsettling gaze narrows. “Don’t you have any human friends?”

I’ve been asked before—never so bluntly—and it’s a valid question. Between Flo who turned out to be a Fae princess, Bernie who’s dead, and the events that led me to Vaughn along with my makeshift family, the ones I have aren’t close. “I do, but Saxton and the pack come first.”

She scoffs. “You’re better off anyway.” When I frown, she grunts. “Habit.”

As Raine struts away, a warm, delicious shiver puckers up my skin, and I take a deep breath. *Saxton*.

I keep my back to him while my heartbeat accelerates. When he bands his arm around me to press my back against his chest, I lean into him and close my eyes. His breath tickles my ear before his mouth opens on the column of my neck.

My body flames up, my nipples tighten painfully, and my lower belly spasms. I spin in his arms and yank his mouth

to mine. At the first stroke of his tongue, I moan. All I want is to climb him. Make him come in my mouth, come in his. Strangle him with my sex while he pounds inside me.

Saxton plasters me against him, and I loop my arms around his neck.

Is this how he's been feeling since the mating call? It's unbearable. Panting against his lips, I fall into his silver eyes. "Let's dance upstairs."

Minutes later, we're in his room—our room—where he kicks the door shut and sets me on my feet. His voice is gruff. "Off."

I lower the cleverly hidden zipper and step out of my dress, and as I hook my thumbs on the bands of my panties, Saxton drops on his knees before me.

When he rips them off with his teeth, I fist his hair, already on the brink of orgasm.

"Saxton."

He grips the back of my thighs and thrusts his tongue inside me, and I shatter into a breath stealing orgasm. The first one of many that night.

Chapter Forty-Six

Saxton

I walk in the mansion's kitchen for breakfast and freeze in between the door jamb while my chest expands. Jade's holding Brittany's pup in her arms. She's cooing softly at the infant who's grinding his toothless gums on the bent knuckle of her index finger.

She turns to Brittany who closes the fridge. "Is he teething already?"

Our in-house chef pecks her pup's crown and chuckles. "Yes, and it's wreaking havoc on my nipples, but he'll be on solids in a few weeks."

We've been mated for almost three months, and after some adjusting, we've found our groove and share our time between the city and Mordsen. When we're here, we spend a couple of days at the mansion before retreating to our cabin where the pack knows not to disturb us.

"Morning, Sax," Brit says with her back to me.

My mate wheels around, and her smile sucker punches me. "Good morning, my love."

The need to claim her stabs at my guts and brings out my wolf in my voice. "My Jade."

We meet halfway in the kitchen where she shifts her hold on the pup before rolling up on her toes. I hook my hand around her nape and kiss her hard, hungry. When I pull back, her gaze is soft and clouded. The pup whines, claiming her attention, and her scent sweetens as she shifts him higher.

She rubs her palm on his back. "Shh. I'm sorry, baba. You'll feel better soon."

My body hardens, and I'm so captivated by her, I almost miss the scents of my dad and Vince, Brit's mate, as they enter the kitchen.

Dad sweeps his eyes between my mate and I before alphan-speaking. “You haven’t claimed her yet.”

My wolf paces restlessly, and I clench my jaw in response. My fangs come out every time I take her, desperate to sink in her shoulder, but I’ll give her the time she needs.

He strides toward us. “This is a good look on you, Jade.”

Unaware of the battle raging inside me, she lifts her grin to him. “It’s all little Liam, here.” She pecks the pup’s head. “Isn’t it, baba?”

After she hands the pup to his father, we head to the dining room.

Three weeks later, in the clearing where Jade won the dominance fight, I stalk past Carson, Ris, Ashley, and a dozen of our enforcers to edge closer to my father in wolf form who’s fight-training my mate.

Something she insists on doing at least three times a week. When I said I’d train her, her eyes heated up. “My love, I need to train with someone who doesn’t make me all shivery and hot. When you’re around all I can think of is how bad I want you inside me.”

We spent the next two days locked in our cabin.

Geared in her magical protective catsuit, she flicks her wrist to shorten the Bo staff and pants. “That’s five strikes, Sam.”

My father’s wolf chuffs before he morphs. Fully dressed. Most of the pack asked for Dana’s spell—except for Carson—and as he smiles, the pride in his expression doesn’t match mine but is close.

After taking her slowly in the shower, and once more before she put on her pretty dress, we went to SCs to meet with Ronin McLachlan, the alpha of a newly formed pack

from the south we gave some land to. The newly established alpha's pack is made of Weres rejected by their groups. Isolated Weres with difficult and checkered pasts. It's the very reason why Jade wanted to help them and to which I agreed after meeting McLachlan.

Now, back at the mansion, I follow her to our room where she places her hands on my chest.

"What's wrong, my love? Your wolf's agitated. Are you worried about Ronin's pack?"

When I shake my head, she frowns. "So, what is it?"

I'm dying to claim you, and I don't know if you'll ever be ready. When I pull her close, she softens and wraps her arms around my neck. My heartbeat quickens. "I want to claim you."

A question etches on her brow as her head tilts to the side. "I thought you had when we mated."

I tighten my arms around her. "The claiming is the physical mating that will create our own scent."

My beautiful mate grins. "I like the sound of that, and I guess it's not sex, because we've been doing plenty of that. How does it work?"

When a curl of her ebony hair falls over her eye, I tuck it behind her ear. "Between wolves, the dominant chases their mate and makes them submit before marking them."

Her eyes heat up. "And in human form?"

"For us..." I glide my hand down her back and press my fingers between her ass cheeks. "I would take you here." I graze my fingertips against the crook of her shoulder and her shiver elicits my growl. "While I bite you here. Afterwards, you'll be tired and will need to sleep until your body absorbs the claiming."

The honeysuckle spices up with arousal, and I inhale deep.

Her lips stretch into a smile. “That’s why this spot’s been so sensitive. All right, but Alpha Cavendish, you’re big, so we’ll need a lot of lube.”

I pull her against me. “I produce a natural lubricant.”

A giggle escapes her throat. “My kinky wolf. So why haven’t we already done it?”

Cupping her nape, I keep her close. *Now, for the hard part.*

“The claiming will cancel Dana’s spell, and you’ll be able to carry our pups.”

Confusion knits her brows, and I tense when she leans back. “But I got pregnant before.”

I stroke her smooth cheek. “While I was transitioning to alpha, my wolf took over. He recognized you and claimed you.”

When she steps back, the small space she puts between us hits me like a blow, and I lock my body into place. The pulse at the base of her neck pounds fast against her skin as she lifts her frowning gaze to mine.

“So, every time we have sex, I’ll get pregnant?”

Diving my fists in my pockets, I keep my tone gentle. “No, I’ll know when you’re at your most fertile, but you’re the only one who decides when you get pregnant. But, baby, we have years, so there’s no pressure.”

“What do you mean years?”

My whole body lurches toward hers, but I keep still. “You’ll be fertile for as long as we live.”

Her golden eyes widen. She shakes her head, then for the next few minutes, the sound of her heels fills out the heavy silence as she paces the wooden floor. She stops and looks at me. “Why didn’t you tell me about the claiming before?”

My mate deserves the truth, so I lay myself bare. “Because after what happened to you and our pup, I was

scared you wouldn't want to try again."

I can't read her scent, but her expression softens, and I take a full breath. I need to touch her. When I reach for her, she steps back and lifts her palm between us.

"I need a minute."

"Baby—" *Please.*

Hurrying to the walk-in wardrobe, she closes the door behind her.

Fuck. She needs more time. I knock on the door I want to smash open. "Jade—"

Her tone is halting. "Saxton, give me a minute."

On wooden legs, I take a seat on the couch and wait. We have each other, so even if she doesn't —

The door opens. I jump on my feet and freeze.

She changed into a black tank top, jeans, and boots.

What the fuck?

When I step toward her, she hops back.

"Baby—"

"I want a sixty-minute head start."

My brain's slow to compute the meaning of her words, but when I do, my chest expands, and I swallow hard while the back of my eyes burns. My beautiful mate wants pups. My Jade wants the chase.

I dig my hands in my pockets to refrain from devouring her. "Five minutes."

The roll of her eyes makes me harder. "Saxton, it takes me ten minutes to get out of the house when I'm in a hurry. Fifty."

Fuck, but I adore Jade Channings. I clear my throat to cover my chuckle, and my wolf growls in anticipation. "Fifteen."

She leans in, and I inhale her heady scent. “Saxton, you’re a thousand times faster than me.”

It’s a bold exaggeration, but I get her point, even though five minutes is too long before I get to claim my mate.

The extraordinary woman who makes me whole lifts a brow.

“Not up to the challenge, Alpha Cavendish?”

That does it. I let my wolf out and growl as I get toe-to-toe to her. “You have thirty minutes.”

“That works.” She giggles as she darts to the door, and I can’t help but laugh. That’s what my clever mate was aiming for.

Then, I peek at the alarm clock on her side of the bed. Fuck. Another twenty-nine minutes. A lifetime. A beginning.

Jade

I barrel down the stairs and screech to a halt before crashing into Sam and Carson.

Saxton’s dad frowns. “Jade, are you okay?”

I nod and whip my gaze between the several exits of the mansion. “Yes ... yes. I’m...”

Carson’s bike. This will work even better.

“Can I borrow your bike?” I hush fast.

His expression turns quizzical. “You ride?”

As I’m about to reply, Sam says, “Carson, our Luna’s running.”

The two men grin as he tosses me his keys. “Things I’d do for my pack.”

After a thank you smile, I race out of the house. If I use the shortcut through the woods, I should be able to make it. Excitement sizzles through me as I put the bike in full throttle.

As I veer into the path leading to our house, Saxton's howl rends the air.

Almost there. While I park the bike against our house, the thud of his paws against the soft ground gets louder.

His footing is usually a lot quieter. He's doing this for me. And it's working. My excitement ratchets up to trepidation. I take off toward the creek. Leaping over the small bridge, I keep running while my mate chases me down.

Our tree. Almost—

Saxton tackles me.

I shriek. My breath cuts off.

He twists his body in mid-air before we hit the ground and takes the brunt of the fall while I land on his chest. He moves fast again and shifts us, so I'm straddling him as he sits up.

Our kiss is frantic. Tongues and teeth clashing.

When I catch my breath, I cage his beautiful face between my hands. "Claim me under our tree."

In seconds, we're there. As he spreads the blanket on the soft ground, I kick off my boots. I grab the edges of my top, but he catches my wrists in one hand and holds them behind my back.

I can hear his wolf in his voice. "Mine."

Trembling, I lick my dry lips and hold my wrist behind my back. When he unleashes his claws, I gasp while my breath hitches, drowned out by my fluttering heartbeat.

His eyes deep in mine, he slices off my clothes. The cool breeze on my skin makes me shiver while the scorching heat of Saxton's gaze engulfs me.

"On your knees."

The energy vibrating from him pushes against my skin, and my need to submit becomes so strong, my breath rushes

out. *Not yet.* I step back.

Saxton's hand clasps around my nape. His hold, although not painful, is unbreakable. His eyes never leaving mine, he presses down until I'm kneeling before him.

He snaps his jeans open, and his heavy penis juts out. *Oh Lord.* He's bigger. Thicker. He'll never—

He's in my mouth. And I close my eyes.

“Look at me.”

When I do, he lodges himself in my throat. And his growl pulls on my nipples. He withdraws slowly.

He cups both hands around the back of my head, and his voice comes out rough. “All of it.”

I flatten my tongue and tilt my head back as he plunges deep. His thrusts quicken, forceful until he yells and floods my throat with his climax.

Gasping as he steps back, I swipe the back of my hand on my mouth. Saxton's still huge. Still hard. Harder. His wolf's eyes drill into mine. The next second he's naked and kneeling in front of me. The one after that, I'm on all four with my back to him. Fevered, I fist the blanket.

His warm hands slide along my sides, stopping underneath my breasts for long, tortuous seconds. “You're mine, Jade.” He pinches my nipples hard.

Oh God, I'm going to orgasm.

I moan as he penetrates me. He goes hard, fast, until my sex clenches around him, and I sob into a dizzying orgasm.

When he withdraws, I peer over my shoulder.

His expression is savage with need, and his eyes are pure silver. “Now.”

I lock my elbows in.

He kneads my butt cheeks, and a heated shiver courses through me. He parts them, and I hold my breath.

“My mate.”

The head of his penis presses against me while he clamps his hands on my hips.

“Breathe, baby.”

As I exhale, the pressure increases, and hot, slick fluid jets against my opening.

“Breathe for me, mia bella.”

Pressure.

I try to wiggle, but his grip pins me into place. His voice is gentle. “Let me in, beautiful.”

More pressure. So much pressure. Searing, scorching me until I think I can’t take it. “Saxton…”

Warm, slick fluid. Raw voice. “My Jade… Mine.”

When he breaches me, I gasp. He growls.

Saxton pushes inside me in small increments. And as more warm liquid bathes my inside, my heart races, and my orgasm builds. Fire spreads under my skin, lapping at every nerve ending until my body is just a mass of sensations. I’m bursting with him. In every way.

Saxton

My mate is on her hands and knees, stretched tight around my cock. When she whimpers, I clench my jaw and shut my eyes tight at the burning extasy.

“Saxton.”

The plea in her voice breaks my control and I root myself to the hilt. *Fuck. So good.* I relax my hold on her hips and glide my hands between her small waist and her ass full of me.

I withdraw slowly, leaving just the tip inside her tight ring. Then I push back inside her slick body.

“Fuck.... Jade.”

When she flicks her hair to the side to look at me, her expression shoots through me. I go deep and still. Our scents mingle and take hold.

My fangs descend.

Jade

Saxton’s hand presses on my belly as he pulls me up, delving deeper inside me while the other curls around my throat. Blistering pleasure whiplashes through me and cuts off my breath.

As his razor-sharp teeth graze the spot that’s been making me crazy, I tilt my head to the side and grip his nape. “My wolf.”

He plunges two thick fingers inside my sex, and his gravelly voice, deformed by his fangs lights my skin up. “Mine.”

His teeth puncture my flesh.

The sharp pain electrifies every cell of my body. Time holds as my orgasm rolls and coils through me. Saxton roars. His orgasm bursts inside me. And I explode in a scream.

When I open my eyes, I’m meshed against Saxton who licks the wound in the crook of my neck. Still shaking violently, I gasp as Saxton withdraws gently from my body and lays me on my back on the blanket. He settles on top of me while holding his weight on his forearms.

There’s no word to express how much more deeply I love him. We kiss slow and long while tears snake down my temples. My beautiful wolf shifts to his side and tucks me against him before wrapping us in the blanket.

Sheltered against his warm skin, my body becomes heavy, and I struggle to keep my eyes open. “I’m ... sleepy.”

He holds me tighter and kisses the top of my head.
“Sleep, my beautiful.”

Saxton

When Jade falls asleep, I carry her to our bed. After cleaning us up, I hold my precious mate who moans softly as she buries her face in my neck.

The next morning, careful not to wake my Jade up, I head to the shower.

Later, as I pull the pastries out of the oven, I listen to the soft patter of my mate’s bare feet on the kitchen tiles behind me. I inhale deeply and smile while my wolf growls in pleasure.

She’s carrying my scent. Our scent. “Sit down, baby. Breakfast’s ready.”

“I thought we agreed you’d cook naked when we’re home.”

I fucking love that she calls our house home. Grinning, I wheel toward her, and my chest expands. *Damn. Look at her.* Wrapped in her silk robe while the sun filtering through the bay windows bathes her in an ethereal light, she glides to me. I pull her in my arms and groan when she wraps herself around me.

“Morning, mia bella.”

She places a soft kiss on my mouth. “Good morning, my love.” Her smile renders me breathless as she cups my jaw. “Am I now truly, completely yours?”

“And I’m truly, completely yours.”

The peals of her sweet laughter fill our home with happiness.

“Good, so can you please get naked?”

Epilogue

Three years later

Jade

I smile at Saxton who's waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs. My feet barely touch the last step when he wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me in for a torrid kiss. We're still impossibly famished for each other, and even though my last orgasm was a few minutes ago, my body revs up.

Grinning at Sam seated at the dining room table, I turn to my gorgeous husband-mate-center-of-my-universe and place his palm on my belly.

"Show yourself to your daddy," I whisper to the little miracle growing inside me.

Saxton's eyes widen. "Mia bella?"

He inhales deep before falling to his knees to bury his face in my stomach.

Sam's howl makes me jump.

Saxton gets to his feet to cup my face, and when tears fill his eyes, my throat tightens.

"How?"

"Since you told me you could hide your scent, I assumed our little girl could do the same. And I was right. I wanted it to be a surprise, so I just asked her to—"

His voice breaks. "A girl?"

I peck his smile. "A beautiful pup with silver eyes like her big, badass daddy."

I didn't foresee it. A couple of years ago, Zayn told me what our child will look like. And since Saxton still dislikes him—although he tolerates him—I kept it to myself.

When he grabs me and twirls wildly in the vast room, I loop my arms around his neck, half laughing half shrieking. As

he sets me on my feet, Sam approaches us with a huge smile splitting his face.

“Congratulations, Jade.”

I peck his cheek. “Thank you, Granddad.”

He hug-backslaps his son before leaving us in our bubble. While his wolf howls happy, Saxton crushes me against his fast-beating heart and pecks my head. After a few seconds, his wolf frets, so I tighten my arms around his waist and slant back.

“My love, she’s got us, our pack, the most powerful sorceress in the world, a witch, two Fae, including one soon to be queen, two succubae, and a werejackal as godmothers. And a Fallen, a werebear, and the alpha of the werejaguars as godfathers.”

His lips twitch. “That’s a fuckload of people around my unborn princess.”

I can’t help my giggle. “Around us.” I roll on my toes to kiss him. “She’ll be fine, Alpha Cavendish.”

Pulling me tighter against him, his smile starts slow. “Yes, we will, Luna Cavendish.”

The End

Other Books by Claudia Landres:

www.evernightpublishing.com/claudia-landres

If you enjoyed this book, you may also like:

[Pack for a Lifetime by Maria Mercurio](#)

[Ruin by Raven Hush](#)

[The Vampire's Thirst by T.M. Smith](#)

BONUS SAMPLE CHAPTER

FIVE OF CLUBS

Claudia Landres

Copyright © 2022



Sample Chapter

Ava

And the prize for the most moronic decision. Ever. Goes to ... me!

The black, heavy, iron door shuts behind my friend Harper and me, and I push my ears into my shoulders while my heart somersaults. I tighten my hands in a death grip around my clutch, then after a calming breath, I take one step and another.

The entrance resembles the hallway of a very expensive boutique hotel. Dark-red walls contrast with a violent sensuality against the black and white houndstooth-patterned carpet. Majestic gold-framed mirrors on both sides lure me in toward the four small elevators at the far side of the building.

“Don’t be so scared. It’ll be fun, I promise,” Harper says, leaning toward me.

Sure, like those crazy people who find it fun to jump off bridges while tied up to a glorified elastic band.

I nod at Harper before she turns her back to me and whispers something to the goateed human house with luscious, deep-red hair that women would pay a fortune for. He stands by the door, studying me.

To stop from fidgeting, I lock my knees and display the only smile I’m capable of, but when his amber glare zeroes in on me, my heart pounds furiously against my eardrums.

I bet the redheaded giant can hear it too.

Where’s the loud music? We’re in a club. I should hear music.

Harper taps on the giant’s chest. “Bruce, this is my friend, Ava.”

The human house grunts, grins at me, and for a split second, the world tilts on its axis and I just stare at his white teeth while Harper chuckles.

“Do you need jetons?” he asks Harper.

Harper turns her will-you-dare expression to my heated face. “Do you want jetons?”

Dear God. I gawk at them and clear my throat. “No ... N-no. I’m ... j-just want ... w-want to watch.”

Bruce raises a brow and leans closer. “Well, you might need jetons for that too, doll.”

All right. Time to run. I point my scuttling foot toward the door.

Harper holds my wrist in a strong grip. “No, we’re good. Maybe next time,” she replies with a bright smile before she leads me down carpeted stairs.

What am I doing here? This is a mistake. A huge one.

“Hello, Ash, Jenna. How are you this evening?” Harper greets a well-dressed couple before shifting her gaze toward me to whisper, “Go ahead, sweetie. I have a table.”

On shaky legs, I make it to the bottom of the stairs and gasp as I enter the main room.

The place is sumptuous and not at all the dark, damp dungeon I expected. I take in the huge, modern, silver chandelier and the softly lit tables enhanced by the marble floors. It has all the appearance of a normal—albeit expensive—romantic restaurant, and I sigh in relief. Harper was right, the club, aptly named, The Club—*because someone forgot to take their creativity pill that day*—doesn’t look like a sex club.

I wince internally. *Am I being judgmental by calling it a sex club?* Harper doesn’t. She, with her best friend, Kincaid Michaels—the maverick of the financial world, and three of their wealthy friends have created a luxurious microcosmos called Haven. It’s comprised of two classic nightclubs, a boutique hotel where the stars love to go into hiding, a fleet of six upscale bars and restaurants, and The Club. But the latter isn’t advertised on their glossy brochures.

Only a select few are entrusted with the knowledge of its existence, and there’s been so many whispers and unknowns surrounding it that it became somewhat of an urban legend. I’d personally never heard of it until Harper told me about it a couple of years after we met at a gala at the museum.

The admission to The Club is a tightly controlled process, and members, only after being unanimously voted in by the five owners, are vetted through an extensive health, financial, and moral background check to ensure the privacy and safety of the patrons. There’s no exchange of money here, and everything from the Michelin-starred food to the exquisite and expansive collection of liquors is included in the onerous yearly membership paid to be part of this hedonistic Eden.

Harper, who’s in charge of the public relations and marketing of Haven, explained that at The Club, women are empowered in their sexuality by being offered jetons to choose

partners to fulfill their fantasies or engage in sexual games in any of the playrooms on the higher floors.

Or are free to just eat, dance, and be merry.

“Do you have a reservation?”

The melodious voice belongs to a pretty, young woman dressed in a tight black dress who smiles at me.

“I’m with Harper Willis.”

“Oh, you’re Harper’s friend? Let me show you to her table.”

I follow her to a raised area in the corner surrounded by a balcony of sorts and climb the three steps leading to an oval table with comfortable, plush leather sofas with high backrests. By the time I settle down, my heart rhythm is no longer a deafening drum. From here, I can view the whole restaurant, but each table is set up as its own little universe by way of ornate bamboo dividers and cleverly placed plants.

I scan the menu and salivate. They have oysters.

Nestling deeper into the seat, I scoff while I discreetly eye the other patrons, all fully dressed.

I’m not a prude—well, I don’t think I am—and I have no issues with kink, sexual or otherwise, as long as it’s between consenting adults. But when Harper invited me for the umpteenth time to come out and make my own opinion, I had run out of excuses and let my curiosity win over. So, here I am. Way, way out of my depth.

The charming hostess comes back to take my order, and I feel absolutely decadent when I order oysters for myself, wings for Harper, and two mojitos.

She smiles as she leans closer. “The viewing den is open tonight. I hope you’ll enjoy it.”

Harper mentioned the den where anyone can watch people having sex. I bare my teeth at her retreating silhouette as my face heats up.

Maybe if I sneak out while Harper's busy, she won't be too angry with me. I strain my neck toward the stairs. There's no sign of her. I clutch my purse, slide my legs against the smooth leather to the end of the table, and stand up. I gasp when I bump into a human wall. I bounce back, hit the back of my knees on the seat, and lose my balance, my arms flaying like the uncoordinated wings of a broken windmill.

Ava Lawson. Nil point for grace.

The tall man catches my arm to stop me from falling on my butt and chuckles.

"S-s-sorry." I suck in a breath. Wow. He's gorgeous. Dark eyes and hair—it's difficult to tell in this low lighting. I'm wearing heels, but he towers over me.

"Don't be. It's my fault for startling you." He smiles and extends his hand. "I'm Mason, and I wanted to personally welcome you to The Club."

I gape for a few seconds too long at his t-shirt that barely hides his wide shoulders and place my hand in his. "I'm-m ... A-Ava."

"Yes, Harp's friend." He frowns and checks out the stairwell area. "Where's Harper?"

"Here," Harper answers from behind him, and he pivots toward her.

"Harper, good to see you again."

His jaw clenches and his shoulders tense in seconds, and for the first time, I witness my friend's expression become ... hard. *Huh-ho. There's history there.* I almost wish I was one for gossip because anything happening with that man has to be interesting.

"Mace, I see you've met Ava," she says with a tight smile that stays on her lips. She turns to me. "Sweetie, this is Mace, one of the owners."

Mason bows slightly. "Ladies, have a good evening. Ava, pleased to meet you."

“S-same,” I reply, but he’s already gone.

I scoot over the curved seat while Harper settles next to me. Her lips are pinched, and she exhales with her lids closed. I touch her wrist. “Is everything all right?”

She straightens her shoulders. “Yeah, I’m good.” She throws her megawatt grin at me. “So, what do you think?”

Our hostess brings our order and glides away.

Harper glances at the silver square tray filled with crushed ice before me and curls her lip in disgust. “How can you eat these?”

I giggle before I slurp an oyster and lick its syrup off my bottom lip. I choke and cough when another tall man just ... stands there. What is it with tall men just appearing at our table? I crane my neck up and up to meet icy blue eyes framed by strong arched brows set on me.

Harper smiles at him. “Caid, hi.”

“Hey, sweetheart.”

Dear God, his voice rumbles over the small space to brush my skin, and I shiver while my heart gallops.

“Ava, sweetie, this is Caid.”

I snap out of his hypnotic gaze and wave at him. A cringeworthy, stupid little wave with my arm folded tight to my side and my fingers splayed wide. “H-Hi.”

He dips his chin. “Ms. Lawson, welcome. I hope you’ll enjoy your evening with us.”

“Th-Thank you. Av-Ava. P-please, c-call m-me Ava.” I pray that the low lighting conceals my burning face.

He lifts a mocking brow, and I groan. I stutter when I’m nervous. It’s an annoying residue of my childhood that my parents found charming, so they never did much of anything about it.

With some work, I eventually grew out of it. But when a man who looks like a god watches me like I'm a human version of a gnat before quickly dismissing me with the phantom of a smirk, my childhood impediment springs back with a vengeance.

Dressed in a perfectly tailored black shirt and slacks, he stalks away in a fluid but powerful gait and disappears through a revolving door with shiny chrome handlebars and darkened glass.

I eat an oyster, and another. "Harp, are you sure my presence here is not a problem?"

She licks her fingers delicately—like she does everything else—and a frown barely mars her stunning face. "What do you mean?"

After wiping my fingers on the linen towel, I shift to face her. "He didn't seem too ... happy with me being here and—"

Rolling her eyes, she squeezes my hand and scoffs. "Don't worry about Caid. Lately, his neutral setting is grump. When I wanted you to come over, we all voted to let you in."

"Even for one evening?"

She lets out the musical peal of her laughter. "Yes, we're that committed. We want everyone to be safe here, so we're very careful."

I watch Harper's soft but focused gaze and chew on my bottom lip.

She wraps my hand in hers. "Ava, it's fine to let yourself enjoy life a little. All you do is work at the gallery—" She tugs on my hand when I'm about to reply. "I know you love your gallery, but apart from me and maybe Marnie, you have no friends." She inches closer. "And no, I don't consider your artists to be your friends."

I chuckle silently as she continues. "You barely get out of your loft. I've known you for over three years, and I've

never seen you with a man ... or a woman.”

She got me there. I don't date often, and I have major trust issues with people. “I'm not really good at casual sex, Harp.”

With a short laugh, she throws her head back. “It's not only about that here.” She winks at me and leans closer. “Sweetie, there's nothing casual about good sex. Here, you have a fantasy, you bring your jeton to anyone you like, and you talk about the terms of your wish in one of the private salons. If all parties agree, we make it happen here.” She grins and whispers, “And it can be anything. Anything at all.”

It's not the first time she tells me this, but tonight, I'm actually thinking about it. How precious would it be to be able to let go of everything else and just feel pleasure?

I'm a little traditional—boring maybe? —and so are my fantasies, but I'm totally fine with that. For me, it would be one man with whom I could share myself with, give myself to completely, without doubts. Without fear.

What would it be like to be in a relationship where I would be enough? Just me.

Harper picks up the last wing from her plate. “There's absolutely no pressure for you to do anything you don't want to. Just know that The Club is a safe space for you to explore and play. Now, let's go to the bathroom to freshen up and then we can check out the DJ.”

“All right.”

Later, I step onto the dance floor with my only friend. I throw my arms in the air and spin and twirl. I dance until I huff and puff.

I dance until it's just me and the music.

End of sample chapter

www.evernightpublishing.com/five-of-clubs-by-claudia-landres



EVERNIGHT PUBLISHING ®

www.evernightpublishing.com