



SCAPEGOAT



SAM HALL

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Scapegoat

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The characters and events depicted in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Stalk me!

Stalk me!



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Author Note

This book is written in Australian English, which is a weird lovechild of British and American English. We tend to spell things the way the Brits do (expect a lot more u's), yet also use American slang and swear more than both combined.

While many people have gone over this book, trying to find all the typos and other mistakes, they just keep on popping up like bloody rabbits. If you spot one, don't report it to Amazon, drop me an email at the below address so I can fix the issue.

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Trigger Warning

Trigger and Content Warning

Please, PLEASE read this.

This book deals with a narcissistic mother and as is often the case, her two children. One she idolises and positions as the golden child, the other is the scapegoat and to blame for everything. If this is a situation you're not familiar with, feel free to do a little research on it, but I don't think you need to, to understand the story.

As a result there is:

- Verbal and physical abuse of the FMC by her mother.
I've tried to pull my punches, but its there
- Kidnapping
- Being drugged
- Attempted sexual assault by a side character
- Death of antagonists
- Depictions of narcissistic behaviours

Chapter 1

“Take your sister with you.”

That’s what my mother would’ve said, if she’d caught me heading out. Luckily for me, she’d stopped dogging my heels partway through the seemingly endless list of chores she’d set me, frustrated no doubt at my inability to do everything the way she wanted. So I was pretty sure I was going to be able to sneak out unencumbered by my younger sister. I carefully opened the back door only far enough to slip through, to make sure the screen door didn’t creak and give me away, then moved, softly, silently, across the back porch to the top of the set of concrete steps that led down along the side of the house and then turned to continue down into the expanse of our back garden. I quickly glided down the steps, pausing once I got to the landing, halfway down, where I stood there for a moment, listening for any signs of life back behind me. Nothing. I threw a quick look back up towards the house, half expecting to see my mother standing there, with her arms crossed and a pinched expression on her face at my foolhardiness. No sign of her.

All day, I’d done everything my mother had asked me to do, working my way through the long list of jobs I had woken up to.

While my younger sister did nothing. That wasn’t unusual.

What was unusual today was that, once I was done, I hadn’t gone and reported back to Mum to get her to check my work, something she always insisted I do. That meant I hadn’t

had to brace myself for her inevitable disappointment in me as she critiqued everything. I hadn't had to start again, to 'do it right this time'. What'd been different today was that, partway through the chores, when my phone had buzzed and I'd pulled it out of my pocket, I'd seen a message that derailed my usual compliance.

Meet us down the swimming hole.

It came from a group chat that we'd set up, just me and the Campbell boys, and as soon as I read the message, I'd felt it: the irritation at having to spend my summer working on the house while the rest of the town played. As I'd studied the words, the heat outside, the atmosphere inside the house felt like it became more and more oppressive. My eyes had darted to the doorway, because I'd been sure my mother would appear to snatch the phone out of my hand and deny me this outlet.

But she hadn't.

So, today, I'd rushed through the rest of my jobs. She was never happy with how I did them, even when I tried my hardest, so why bother doing them well when I could be somewhere else? So, as soon as I'd dropped the cleaning cloth into the laundry basket, I made my escape.

Everyone in this town had the ability to shift into a wolf once they reached a certain age. I was due to do the same, any day now. I knew that because I could feel her presence coming to the fore within me, as I ran down the steps and into the garden. Her paws slotted into my feet as we ran across the grass; the slope of my body, the swing of my hips, all hers as we slunk past low-lying shrubs and pushed through the dense stand of gum trees to get the fence at the edge of the yard.

"Kaia?" My name echoed through the backyard. Like a lot of families here, we lived on a big block, so Mum had no qualms about making her voice ring out, to make sure she was heard. "Kaia?"

She couldn't see me, not unless I stepped out from behind the trees, but I still hesitated, gripping the wooden fence, but not committed to taking the next step of hauling myself up and

over it. Not yet. I'd listen a little longer. Maybe she had something positive to say.

“Kaia? You cleaned up your room, but you didn't take the rubbish away! And you still need to finish the bathroom! ... Honestly. Where is that girl?”

That's why she wanted me? That's why she was shouting my name so loud the whole neighbourhood could hear? There was one bag of rubbish, less than half of one really. I was made to keep the room clean because “Anna likes it that way” but most of what needed to be thrown out were my sister's old soft drink cans and food wrappers.

Call Anna, I thought traitorously. Ask her to take the bag of rubbish downstairs and to the bin. And if you can't bear for her to get her hands dirty, do it yourself!

That felt like the wolf talking, because I never said things like that, not to my mother or my father, and especially not Anna.

“Bloody child...” I heard Mum mutter, then the screen door slammed shut in defeat.

I grinned, the air playing over teeth that felt like the wolf's fangs, her strength mine as I launched myself over the fence. Her lope was the one that took me down the dirt road that led to the forest, her senses alive as we were swallowed by the trees. No possibility of Mum seeing me now. With the resinous scent of pine trees in my lungs, my footsteps swallowed by masses of pine needles, I was invisible, silent, a ghost, as I moved. I trot-jogged all the way, only slowing my pace down as I got to the very edge of the pine forest and the surface beneath my feet changed from soft pine needles to bare rock and the occasional hardy gum tree clinging to the stone.

The bedrock beneath me was made of limestone and, every now and again, the rock would drop away, creating sinkholes. The one I was standing above was only a little one and well known to all of the local kids. It filled with rainwater every winter, the porous rocks absorbing any impurities, leaving water that was crystal clear. So I saw each of them perfectly from my vantage point.

Xavier emerged from the water, flicking his head back and grinning as he gasped in huge lungfuls of air. His body was big and strong, already, making people mutter. Young men got to challenge the existing alphas for a place in the pack hierarchy. The contenders would pit themselves against the more experienced alphas, not to fight to the death, but for recognition. If you were deemed worthy, you might be made the heirs to the leadership of the pack.

And if they weren't?

If you were too strong to obey, but not strong enough to lead, then you would be exiled.

I froze where I was when I saw Xavier scan the tree line, as if already aware he had an audience. But whatever his senses had told him, they were quickly drowned out when Jayden launched himself at his brother, wrapping a thick arm around Xavier's neck and dragging him down into the water.

Atlas—the last of the Campbells—grinned, his teeth sharp and flashing in the diffused sunlight. Seeing a fight in the offing and ready to jump right in, he raked his dripping dark blond hair back from his face in order to plan his move. Xavier bucked against Jayden's grip, but he just held him tighter. Atlas moved calculatingly closer, a wolf on the hunt. But they weren't the only beasts here, I thought to myself with a smirk as I stepped out from between the trees, cupping my hands around my mouth to funnel my voice.

“Atlas!”

My friend—my confidant—swung around, trying to pinpoint where I was. His break in focus gave Xavier a chance to rally and he shot me a wild grin of thanks as Atlas stared up at me, smiling widely. Xavier seized the chance to shake off Jayden's grip, because their other brother had been equally distracted, then he launched himself out of the water, slapping his hands down on Atlas' shoulders to then drag him under.

I laughed, as much at the trick as at the glee on Xavier's face. It felt like the only time I ever did smile was around the three of them. The fight devolved into a writhing, thrashing,

splashing mess, until finally all combatants emerged from the water's depths, each trying to keep an eye on the other two.

Then failing when their collective attention swapped to me as I picked my way down to the edge of the waterhole.

“You made it!”

Atlas was the closest so he waded over to the edge of the sinkhole, and that's when I saw it. All the ways he was no longer a boy; all the ways he was becoming a man. Muscles flexed as he gripped the soft crumbling stone and he hauled himself out with little effort. Water dripped on the leaf litter.

But where there was one Campbell, there were three. Xavier tried to get out next, but Jayden grabbed his brother's shorts, dacking him in a smooth move, then cackling as he used Xavier's embarrassment to shove him out of the way and take his place. He was up and out of the water, running towards me, before I could even throw my hands up.

“No, Jay, no—!”

Any protests I might've made were cut off immediately as he wrapped his arms around me, plastering his wet flesh against mine, soaking through my clothes.

This interaction represented our relationship perfectly, as he swung me around, laughing at the sounds of my shrieks, then threw me in the air. I stiffened my body on purpose, like a gymnast, to make sure I flew higher, that exhilarating sensation of soaring through the air consuming me entirely: because with them I was freed from the constraints of my everyday life. Free to feel. I knew Jay would always catch me, his arms would lock around me, snatching me back from the air even in opposition to gravity, making sure I was safe, before setting me down on my feet. Just like he did now.

“You came...!”

As if there was any doubt. We'd been thick as thieves since we were kids, our mothers having been childhood friends. Mum had encouraged the relationship further when she saw how big and tall the boys were growing up. Jenny, their mother, had managed to attract mates who were much further

up the pecking order than my family were. The boys' dads were big men, strong men, much more than my dad, and when it became apparent that the boys might be alpha contenders, Mum had shoved me much more conspicuously towards the Campbell boys.

But I was supposed to take Anna with me whenever we met up.

"Of course, I did," I said, punching him on the arm. "It's hot as balls and—"

"Time for a swim then," Jay said, who swept me into his arms and, while I was still squeaking, tossed me to his brothers. Xavier grabbed my wrists, and Atlas took my ankles, the two of them ready to engage in a familiar game.

"Guys..." They both grinned like demons as they heard the tremor in my voice. We used to do this all the time when we were kids, but they were bigger, stronger now.

"Count to three, Kaia," Jay said, appearing in my field of vision.

"One," Xavier announced as they swung me back and forth.

"Guys, you don't have to...I wanna go in for a swim. I'm all sweaty and gross and..." I stammered.

The trees felt like they rushed up to meet me, then I was swung back towards the water hole.

"Two," Atlas said, his smile widening.

"I'm going to go in anyway!" I jerked against their grip, trying to get free, but they held me fast, like they always did.

"Yeah, you are," Jay said with a wink. "Three!"

They let me go at the top of the swing, sending me flying through the air, arms and legs flailing, right before I went crashing down.

Water, clean, with a strange earthy aftertaste, filled my nose and my mouth, first of all as I sank down and then again as I kicked for the surface. More splashes let me know that I

wasn't in the waterhole on my own anymore. When I emerged, gasping and spluttering, the three of them cackled.

"You didn't need to throw me in!" I yelled, rising up on my tiptoes, then punching Atlas in the bicep. He just looked down at the small red mark I'd left and cocked an eyebrow, as if to say, 'Is that it?'

"Need, want, it's all the same to us," Jayden said with a shrug, then reached for me, ready to dunk me in the water again. I let out a low growl, wrapping one of my legs around his and then his knee out from under him, his brothers laughing as Jay went down.

"Don't mess with my girl."

Half the female population at school would've swooned if Xavier Campbell said that to them and I admit, I did too. Just right deep down where no one else could see. I cocked a hip instead, looking at Jay through slitted eyes as he began to rally.

"So it's like that, is it?" Jayden growled.

"It's always like this," Xavier shot back. "Ready, Kai?"

Chapter 2

Some hours later we were out of the water and lying on the hot stones by the waterhole.

“There’s a party on tomorrow night,” Atlas told me with a hopeful little note to his voice. “We could go.”

His brothers were lying with their eyes closed, ostensibly asleep or not caring about what we were talking about, so perhaps that’s why he reached out, his hand sliding into the space between us. Just a tiny little brush of his pinkie finger against mine was enough to bring me to full attention, my eyes flicking open.

“Where?” I asked, watching him, watching his hand.

“Over at Granville. The dads said we can take one of the cars.”

That was the next town over, the one where the humans lived.

“I...” My throat was closing up. It often did in these stolen moments, like my ability to feel and breathe couldn’t happen at the same time. “I... don’t know if I can get away.”

Because with his suggestion, reality came crashing back in. I’d slipped out with the boys to escape my mother, her expectations, her long list of things to be done. Things to be done for Anna—always for Anna. But if the boys were to come to my door, talk to my mum and my dad about where we were going, I knew what Mum would say...

“TAKE YOUR SISTER WITH YOU.” Even though I was eighteen and Anna was fourteen. “*She needs to be close to her fated mates. Those boys will need an omega one day and you know Anna’s going to reveal as one. Just look at her.*”

I did. Everyone always did and I couldn’t blame them. I wasn’t jealous of my sister’s golden perfection. Everyone talked about what beautiful children she would make, when she was grown, with the Campbell boys as the fathers. Each guy was a different shade of gold himself, from Xavier at the lightest, the sun turning the tips of his hair platinum in the summer, to Atlas who was only a few shades lighter than my dark hair. My sister would be beautiful. I wanted that for her, because she seemed to soak up attention like a flower did the sun and I... I turned to an awkward mess. Better to hide in the shadows, where no one else could see. Calm, competent...

“*There’s my clever girl,*” Dad always said, when he got my reports in the mail, though never when Mum or Anna was around. He’d ruffle my hair, tell me he was proud of me and then shove those same reports under his plate when Mum joined us at the dinner table.

“IF YOU WANT TO GO, we’ll come up with something. It’s no big deal,” Atlas told me, rolling towards me.

When he did that, I couldn’t see the forest, the trees or anything else. Just him. His chest was bare, his skin golden brown and every muscle was lean and tight, like a healthy young animal’s. He was wrong, though. *Everything* about this felt like a big deal. His brows creased slightly in concentration and his eyes dropped, lingering on my mouth for far too long.

A mouth he’d kissed.

Stolen kisses, sweet ones, kisses that made me pant against his chest, fighting to take a breath. Then he’d hold me close and tell me...

“You’ve got to come.” At the sound of Jayden’s voice, I yanked my hand back and... was that pain in Atlas’ eyes? If it

was, it was cleared away as soon as Jay popped his head up over his brother's shoulder. "Summer's nearly over."

And so was our childhood; we all knew that. We'd finished school. Now we were waiting on our final grades, the ones that, if we were out in the human world, would determine what we would do. But here in Stanthorpe, it was the pack that decided your fate, and they would deliver ours once summer was done. We'd be assigned jobs, tasks, roles, depending on where we fitted in the pecking order, and that in itself was decided by the alphas of the pack.

Those decisions could mean the boys were elevated to heirs-apparent or removed from the pack altogether, left to find their own way beyond the town limits.

"It'll be one of the last parties," Xavier said, getting to his feet and gazing down at me. "No one will mess with you, not if you're with us."

"And anyone who does will have his face rearranged," Jay promised, a dangerous glimmer in his eyes.

Good or bad, that was true. My friends were nothing but protective. I'd never been on a date, never had a guy tell me he liked me, because, if any of the others at school got close, the Campbell boys started growling.

Like my stomach did right now.

The boys' eyes dropped down and Xavier frowned slightly at the sound of it.

"You didn't eat again." His voice was full of censure.

"I didn't have time," I said, slapping a hand over my stomach as I scrambled to my feet. "I had to make breakfast for everyone else and Mum, Dad and Anna all wanted something different."

"You know other families don't use their fucking eldest daughter as a domestic servant," Jay snarled. "They get their own fucking breakfast."

"Yeah, well, they'll be doing that once..." I stopped, and stared at each one of them. "Once I've been given a job. I can

move out then, live somewhere else, away from Mum...”

“With us,” Atlas said, with a definitive nod.

I smiled at his intent gaze that brooked no argument, and at their concern, but there was something hopeless about it all. The boys acted like nothing else would change, now that school was done.

But I knew differently.

They’d fight the alphas, strive with everything they had to show they had the requisite level of dominance, of power, to claim a place at the top of the pack hierarchy. And when they did? One of the girls in town would reveal as an omega.

And my mother was sure that would be my sister.

“I should get back,” I said, scrambling to my feet.

“To slave for your mother all afternoon?” Jayden said. “Fuck that.” He held out a hand and I took it—I always took it—before pulling me closer. “If you’re not going to bother looking after yourself, we’ll have to step in and do the job right.” He glanced over at his brothers. “The milk bar?”

“The milk bar,” the others agreed.

Chapter 3

There was something particular to being an Australian teenager in the summer. No cares, no responsibilities, just what seemed like endless sunny days. We walked back into town, padding into the artificial chill of the milk bar, the concrete floor cool under our bare feet. The boys had mucked around, jostling and pushing each other, all the way there.

“You lot again?” Elsie was an older woman who had run the local milk bar since long before we were born. With her mate, first, right up until he died. And now she looked after it all by herself. “Lemme guess.” She pulled out an old paper order book, a chewed up pencil stub in her fingers. “Three burgers with the lot.”

“Four,” Xavier said, nodding to me. “And milkshakes and fries.”

“Last of the big spenders,” she said with a slow nod. “All right. You know the drill. Take a seat and I’ll have it right out for you.”

“I can’t eat all of that!” I hissed at them as an arm went around my shoulders and steered me towards the plastic tables and chairs set up for customers, a bright vinyl tablecloth laid over top of it.

“You can and you will.” Atlas’ voice didn’t allow for argument and he stared at me steadily as he sat down opposite me. “You’re getting too thin. Your mother is running you ragged.”

But not for much longer, that went unspoken. Until the end of summer I was her child to do with as she saw fit, but after... I would find my wolf, be recognised as an adult in the pack. I would discover just how strong my animal was, letting me know where I fit. Men would seek me out as a mate based on that. But as Elsie returned with our meals, the boys paying for everything, making me flush with shame, I wondered... Who would he be? And would I still feel the ghost of kisses stolen by the Campbell boys, long after my mate had claimed me?

ATLAS' faith in me was apparently warranted. I didn't manage to eat everything on my plate, but I made a good showing of it. The pillowy soft bread, savoury meat patty, the lashings of pineapple, cheese, caramelised onions, beetroot and egg and bacon making my stomach ache a little in response to all that food, even as my body felt heavy with a sweet feeling of wellbeing.

"Now you've had your food," Elsie said, coming back once we were done and clearing away our empty plates and glasses, "you'll need to head home." She stared at me, a strange mix of pity and judgement in her eyes. "Your mother has been ringing everywhere looking for you." Her head snapped around when the guys let out a low growl. "And you lot? I'm guessing you're the ones that whisked Kaia away from her mother? You think you want to run this place one day, but you won't be doing that by sneaking girls out of their own homes."

"Not running anything," Jayden said with a smirk, jumping to his feet and hauling me up with him. "We're just kids until summer is done."

"Kids, my arse—" Elsie started to mutter.

"So we can't be held responsible for our actions. Bye, Elsie!"

The boys tore off for the front of the shop and dragged me along with them, running past racks of chips, lollies, and newspapers to the sounds of her shouts, their laughter ringing in my ears until we stumbled out onto the footpath beyond.

But as soon as we got outside, my eyes flicked around. Like a lot of small towns, everyone knew everyone, but the clannishness of Stanthorpe rivalled anything that might happen in human towns. The people here could smell us and, what's more, were connected to us by an intricate series of unseen bonds. I should have been keeping an eye out, but the sense of contentment I had from a full stomach and the company I was with was making me feel like I was floating free beyond it all. That was both exhilarating and disorienting.

“Maybe we should—” I said.

“Head to the movies?” Jayden’s blue eyes danced. “There’s that new action flick on. The one with all of the cars and the explosions...”

“That can’t happen unless it’s only one of us going in.” Xavier was looking at his bank balance on his phone. “We don’t have enough money.”

“One ticket?” Jayden’s grin widened. “We can work with that.”

“Jay...” Atlas growled.

“C’mon, we’ve snuck in a million times before.”

“Fuck’s sake, Jay,” Xavier cursed. “Elsie is right. We’re not kids anymore.”

“Yes we are.” The smile faded and was replaced by something much more defiant in Jayden’s eyes. “For another week, we’re just kids.” His focus shifted to me. “We’re not recognised as adults: we’re not allowed to do anything, make any choices, change a single thing. So, until then, we act like kids.”

His words acted as a call to arms, one that had us turning towards the old movie theatre.

Only to be intercepted on the way.

Not by my mother, though. In some ways that would be easier. I saw a few of the girls from school coming towards us up the footpath and found myself falling back, putting myself behind Atlas’ broad back as they approached.

“Heeeey, guys...” Amber’s voice was a perfect low purr. When we stopped, I peered past Atlas’s broad bicep as she looked the guys over with heavily lidded eyes. “Coming to the party over in Granville tomorrow?” Those eyes narrowed when she spied me, then ignored me. “You could come with us.” She nodded to her two friends who clustered closer. “Could have a real wild time.”

“We’re going,” Atlas said, pulling me in front of him, his arms going around me as he plastered my back against his chest. “But if we’re taking anyone, it’s Kai.”

For just a second, I let myself enjoy that, the moment when they chose me, not three of the higher ranked girls from school. Amber was strong, vicious and had enough dominance to ensure she would rise high within pack ranks. And she’d bring her minions with her. But Amber was effective in more than just hand-to-hand fighting, as she proceeded to show as she looked me up and down insultingly slowly, a small smile forming on her lips.

“Oh. You’ll be bringing your little sister with you?” Her perfectly shaped brow rose, her lips twisting into a sneer. My throat worked as my mind raced, wanting to come up with something just as smart, just as cutting, but instead was hit by a wave of defeat. There’d be no way I’d be allowed to go to the party without Anna in tow. Amber’s focus shifted back to the guys. “Let me know if you want to have an actual good time, not just spend the night babysitting.”

And with that, she sailed past, her friends casting scathing looks our way until it was just us left on the concrete footpath.

“C’mon,” Xavier said, bestowing a golden smile upon me. “Don’t worry about those bitches.”

“We’ve got a plan,” Atlas assured me, but they didn’t share it with me, not when we reached the movie theatre, nor when we snuck in.

Chapter 4

“How’s it going, Ashley?” Xavier had drawn the short straw and was responsible for keeping the girl at the ticket booth busy as we snuck in. She looked up from the displays of snacks she was organising, then flushed when she saw him.

“Good, Xavier. Long time, no see?” Ashley was a few years older than us, so it felt weird to see a girl who was a recognised adult get all flustered when she spoke to him. But that was the way of alphas. They ruled with a combination of charisma and iron will. “Going to the party at Granville tomorrow night?”

“Sure am. Might see you there.” He leaned over the counter, closing the gap between them and Ashley’s eyes widened with hope.

“So where are your brothers at?” she asked. That was a natural question, because where one was, so were the rest. Xavier stiffened.

Jayden was usually the one who tried to charm the movie theatre attendant, bullshit falling from his lips as naturally as rain. Atlas could even do it if he had to, the naturally quieter brother saying little, which made it harder to catch him in a lie. But Xavier? He liked to do things right, always going along with that shit under duress.

“Ahh...” He waved furtively for us to get moving, his hand hidden by the counter. We crept forward, keeping our heads out of view. “I just wanted a break from my brothers,

y’know, do something on my own for once. Thought I’d catch the new action movie...”

We didn’t catch the rest of his lies, instead scuttling past the counter and into the theatre, barely stifling chuckles as the thrill of doing something we shouldn’t pounded in our veins.

“Tickets?”

John had been working at the theatre for years and he looked us over with a weary eye. I was wondering what the fuck we were going to use when Jayden fished out some old ticket stubs.

“Just come back from the toilets,” he said, walking forward, dragging us with him.

“All of you?” John frowned slightly, but as we walked past, he just shrugged. “Whatever. Enjoy your movie.”

And we did.

We slunk into the darkened theatre, just as an explosion was taking place on the big screen. Jayden led us right up the back to a row of empty seats. He went first, grabbing my hand and sitting me down beside him as Atlas settled down on my right. But as I was getting comfortable, I felt it: Jayden’s arm around my shoulders, a welcome weight that seemed to always instantly soothe me. And then there was Atlas. His fingers brushed against mine in the darkness, then he grabbed my hand.

And any hope I had of watching the movie was gone.

It was dark. I could hear their breaths, coming in slower and slower as their heart rates settled. But mine spiked. I felt the shift of Atlas’ fingers, the rasp of the calluses against mine, then the play of Jayden’s in my hair, the feeling making me all shivery. People spoke intently on the screen, shooting guns and then throwing themselves into fast cars, taking off with a squeal.

And I felt like I was right there with them.

Why else would my heart be racing, thudding bunny-fast inside my chest? The POV shot of the driver swerving around

corners as they fought to get away from the bad guys was apt, because that dizzying, disorientating feeling, our eyes thinking we were doing something we weren't, was a close approximation of what I felt every time I was with them.

I was in love with the Campbell boys.

In the dark, divorced from my family, my town, my pack, I could admit that. I felt a thrill each time they touched me, my whole body crying out for more. My thighs shifted now, rubbing slightly together, the feeling of tension, of excitement, of pleasure rising and rising until—

“Move over!”

We all looked up to see Xavier hissing at us.

“Nah, we're good,” Jayden replied and snickered as his brother's eyes narrowed. Xavier's eyes took in everywhere his brothers' bodies touched mine. Jayden's hand curled upwards, stroking through my hair until his brother let out a growl of discontent.

“Guess I'm not giving you any of the snacks or drinks I bought,” Xavier whispered back, flumping down beside Atlas.

“How'd you get them?” Jayden demanded.

“Might have said you'd go on a date with Ashley at some point,” Xavier replied, tearing open a packet of chips and smiling as he popped one into his mouth.

“What the fuck...?” Jayden said, at the same time as Atlas turned to their brother.

“Move.”

“What?” But Xavier did as he was told, making a space between him and Atlas and then I was picked up bodily, stifling back a yelp, when he put me down into that spot.

“I got you a pack of Smarties.” Xavier was somewhat shy now, leaning too close, watching me too intently as he peered into my eyes. “I know you like them...”

I had when I was a kid, the crunchy sugary shell and chocolate interior driving me nuts and I still liked them now,

even if they weren't my favourites. But when Xavier offered the packet to me? They became the most delicious things in the world.

"Thanks," I said, glad for the darkness, because otherwise he would have seen my cheeks as they blushed bright red.

"Anything for you, Kaia."

He barely breathed that out, so I didn't think his brothers heard him, but I did. He held my gaze, the smashes and crashes from the theatre speakers somehow a perfect soundtrack for the rapid beat of my heart. The packet crinkled in my fingers, the weight of it somehow heavy. Then Atlas let out a low grunt, wrapping his arm around me and tugging me close.

And suddenly I was in heaven.

The theatre was a dark cocoon and we were nestled down in it, tied tightly by bonds we didn't quite understand, weren't ready to articulate, not for another week. There was no point, not when our futures were in flux. The possibilities were dizzying. They might become the heirs to the current alphas' throne or they might become outcasts. I might continue to be their childhood friend, my importance fading when they found their omega, just like Mum promised.

Or perhaps this.

Maybe one day we'd all walk in here on each other's arms, sporting the mating marks that declared what we meant to each other on our necks. The world would know that we shared a bond that would never, *could* never be broken and we wouldn't have to hide that from anyone. That thought was far sweeter than the chocolate I put in my mouth. With each crunch, each burst of sugary sweetness from the Smarties, I saw a different glimpse of what might be.

BY THE TIME we finally stumbled out of the darkness of the theatre and back into the lobby, I couldn't have told you what the movie was about if I'd had a gun to my head. But as we blinked against the harsh artificial lights, I saw that the sun

had gone down. Only recently, but that was enough to make me anxious. Mum would be expecting me to have started dinner before now and...

“I’ve gotta get home,” I told them.

“You’re coming to ours for dinner,” Atlas said, with just as much certainty.

I stared at him, Xavier, then Jay.

“But Mum—”

“Can make her own fucking dinner.” Jay’s easy smile was gone now, replaced by an angry, hard expression. “She used to before you were born, didn’t she? She used to actually do something.”

He was just saying something we all knew. While Mum had been bossing me around and forcing me to help with Anna from the moment my sister was born, she would have had to have been self-sufficient at some point.

“Mum’s got a lamb roast cooking,” Xavier told us, as he looked at a message on his phone. “She said you’re welcome to come over.”

I was always over at the Campbell place. The boys’ mum was a bit like the mother in *Mean Girls*, wanting to be a ‘cool mum’, but that was a relief when compared with mine.

“OK.”

The way they looked at me had a flush of pleasure, of excitement, that I felt, too. It was like I bathed in the afterglow, that it buoyed me up and carried me forward. I could pretend, just for a minute, that I was just a girl and they were just a bunch of boys, out having fun, before we were forced to shoulder adult responsibilities.

“HELLO, KAIA,” Jenny, the boys’ mum said as soon as we stepped inside the house. She smiled fondly, though her keen eyes seemed to catch the way the boys were clustered close to me. “Your mum’s been on the phone to me. She’s looking for you everywhere.”

Chapter 5

And just like that, all pleasure evaporated. My fists balled, as if I could fight off this shift in mood and Jenny noted that with a slow nod, before breaking the tension with a smile.

“Don’t worry though. I was honest; said I hadn’t seen hide nor hair of any of you all day.” Her focus shifted to the boys. “Where did you get to?”

“Waterhole,” Jayden said, walking over to grab an apple from the fruit bowl on the kitchen bench. His mother slapped his hand away.

“You’ll ruin your appetite. Dinner will be ready in a second,” she said. “And what else?” She looked us over carefully. “You don’t look burnt enough to have been playing in the waterhole all day.”

“We had lunch at the milk bar and then went to the movies,” Xavier replied, moving over to the kitchen sink and washing his hands.

“Just like that, huh?” Jenny eyed the lot of us. “You have enough money? Tell me you didn’t go sneaking into the movies again.”

“OK, I won’t tell you we snuck into the movies again,” Jayden replied, going to the fridge and pulling out a jug of water, his smirk making his mother hiss.

“I’ll put some more money in your account,” she said, pulling out her phone. “Though I’ll be glad when you start earning your own.”

“Who’s earning what?” Jackson was one of Jenny’s mates and he walked into the kitchen with an aluminium tray complete with a delicious smelling roast that was still crackling. “Oh, hey Kaia. Joining us for dinner?”

I opened my mouth to reply, but Jenny got there first.

“Of course she is.” She straightened up and then put a hand on my shoulder. “Everyone needs to clean up for dinner. Kaia can use my bathroom.”

Jenny had clearly defined spaces in the house that belonged to her and her alone, and this bathroom was one of them. She flicked on the light and the spacious bathroom came to life, the scent of lemon peel and lavender strong in the air.

“Have my boys been looking after you?” she asked, a reflected presence over my shoulder as I ran the taps, then lathered my hands with the handmade soap she always bought from one of the local craftspeople. I could never smell lavender or lemon without thinking of Jenny.

“Yes, of course. They always make sure I’m OK,” I replied, then rinsed my hands off, inspecting my short nails and long fingers, making sure there was no dirt left on them.

“Good. Good.” She handed me a small towel when I straightened up and, as I dried my hands, she stood there, an eyebrow raised, staring at my reflection in the mirror. “You know, you’d be quite pretty if you pulled your hair back.”

She did just that, with the strange kind of familiarity older women had in Stanthorpe. Growing up here in the pack, it sometimes felt like you were as much the child of these ladies as your own parents’, even though you didn’t know them as well. So, when she grabbed a gentle handful of my hair and pulled it up into a loose ponytail, I just stood there and let her.

“See.” We both stared into the mirror. “With all that hair out of the way, we can see your pretty face.”

I didn’t see it. I couldn’t, not with the way I’d grown up. According to Mum, my hair was thick and coarse and dark. It was like Mum’s. Not like Anna’s. Mum used to brush Anna’s over and over until those golden locks shone, tossing the brush

to me afterwards to ‘do something about that mop of hair’. Anna would stare at me, seeing all the ways we were different, her bright blue eyes narrowing slightly before Mum would call her away to do something fun.

“You don’t believe me.” I saw a small crease form between Jenny’s perfectly plucked brows, all of her golden perfection seeming to be slightly marred by that small expression. But she softened it quickly with a smile, stepping back slightly. “Is that the poison she fills your head with?” I didn’t dare reply, feeling a strange kind of misplaced loyalty for my mother which manifested as a reluctance to admit what happened at home. “That you aren’t pretty?”

Jenny’s voice was all gentle warmth, but her hand on my shoulder was an insistent pressure, demanding an answer.

“Anna is—” I started to reply, the standard response starting to trip off my lips. But Jenny shook her head sharply.

“Anna is Anna.” Jenny smiled. “She has her strengths and weaknesses, just like anyone else, but...” She gave my shoulder a squeeze. “But I know who I’d rather have as my daughter-in-law.”

Her words were so sudden, so unexpected, that all I could do was stand there, staring dumbly. Jenny took this attention as her due, shaking her head.

“Didn’t expect me to say that, huh? I know what your mother thinks, but, Kaia...” I stood there, just staring, not able to do anything else. “Just because your mother doesn’t see your worth, doesn’t mean I don’t. And my boys definitely see it.” She moved her hand from my shoulder then and the distance between us felt like it broke the spell. “C’mon, you must be starving.” She steered me out of the room. “A meal you don’t have to cook for once? That’s gotta be nice, right?”

I agreed in a strange little croak, the sound terrible, but thankfully she ignored my lack of an actual response as we returned to the table.

THINGS WERE DIFFERENT IN THE BOYS' homes, in most of the homes in Stanthorpe. The men all stood around the table, the food now sitting there, ready to be eaten. But they didn't sit, not until one of the dads pulled out a chair for Jenny to take her place at the head, Atlas doing the same for me. Jay had moved to do it, glaring at his brother when he got there before him. When we sat down, this felt... special. Probably because Jenny turned to me.

“Our guest is served first.”

The dads all smiled at me, a snapshot of what the guys would look like when they got older. Each man was just like their sons, their hair various shades of gold, their eyes bright blue. But they were bigger, heavier built, with the muscle of adults and they watched everything that went on, then nodded to their sons.

“Bread rolls,” Xavier announced and I shot a sidelong look at him, hearing the tiniest quaver in his voice. “You like bread rolls, right?”

“Of course she does, numbnuts,” Jayden replied.

“Jay...” Jackson growled, then shot his son a long look. Jayden nodded and then picked up the dish of carrots.

“These have been cooked in butter and honey and they're so fucking nice,” Jay told me.

“Jesus, Jay...” Greg, the boys' other dad, just rubbed his face then.

“Mum makes them when we have special guests,” Jay told me, his hand frozen mid-air, holding the container up for me to inspect. “Did you want to try them?”

Why now? That's what I wanted to ask. As my eyes scanned the table, I wanted to know what was so special about tonight. But I couldn't, because that's not what we did in my family. We kept quiet and accepted what was, so I just nodded. Jay dropped a big slotted spoonful of the carrots on my plate and that seemed to start the three of them off. Meat, bread, potatoes, mint sauce, it was all piled on my plate until I was forced to say something.

“Enough.” I blinked, realising that my words must sound completely ungrateful. “I mean thanks, but... I can’t eat that much. It’d just be a waste. And it smells amazing. Thank you so much for letting me stay for dinner.”

“Of course.” Jenny smiled as one of the dads started to put food on her plate. But as a small hum of conversation started to build, I just gripped my knife and fork tight. “Eat,” she directed with a nod. “We don’t stand on ceremony here.”

And so I did.

It shouldn’t have tasted as good as it did. Like, the food was top notch, because Jenny and her two mates prided themselves on their cooking. She’d given me plenty of tips over the years to improve my own skills. But... there was more to it. It was the feeling of just being able to sit there and eat, not push past my own hunger to cater to everyone else’s, not feel tired and sweaty and slightly nauseous from cooking all day for my family, only for my efforts to be critiqued mercilessly. Tonight, I ate for pleasure, for the taste, because I was given this food by the guys, because their family nodded and smiled as I did, seemingly benevolent witnesses to the simplest of pleasures.

“LET me help you with the clean-up,” I said, once the meal was done, instantly getting to my feet and grabbing my plate.

“No, you stay here.” Jenny waved me off with a wink. “The guys will help me in the kitchen.”

“We will?” Greg said, copping a dark look from Jenny before he smiled. “Of course, we will.”

“You sit with the boys and keep them company, or maybe you want to go up to their room?” she suggested.

“WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON?” I hissed at them after we’d traipsed upstairs. “Usually it’s all ‘keep your door open and no getting up to anything naughty’.”

“Mum knows,” came Atlas’ response, prowling around the room before coming to a stop by his bed. “Everyone knows.”

“Knows what?” I asked with a frown.

“Kai...” Xavier sounded tired or frustrated or...? I struggled to read his expression as he stopped in front of me. “You know.”

“Know what? This is the second time I’ve asked and...” Whatever I had to say, it all trailed away as I felt fingers at my nape, pulling my hair back from off my neck, but I hadn’t felt a thrill when Jenny did it, not the way I did as Jayden did.

“Need us to spell it out?” Jay’s voice was low and hoarse, right before he pressed a kiss to my skin. I sucked in a breath then, a little shiver running along my skin, my eyes flicking to the other guys. Because this had never happened.

All of the kisses I’d had before had been small, stolen moments with one brother or another. Kisses that hadn’t been seen, they’d been kept secret from the other brothers. Never like this. But as I felt Jay’s arms go around me, cradling me closer, his mouth making a very blatant, very thorough inspection of the back of my neck, I knew they saw. Atlas, Xavier, they moved closer, eyes changing from blue to silver as they watched me tremble then gasp, as Jay kept on kissing me. I felt like I was being stretched thinner and thinner, becoming less a girl and more just a fine thread of consciousness, made up of everything I was thinking.

And everything I felt.

“You were always the one for us,” Xavier told me, staring with the eyes of the wolf. As he edged closer, so did Atlas. “We’ve always known you were the only woman we’d consider as mate.”

“You’re our princess,” Atlas said and then shot me a lopsided smile, bringing me back to then. When we were kids and left to roam around in a paddock of wildflowers as both our sets of parents worked on preparing a BBQ. The boys had collected up handfuls of flowers for me, depositing them in my lap as baby Anna grizzled. I’d shown the boys how to make

daisy chains with the stems and they'd been apt students. Crowns and necklaces and even bracelets, we'd made them all, bestowing them upon each other, then made childish vows.

"You'll be my princess forever," a reedy-voiced, five-year-old Jayden had declared, putting my crown on my head.

"Forever," a child Xavier agreed, putting a necklace around my neck.

"Forever, remember?" Atlas said now, stepping forward and twisting his finger in a lock of my hair.

They'd lured me out of my house today, seduced me into playing hooky for the whole day, avoiding all of the things I was supposed to be doing. They offered me an escape. But none of us had any business offering anyone anything. Our future was to be determined, not by us, but by the pack. The Campbell boys were sure to become alphas and, as soon as they caught scent of their omega, they'd forget about everything.

They'd forget me.

My throat worked, ready to deliver my mother's wisdom, to repeat the same words she'd told me over and over, but right as my breath hissed past my lips, I heard it.

"Is she in there?" My mother's voice floated up from outside, muffled, but no less strident for it. "Is she with them?"

"Now, Abigail—" one of the dads said.

I jerked away, breaking the hazy spell I was under to rush over to the window and stare out, watching my mother square up to Greg.

"Don't you 'now, Abigail' me. Where is she? Where is my fucking daughter?"

Chapter 6

It was the ‘fucking’ that made me aware of just how much trouble I was in. Like, I knew; of course I knew. There was no way I couldn’t. Sneaking off, disobeying Mum. They would have consequences and I knew them well, but this... I watched Mum square up to Greg, talking faster, louder, until it felt like every window in the street lit up and people peered out. Mum was creating a fucking scene and it was all my fault.

“I’ve gotta go...” I said, barely more than a whisper, but when I moved towards the door, they stopped me.

“You don’t.” Atlas peered down at me, as if begging me to understand. His big hands rose, then flexed in the empty air without touching me.

“You could stay here,” Xavier added. “It’s only a week until the choosing begins. Mum’s OK with it and—”

“Your mum is a fucking bitch and everyone knows it.” Jay always said what was on his mind, and now was no different. The other guys gazed at me steadily, willing me to understand, but his eyes dared me to walk out that door. “No one can stand to be around her, but...” His tirade seemed to lose steam, ending with a hard swallow.

“But what?” I asked, my voice growing sharp. “But what?”

“Your dad is weaker than your mum.” Still more truth bombs, but delivered much more gently by Jay. “He doesn’t have half her dominance. She bullies him, pushes him around...”

Jay had more to say, but I moved back towards the window, staring down at their dad and my mum.

Mum had calmed down somewhat. She wasn't shouting now, instead talking to Greg quietly, intently. The two of them seemed to edge towards each other, something that had my brows creasing, though I didn't know why. Greg raised a hand slowly, as if gentling a flighty horse, obviously talking her down from a ledge, and that's when Jenny knocked on the boys' door.

"You don't have to go anywhere," she told me, bright red spots forming in her cheeks. "I'll talk to the alphas. There's only a week to go."

Her offer was kind: beyond kind. Pack members didn't meddle with other families' business often and she was volunteering to do that. But without the alphas' support, we would get nowhere.

"Where is my daughter?" Mum's volume ramped up again. Greg apparently hadn't managed to restrain her for long. "You need to get Kaia and bring her out here now, or I'll be forced to go to the alphas."

Her voice, the determination within it, was what had my legs moving, forcing me to push past the boys, Jenny, and run down the stairs. Mum would call the alphas, make a fuss and get the Campbells in trouble, just like she would for anyone who tried to help me, so I moved faster, trying to head that off.

"You have no right..."

Her voice trailed away as I jerked open the door and stormed into the front yard. Mum pulled away from Greg, throwing up a hand when he started to talk faster, louder. Her eyes narrowed as she took me in, but she moved slowly, purposefully towards me, not letting out a breath until her hand wrapped around my arm.

Her fingers dug deep enough I knew they'd leave a bruise tomorrow, but I just stood there, bearing that pain.

"There you are." Mum's voice was a perfect facsimile of parental concern, at odds with her previous angry shouting, but

consistency had never been her strong point. “I’ve been worried sick all day about you. Time to get you home.”

“The choosing is only days away,” Jenny said, now standing on her doorstep, her arms folded. “Kaia will be an adult then and get to decide her own fate.”

“And she’ll make the right choice for her family,” Mum declared, staring Jenny down.

Mum and Jenny had been best friends at school and had raised their kids together, hence why we were all so close. Then something had happened, something that made them both harden against each other, reducing them to the equivalent of spitting cats whenever they met. And as they stared at each other now, I realised there was a much stronger sense of animosity on Mum’s side.

But she never had that attitude when she saw my best friends.

Mum’s manner changed completely, all the tension leaving her body, a smile that was the equivalent of a lower-ranked wolf rolling over and showing her belly spreading across her face.

“Lovely to see you, boys. If you want to catch up with Kaia, you should come by the house. I know Anna would love to see you. She was just saying today how much she missed you.”

And there it was, the bone of contention. Mum was all about Anna, while no one else here was particularly captivated by my sister. Jenny, the dads and the boys just stared at her flatly until Mum’s fake smile faltered and then faded away altogether.

“Get in the car,” she hissed at me.

“Come by for dinner tomorrow,” Jenny told me. “You’ve got a standing invitation any night of the week. You know that.”

I was caught between two females who were far more dominant than me, while my status in the pack still that of a pup. I couldn’t argue with or talk back to either of them, even

if they wanted contradictory things. Not until I found my wolf and worked out where I fitted in pack hierarchy. So I just nodded, not daring to say a word, sliding into the passenger side seat of the car, then closing the door.

Mum had more to say to Jenny, but her words were muffled by the glass. I just watched her step up to her former best friend, the two of them bristling with hostility as words were said, sharp gestures were made and things looked like it would either escalate into a full fight, probably in fur, or they would just walk away from each other.

They chose the latter.

I jumped when Mum jerked the car door open. She got inside and turned the key in the ignition, then took off down the road with a squeal of the wheels.

“NOT ONE WORD,” she cautioned me when we pulled up outside our house. I wasn’t sure why. I hadn’t said a thing on the whole drive home, so why would I have decided to start? “Get inside and then I’ll deal with you.”

Her words gave me a sense of impending doom. I moved slowly, each step feeling like it took a million years, right up until I got inside the front door and that’s when all the violence that had been simmering inside her erupted.

When she raised her hand, when she called me a little bitch, right as she slapped me so hard, I saw stars. None of that was a surprise. It was what had made me think twice about sneaking off, and was also the reason why I did in the first place. I couldn’t stand living under my mother’s tyrannical rule, so I escaped sometimes, just to fucking breathe. But every time I did, I was hauled back here, reminded of my place.

“Kaia...” Dad jumped to his feet from his seat at the dining table. His brows creased, then real rage flickered in his eyes when he saw the mark on my face, the tears glistening in my eyes, unshed. “Jesus, Abigail, what the hell did you do?”

“What you can’t,” Mum sneered, marching into the room and then pointing imperiously at the kitchen. “Your father, your sister, have yet to have their dinner. They’re starving hungry because of your selfishness, so you march right in there and—”

This was the problem with hitting me too early. Mum never did learn. I’d gotten into the car, done as she asked, to try and avoid just this. But once she’d slapped me? The wolf shifted in me, forcing my spine straight, my head held high. Well, there was nowhere left to go, was there? If she hit me again, it wouldn’t make my jaw ache more or less than it already did, so what did I have to lose? Only a week until I was an adult. One week until my wolf and I were one.

“So why didn’t *you* cook them something?” I snapped. Dad sucked a rapid breath in, not due to my insolence, but from fear. His eyes went wide, flicking backward and forward between the two of us, while Anna sat back, arms folded, watching everything. In response to my words, my mother’s eyes shone with a manic light, a mirthless smile spreading across her face. I wasn’t going to let that stop me now that I’d finally started. “Any of you. Your arms aren’t broken. If you went hungry, you only have yourself to blame.”

The wolf growled inside me, muscles tensing, my arms going wide, my weight resting on the balls of my feet, as my mother launched herself at me.

Blows smacked my head right and left and I tried to shake that off, see through the explosions of white inside my head, right before I hit back. Raking my nails across her skin, slamming my fists into anything that was in reach, with no skill or strategy. The wolf hated this, bucked and fought inside me, desperate to get out, to shift, to run the fuck away, or stand our ground and howl, right before we launched ourselves at her. My mother, the one who had borne me, she wanted me to hurt, I could taste that in the burst of coppery blood inside my mouth. But right now, I wanted to hurt her too. Cloth ripped, muffled growls and screams filled the dining room until a roar cut through it all.

“Enough!” Hands pushed us apart and I think we were both surprised to see my father standing there, panting hard, as he struggled to keep both of us away from each other. Mum lunged at me, snapping her jaws. I was about to do the same when he said it again, “Enough.”

Dad’s voice had dropped in tone, becoming a plea rather than a demand, and that’s what had me stepping back.

“Kaia, go to your room,” he instructed. As I moved to obey him, Anna started to whine.

“But I’m hungry...”

“Make yourself some toast and baked beans,” Dad said.

“But I don’t like baked beans!”

“Then get a bowl of cereal!”

Anna jolted in her chair, not having flinched a second as the fight between Mum and I broke up, but shaken to her core now. She blinked, then blinked again, rapidly. Tears formed in her eyes and that’s all it took to move Mum.

“Don’t cry, darling.”

Not for the first time, I stared at my mother, wondering what the fuck turned her from the vicious bitch of five minutes ago, to this. She moved to Anna’s side and gathered her up in her arms, making my sister seem so much younger as she was held to her mother’s breast.

This, exactly this was what I was jealous of. I didn’t need to be blonde or pretty like her, nor good at drawing and I didn’t need a phalanx of adoring friends. I didn’t need anything else Anna had. Just this.

My mother loved Anna, that was plain to see, as she stroked her hair and crooned soft words to her, giving her all the comfort that had never been bestowed upon me. At Anna’s behest, Mum fussed around in the kitchen, opening drawers and cupboards, although not really knowing where anything was. And why would she? Feeding and caring for the family was my job, not hers. But Mum made my sister a bowl of

cereal, as if pouring out the stream of grains and then adding milk was far too much for Anna.

“Go to bed, Kaia,” Dad prompted in a soft voice and I did, because I couldn’t stand to be around my family for one moment longer.

Chapter 7

You'd have to wonder why she'd allowed me to keep my phone. That was the first thing that got confiscated when a kid was in trouble, right? But as soon as I entered the room I shared with Anna, after I flopped down on my bed, feeling wrung out and nauseous, I reached for the device.

Are you OK? Atlas asked.

Tell me that bitch of a mother didn't fuck with you, Jayden demanded.

You can come and stay with us any time, no strings attached, Xavier wrote. *You know what we want, but we want you safe most.*

Tell me you're OK.

Kaia?

Kaia?

This is why I was allowed to keep it. My phone brought all of the boys to the yard, and in the end, that was more important than punishing me. But as I stared at the screen, seeing notification after notification pop up, I wondered. I tended to keep my mother's abuse to myself. I wasn't even sure why, except I always had, and to go against that felt wrong somehow. More wrong than her laying into me. I blinked as I saw that the questions and expressions of support ceased and then a request for a video call came through.

If I accepted it, the boys would see and... I didn't think much further than that, tapping my finger on the screen.

"Kai..."

The boys were all crowded around one phone, staring at the screen. Jay's, it looked like, his eyes hardening first.

"What the fuck did she do?"

"Nothing—" I began to reply.

"Don't say it's nothing." Atlas shoved forward, his eyes bright, bright silver on the screen. "Don't."

"I wasn't going to," I replied tightly. "I was going to say nothing she hasn't done before."

"She..." All of the Campbell brothers were golden boys, but Xavier seemed like the most golden, seeing the best in people and not accepting the worst. I watched disbelief, fear, concern, then anger flash across his face but I just felt so damn tired. I couldn't come with them on this emotional rollercoaster, not when my journey was done. "Your mother fucking hits you?"

"Of course, she does," Jayden spat. "I told you. I fucking told you." His eyes jerked back to me. "We're coming for you. We'll grab one of the dads' cars and be around—"

"No."

I might not have been able to use the voice of command on my mum, but I could with them. That didn't make sense, because the boys' dominance, that feeling of power that throbbed inside them, it was far stronger in them than it was in Mum. The difference was that I wasn't scared of them. My attention was pulled back to downstairs, because I could hear Mum's voice getting louder and louder in volume, Dad shouting back, things smashing, crashing. Then the sound of Anna running upstairs, her footsteps stopping outside our bedroom door.

She shoved the door open, shooting me a dark look before collapsing down on her bed.

“This is your fault,” she said, stabbing a finger towards the hallway, the sounds of our parents fighting getting louder. “It’s always your fault. You...” Her gaze narrowed, her whole body coming to attention when she saw the phone. “Is that the Campbell boys?”

I didn’t get a chance to answer her before she came rushing over to my bed, reaching to pluck the phone from my grip.

“Piss off!” I hissed at her.

She jerked her hand back, eyes narrowing as she stared down at me.

“You only get to keep that phone because of me. You only get to talk to them because of me.” She launched herself at me then, my reflexes delayed by post-fight soreness. Her eyes lit up when she got it out of my hand, then her whole body stilled when she realised she’d interrupted a video call.

“We’ve got nothing for you, squirt,” Jayden told her and I watched her go pale as a result. “We’ve told you that before. I know your mum has ideas, but we—”

He didn’t get to finish the sentence, because my sister’s face transformed into a vicious snarl, right before she pegged the phone at the wall.

The screen cracked, right before it went black.

“What the...?” I got to my feet, approaching it slowly, picking up the broken phone and staring at it, then holding it out to her. “What the hell did you do?”

“They’re my mates.” Anna stood as tall as she could, the small tremble in her body betraying her true feelings as she repeated the same thing Mum had told her over and over. “In a week they’ll win the dominance fight with the alphas and then I’ll become their omega. Mum said I won’t have to go to school anymore, that I’ll move into the alphas’ residence and learn how to be a good mate from the alphas. And you...” She sneered at me then, all that golden beauty souring into something ugly right as I just stared at her. “And you’ll be made to work as a maid in my house.”

“Fuck off,” I said, flopping back on my bed. Mum had said the same things too many times before. Anna’s words couldn’t hurt me. Right. So why did I turn around, roll into a tight ball and pull the covers over my head as I tried to go to sleep?

It took some time, the sound of my heartbeat too fast and too hard in my ears. But at some point, the quiet, the stillness, the exhaustion from everything that had happened hit me and I dropped off to sleep.

Chapter 8

“Get up.”

I'd barely heard the order, my eyes struggling to open, the dream I'd just been having still playing in my brain, when a hand reached in under the covers, grabbed me around the upper arm and dragged me out of bed. Mum stood over me, eyes shining, teeth bared, ready to go for round two when I was struggling to remember round one.

“You need to cook breakfast for everyone, now. Your father has to get off to work and your sister is going around to a friend's place.”

Leaving no witnesses to whatever she had planned for me. Nice. I blinked, my brain coming online with an almost audible snap, as I stared at her.

“Fine,” I ground out, jerking my hand from her grip.

“And you'll do so with a better attitude than that, young lady, or I'll—”

“You'll what?” I sneered.

But any feeling of strength I might have felt disappeared the minute I got downstairs. Anna was sitting on her phone, tapping out messages to her friends, I bet, but Dad? People are taught to look for the signs of domestic violence in women, but do they do the same for men? He moved slowly, too slowly, as he sipped from his coffee cup and when he did, his sleeve pushed up slightly. Just far enough to reveal a band of greenish yellow bruises. Nausea forced saliva to flood my

mouth, my guts rolling and rumbling at the sight of them, but Mum noticed that. She shot me a smug smile and then sat down at the head of the table, waiting expectantly.

I knew what they each wanted, though Mum and Anna delivered their orders imperiously. That was half the appeal of having me cook breakfast for them. This was an exercise in control and Mum flexed her muscles as I busied myself in the kitchen. But I set her coffee down before her with too much emphasis, listening to her splutter when the drink slopped over the rim and stained the tablecloth.

“That’s your great-grandmother’s good tablecloth you’re staining, young lady!” Mum said, puffing up, ready for another fight, but I just turned around in the kitchen and stared her down. My gaze held hers for some seconds, something I’d never been able to do before. The wolf inside me, she flexed her muscles, shifting. She was like a chick in an egg, tapping away at a hard shell, ready to come out. But I could feel her strength right now, and more importantly, so did Mum. “You’ll clean it up afterwards,” she ordered, but in a much more docile tone, so I turned back to the cooktop and kept working.

Dad had said he just wanted toast, as if ordering the minimum for breakfast was a sort of a salve to me when my mother forced him to treat me as the hired help. But I’d cooked eggs and bacon for him as well.

“Thanks, sweetheart,” he said, gazing up at me as I set it before him. I just nodded.

“Where’s mine?” Anna demanded, looking up from her phone for a second.

I stalked over and dropped a bowl of cereal in front of her, not caring if the milk splattered everywhere. When Mum began to growl, I slapped her bowl of oatmeal with sliced strawberries down on the table next to her.

“You got milk on my clothes!” Anna cried.

“Why do you care?” I replied with a steely look. “I’m the one who’s going to have to clean them, so just stick them in the basket like everything else that needs washing.”

“Don’t talk to your sister like that!” Mum snapped, getting to her feet. She then shoved the oatmeal back at me. “And I told you to cut off all the white parts of the strawberries so it doesn’t turn the oatmeal bitter.”

Dad started to make small sounds of frustration as I stomped back into the kitchen, wrenching open a drawer and then pulling out a paring knife.

“Now, girls, let’s all take a deep breath,” Dad said.

“Do it yourself.” I slapped the knife down on the table and then pulled the apron I was wearing off. I tossed that onto the table too and then faced down my mother. “You’re going to have to soon enough. The choosing happens in less than a week and I’ll be out of here the moment I find my wolf—”

“You won’t be going anywhere.”

This was the pattern of our relationship. Me complying to try and avoid trouble, then when nothing I did pleased her, I rebelled until I was smacked back down and put in my place again. We were trapped in this toxic tug-of-war and she would never put down the rope. So there she stood, stepping up to me, the wolf inside me coming instantly to attention, sniffing the air, picking up the sharp stink of rage from her.

“You think you’re going to escape here at the choosing?” she said, then smiled, the expression on her face one that struck fear in my heart, far more than any threat would have. “You think anyone in this town is going to employ you? Rent a room out to you? Give you a loan for a car?” She shook her head slowly. “Put that apron back on and get back into the kitchen and clean up this mess!”

And with that she threw her bowl of oatmeal against the kitchen wall, the thick goo spreading all across the wall, then slowly dripping down. Anna let out a terrified little yip and Dad froze, blinking, blinking at the mess before staring back at the two of us.

“I think—” he said.

“Go to work and earn some money,” Mum commanded. “This doesn’t concern you.”

“Doesn’t concern him?” I’d never said anything about this before now. The inequality between the two of them had stayed the elephant in the room. I turned to my father. “We don’t have to stay here, Dad. You could show those bruises to the alphas and they’d do something.”

But my dad just flushed bright red, tugging his sleeve down as his face took on a strange shuttered quality.

“We can get out,” I told him, almost pleading.

“Get out? How are you going to do that?” When I turned around, Mum was smiling smugly at me. “I told the alphas about what you’re good for and it wasn’t much.”

I went ice-cold right then, the fire inside me fluttering and then dying out.

“Abigail, don’t,” Dad said.

“They asked me what you’re good for, what kind of job you could do and I was honest with them.” She was never so alive as when she was being vicious to me, her eyes dancing with glee. “I told them that you’re flighty and unpredictable —”

The house was kept clean, orderly, because of me. People didn’t eat in this house if I didn’t cook. Alongside keeping on top of my schoolwork, I did all the washing, the ironing. I cleaned up the room I shared with Anna, and the bathroom and toilet. I ordered the groceries and got them delivered. I—

“A risk to yourself outside the home. You’ll need to stay with the family, working in a domestic capacity, to stay safe.”

Every child who was due to submit to the choosing had a parent speak to the alphas about their hopes and dreams for their child. That wasn’t a life sentence. The alphas used community knowledge, input from teachers and friends, as well as family, to find the best place for a new wolf shifter in the pack. But for Mum to use that opportunity to... what? Try and condemn me to life in this house, rushing after her, doing her bidding, for the rest of my life? A sharp feeling burned inside my chest.

A sharp knock on the door drew our attention away from the drama playing out, preventing me from screaming my outrage at my mother's manipulations.

"And who the hell would that be?" Mum muttered, fixing me with a gimlet look before stalking off to the front door.

"Kai!"

A sharp hiss had me, Anna and Dad all turning around. The Campbell boys were sneaking in from the kitchen like they were on some special ops manoeuvre. Jayden had peeked around the door, Xavier and Atlas' eyes were on the front door. I ducked sideways to see that the pack alphas were standing there on the front porch, and that they had Mum's full attention.

"We're getting you out," Jay said. "Let's go."

"What?!" My feet were rooted to the spot, even as he offered me exactly what I wanted.

"You're not staying here anymore, not another night." Atlas was slow to anger, but when he did? His deep, rumbling voice, his stature, had people jumping. And he was angry. "Get your stuff and let's go, Kai."

"You can't go." Anna sprung to her feet, a frown on her face. She didn't pay any attention to me, entirely focussed on the guys. "You can't take her." She swallowed hard. "You have to take me."

"We're not the ones for you, kiddo." Xavier was trying to let her down easy, but my sister's brows jerked lower. "We've told you that."

"But Mum..." Anna stopped herself, because she was fourteen, not four and even she knew that saying what she knew wasn't true was hopelessly babyish.

"Get Kaia out of here," Dad said, looking wretched. "Take her and don't let her come home. No matter what happens, you have to promise me that. Keep her safe, even if you have to get her out of Stanthorpe. Keep her safe."

“We intend to,” Jayden said, grabbing my hand and starting to pull me toward the stairs. Then Anna opened her damn mouth.

“Muum...!”

That imperious summons. The one Anna used all too often. I could’ve killed her. We were on the home straight, about to escape, and she alerted the one person we needed to keep this from.

“Fuck’s sake, kid,” Jayden growled and Anna flinched at the ferocity of his tone. I didn’t get to see how that played out, though, because he scooped me up into his arms and carried me down the hall.

“Kaia?” Mum’s call wasn’t as harsh as it usually was, because she was around the alphas. “Kaia!”

But the four of us had already spilled out the back door and into the garden, the boys cackling as they threw me over the fence and then followed themselves, before we all shoved into their father’s Hilux. The ute squealed its tyres as they took off at speed.

“You’re never going back there, Kai,” Xavier promised as he looked across at me. “We’re done waiting, done letting you go back to that place. Choose us or not, you’re safe now.”

I just stared at him, then his brothers, because the words falling from their lips were everything I wanted to hear. But I’d wanted it for so long, it was hard to accept I might finally have it. My fingers went to my bruised cheek, the sting there helping to ground me, even as the boys’ eyes narrowed at the mark my mother’s hand had left on me. I sucked in a breath, then another and finally got it out.

“Promise?”

Chapter 9

After being at my house, the alphas had come to the Campbell residence and let us know they'd made clear Mum was to keep away from me, or risk being expelled from the pack. That appeared to be enough to stop her from coming over to the boys' house today. Jenny had fussed over me as soon as the guys brought me in through the door, wrapping me up in an ultra-soft blanket and setting me up on the couch with a mug of hot cocoa. I'd sipped at it absently, more to keep her happy than anything, that people pleaser instinct kicking in slowly, after this morning's spike of rebellion.

"You're safe here now." Her words had reinforced those of her sons and everyone stood around me, nodding to show they were a united front.

And they'd probably have to be.

Mum never let anything go, let alone me. Her dreams for her two daughters—mine terrible, Anna's fantastic—she'd put her heart and soul into them for far too long to just set them aside. But right as my mind started to churn on that, Atlas settled down beside me and pulled me close.

My leg was hooked over his in a way that was far more familiar than I'd ever dared consider, but he stroked my back, once, twice, and kept on going, until I let a long breath out. And when I softened against his brother, Xavier moved until he was pressed against my back, sandwiching me between them. He held me close and then pressed the softest kiss to the top of my head. Jayden stared down at us with a look of

longing, but he smiled when he had my attention, then sat down on the floor in front of us, snagging the remote from the coffee table.

“What did you want to watch?” he asked me, flicking through channels, but I stiffened. The prospect of choosing something, anything, too much for me right now.

“Just put some old reruns on,” Atlas instructed and so Jayden did.

“WELL, LOOK AT YOU.”

It was the evening now and Jenny and I stood in her bedroom staring into her full-length mirror at what appeared to be a stranger, because I had been transformed. The big party over at Granville was on. When I’d said I couldn’t go because I didn’t have anything to wear, she’d pulled me out from where I was nestled between her sons and then started looking through the back of her wardrobe.

“I haven’t worn this since... well, I think I was about the same age as you.” She plucked at the pretty white sundress, running a thumb over the delicate broderie anglaise fabric with a fond smile. As Jenny looked me up and down, I stiffened, because if she was anything like my mother, this would be when she launched into me, telling me my hair was as coarse as horse hair, that I was thin and gawky, that I looked as morose as a wet week, that I was—

“You’re beautiful.” Jenny nodded in satisfaction, then went over to her dresser, grabbing a hair clip before pulling part of mine back and then clipping it in place. “There. You might have to wear your tennis shoes tonight. My shoes are too big for you to wear, but...” She straightened the dress tie on one shoulder. “We can take you to the shops tomorrow, maybe over at Warrick? We can get you a whole bunch of clothes to tide you over.”

“Oh, I can’t—” I started to say.

“Nonsense.” She smiled broadly. “I always wanted a daughter to dress up.” Her arms went around my shoulders.

“Now I’ve got one.” Her hug was there and gone again, before she used her grip to steer me out the door and into the lounge room.

The dads were circumspectly hanging around, apparently having urgent tasks that required them being in the lounge room. On the other hand, the boys were sitting down, their normal demeanour a little subdued. When they saw me, they jumped to their feet. Each one was freshly showered, hair combed back neatly, fresh jeans and shirts replacing the worn clothes they’d been in when they hung out with me all day. They didn’t look anything like they normally did, and neither did I.

“I…” Atlas stepped forward and held out a small posy of flowers. Not just a clutch of random whatever’s-in-season from the garden either. These were white roses. “I got you these.”

“When the hell did you pick *them* up?” I caught Jayden’s whispered hiss before he smiled brightly as he met my eye. “They’re from all of us.”

“No, they’re not. They’re—”

“Beautiful.” I finished for Atlas.

I took them from him with shaking hands, unable to believe what I was seeing. I touched the white petals, then jerked my hand back, not wanting to damage them. But as my fingers brushed against the petals, I caught the rich, sweet perfume. Not as intense as red roses, but still alluring. I looked up at him, and saw that all three of them were staring down at me with eyes of pure silver.

“No one’s ever brought me flowers before.”

“They tried.” Jayden said frankly as he crossed his arms. “Steve Bailey at school.”

“What?” I frowned as I looked at him.

“Jimmy, Kaleb, Macca…” Jayden listed them one by one, then looked at Xavier. “Who else?”

“Doesn’t matter who else,” Xavier replied, stepping forward and grazing his fingers along mine that clasped the flowers. “We made clear who you belonged to, Kai. Us.”

I blinked, despite my lashes feeling unusual, a bit weird and clumpy. Jenny had helped me put on a full face of makeup and, while I liked the look of it, it felt strange. I thought that might be why I could barely feel my face, my heart pounding, my palms sweaty and my cheeks numb.

“Take the girl out first,” Jackson said with a smile. “Show her a good time. Make clear what you’ve got to offer her, before you try and nail her down.”

“Definitely no nailing,” Greg said with a meaningful look. “But if you’re going to this party, who’s gonna be Sober Bob?”

Sober Bob was a program the Australian government had set up to try and popularise one person staying sober when the others were getting drunk, so no one was tempted to drink and drive.

“Me!” Jayden said, holding out his hand for the car keys.

“Xavier, then?” Greg asked.

“I will,” Atlas said, holding out an arm for me to take. We’d walked hand in hand more times than I could count, but right now? It felt different, like there was a ceremonial import to the whole thing. I could imagine doing the same, similarly dressed in white, but in a much fancier dress, looking down the aisle at the local chapel before— “I don’t need to drink tonight, not when I’m with Kaia.”

“Drunk on lurve...” Jayden cackled then made exaggerated kissing noises and at his stupidity it felt like we all let out a sigh. Things were reverting back to normal. Xavier was expected to be responsible, Jayden was acting like a dick and Atlas...? I wanted to meet his gaze, but I could only manage it for a second, the intensity in his eyes part alpha dominance, and part him.

Mine.

That's what I felt as they escorted me out, the parents seeing us off, making us promise not to drink too much and to ring them if we got in trouble. Sliding into the seat with full parental permission, with no sign of Anna being pushed our way? That was weird, real weird. But as Atlas turned the engine over and eased us out onto the road, I decided I could get used to it.

NIGHT HAD FALLEN by the time we arrived at the party. It was being held in a paddock on someone's farm, so the endless horizon, all the stars in the sky, it made the expanse look so big. And when Atlas grabbed me around the waist and swung me out of the car? There was something magical about it all.

"The fairy lights..." I said, not able to finish that sentence as I stared at the strings of them hung up everywhere. "The fire pit... It's..."

"Perfect?" Atlas completed my sentence, but he wasn't looking at any of that, just at me. "Yeah, it is. The most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

I smiled then, shyly at first, then much more broadly, even as my cheeks flushed. I felt like a butterfly working its way out of its cocoon, ready to flap its wings. And just as I was feeling bold, the dress Jenny had lent me swirling around my knees, my fingers clasping the posy of roses tight, a voice cut through it.

"So you made it?" Amber had appeared out of nowhere with her posse of friends, wearing a very pretty dress with perfectly polished cowboy boots. As soon as I saw her, all gleaming confidence, I felt the usual instinct to shrink back. But when Amber took an insultingly slow look at me, my wolf let herself rise up. I wasn't shrinking away anymore. A low growl formed in my chest, ready to erupt, as I stepped forward, staring her down, even as she continued. "And you brought your little friend too. Where's your sister, Kaia?"

"Shut up, Amber—" Jayden started to say, but I held up a hand.

“At home, with my mother,” I replied in a tight voice. “But seeing as the alphas have stepped in to make sure that I don’t have to go back there, I’m not sure what they’re doing.”

Her smile faltered then, but not for long. It got whiter and brighter as she focussed on Atlas instead.

Whoever had organised the night had gone to a lot of work. There were strings of fairy lights everywhere, and a massive fire pit blazing away in a hole dug in the ground. Bales of hay covered in horse blankets were used as seating and the savoury scent of roast meat filled the air. There were so many people milling around, dancing, talking, the place looking like some kind of wonderland, not just an ordinary farm.

“I got some new boots.” She twisted a graceful leg to show them off. “Want to help me break them in on the dancefloor?”

Part of me was still sure he’d say yes. I couldn’t believe him when he moved closer, nor when he took my hand, couldn’t believe in the way his grip tightened as her eyes narrowed. I felt a sharp pain deep in my guts, as if my body was feeling the rejection I anticipated before it even happened.

“If I’m gonna dance with anyone, it’s Kaia,” Atlas said.

I just stared at him blindly. And Atlas? He didn’t wait for permission. He just grabbed my posy and tossed it to his brothers before leading me over to a well-lit part of the paddock where a Bluetooth speaker was blaring out a playlist of the latest country music.

“I can’t dance!” I hissed at Atlas when we were standing amongst the other dancers. I watched the way they moved together with apprehension. Mum had never been interested in teaching me and when I was hanging around with the guys we normally weren’t working out dance steps.

“Don’t worry, Kai,” he said, gazing down at me, in a tone of voice that said this would always be true. “I’ve got you.”

Chapter 10

Atlas

I didn't. Of course I fucking didn't. I couldn't dance my way out of a wet paper bag, but when that bitch tried to put my Kai down, I had to step up, it was just that... I'd waited for just this moment for far too long. When I stepped forward, I saw the million stolen glimpses of Kaia in class, in the school yard, on the bus home, when she was hanging around with us. And when I took her hands, it felt like I did so finally acknowledging the million impulses to touch her, to drag her close and into my arms, to hold her close and never let her go. I stared down at her mouth, then back into her eyes, those dark depths slowly fading to silver. I knew she was worried—that she was scared—but she didn't get it. Even if we made damn fools of ourselves, I'd have her, my girl, my mate.

Just like she'd always have me.

“Step onto my boots,” I said.

“What?” I pulled her closer, her feet moving reluctantly in those cute little tennis shoes. “But I'll be too heavy.”

I snorted at that.

“You're like a butterfly, Kai, or a feather on the wind. I spend half my fucking life terrified you'll just blow away.” I settled her feet on top of my boots, her arms going up and around my neck to keep her balance and that made me smile. “Anyway, I dunno how to dance either.”

“What!” She glanced around to see what everyone else was doing, right up until I snagged her attention as my hands went around her waist, holding her close, just cradling her in my arms and nothing had ever felt as right as this. Mum and the dads had told me that this is what it would be like, but they hadn’t mentioned the wrench in my chest that felt like pain, but one that hurt so sweet as long as I held her. “So why did you say you wanted to dance?”

“Because of this.”

I moved slowly in time with the beat of the music. It was a slow song, a sad one, where a guy loses his woman, his farm and then his dog, but I couldn’t relate to the lyrics. He sang about a terrible emptiness, right when I felt completely full.

I was holding Kaia. I could smell the sweet floral scent of her, something that always tugged at my attention, making sharing a class with her bloody terrible and awesome, all at once. I could feel the rapid skitter of her heart, saw the way her chest heaved and the bodice of the dress shifted with it, my eyes wanting to follow the way her breasts moved. But what was happening here went way beyond sex or attraction. I wanted her. I dreamed of her. I was ashamed to admit it, I’d jerked off more times than I could count to memories of her, but I thought of none of that now. Just her, here, with me, in my arms and—

“I have to touch you, Kai. I’ve wanted to for so fucking long I don’t know how to stop. I have to hold you.” I shifted my arms then, pulling her just a little closer, obliterating any gap between us, her eyes going wide as she felt me. “I have to keep you close, feel you in my arms, shut the fucking wolf up inside me and trick him into thinking you’re mine.”

“Trick...?”

She barely breathed that out, then went up on her tiptoes. I felt the press of her toes through the thin rubber of her soles and the thick leather of my boots, then I felt the press of her breasts against my chest as she leaned into me, lifting her face.

And then her lips pressed against mine.

I'd stolen kisses from her before, little ones, teasing glimpses of what might be, but never like this. In the open, where everyone could see, some people letting out great whoops in response, egging us on as they teased us. But I couldn't give a flying fuck, not when I had this.

"If you knew how badly I wanted to hear you say that..." she breathed out between kisses.

"You shoulda said, Kai. I would've told you every day, shown you in every way I know how. You belong to me, beautiful, in every fucking way a man and a woman can belong to each other. I'll never want—"

Her lips silenced mine and that was just fine. Our bodies spoke much more eloquently than we ever could. Kisses, searing kisses that felt like they burned a brand on my soul. I took one, two, too many to count, and then they were deepening. The moment her lips parted, I groaned: the music, the dance forgotten. There was just Kaia, just her taste, the feel of her tongue and— I forced myself to pull away before I lost control altogether. The wolf was close, too close, and I couldn't let him out for the first time here.

"C'mon," I said, reaching out and taking her hands, not able to take a breath until she squeezed back. Kai looked happier, her whole face lighting up brighter than the damn fairy lights strung up everywhere. I stared at the long flow of her dark hair, her eyes so big and fading back from silver as they gazed back at me, watched her full lips twitch, right before they broke into a grin. "Let's get you something to drink."

She didn't know it, not as I held her hand, not as I drew her through the crowds of people, as we weaved our way towards the bar. I'd do fucking anything for her. Walk over hot coals, slay a fire-breathing dragon or just wring the neck of that fucking mother of hers, because that woman was the biggest threat to Kaia. Instead the only quest I had was to dig into the ice in the eskies, pulling out a soft drink for me and a beer for her, before scooping her up and setting her down on a hay bale. I handed her the beer, but she took it without even looking at the brand, still staring up at me.

“Is this the way it’s always going to be?” she asked me in a little voice, like she only just dared to say the words aloud. “Tell me it is—lie to me if you have to—just like this: no worries, no bullshit...”

I cracked my can of Coke and tapped it against her beer bottle in a silent toast.

“Always.” I stepped closer, standing while she was sitting, looking down at her which made me feel she was so much smaller, more fragile, than I ever would be. The need to look after her, protect her, had been growing and growing with every year, but now it was an ache so damn sharp it almost took my breath away. “Always and forever. You’re my princess and I’m just the fucking idiot that serves you.”

“You’re not an idiot.”

She reached up then and I bent down to let her wrap her arms around my neck and there was nothing better than letting her press my forehead to hers, right before I dipped my head sideways and then took her mouth.

We didn’t have that much of an audience here. Plenty of people were kissing their own partners and, because we weren’t on the dance floor, less people were watching. So this wasn’t a soft thing, just a press of the lips. It started out that way, but that changed all too soon. Because as soon as I felt Kai’s lips, I was gone.

Lost in the taste of mint toothpaste and her, then the feel of those too soft lips giving beneath mine. Every other kiss before tonight had been a quick thing, grabbed before the others, before our parents, could find out. But there was no one else here, no one but Kai. I teased her lips open, slowly but surely, needing more, more, that was what pulsed hot and heavy in my blood. I was dimly aware that she lost hold of the beer, that it spilled fizzing out onto the dry summer grass, but I didn’t care.

I just wanted this.

Her little hitch of a breath, her lips parting, her tongue flicking out cautiously, testing mine, right before I set down

my Coke on the hay bale and tugged her closer. I needed to feel her against me, under me, a strange kind of hunger building that would not be satisfied until she was mine. It was the hunger of my knot, that only ever swelled when I was around her, that ached so fucking much for her. But when I scooped her up, her hands keeping hold around my neck, her legs wrapping around my waist, I smelled the moment her floral scent deepened as I rocked against her.

“Atlas...” Her voice was part whimper, part plea, and I was helpless to do anything other than answer it. I sank my fingers into her lush arse, then ground her harder against me.

“Something you need, my mate?”

She pulled her lips away from mine and, for a moment, I figured I’d fucked up, killed the mood. But she just stared at me with a look of wonder.

“Mate...?”

She couldn’t seem to say more, to ask all the questions I could see swirling inside her head, so I answered them as best as I could. I nodded slowly, holding her gaze, trying to communicate every damn thing I was feeling.

“You’re all I’ll ever want, Kai. All I’ll ever need. The world begins and ends with you. How could you think I’d want anyone else?”

She burrowed her face in my chest then, tightening her grip on my shoulders to close even the smallest gap between us again. I held her close, crooned stupid, nonsense words to her as I just held her.

“Good one, numbnuts.” I jerked my head up and growled at my brother when Jayden appeared at one shoulder, Xavier at the other one. Jay looked the two of us up and down, then shook his head. “Now neither of us can kiss Kai. She has to look like she’s your girl for the humans.”

“Or...” Xavier said. He looked at each one of us in turn as he waited to finish his sentence. “We don’t give a shit what the humans have to say. Not them, not the other kids from school, not our parents or our town, anyone.” Mr Do-things-by-the-

book was breaking all the rules when he held out a hand for my girl, our girl, and I think only I saw how much it cost him. Kaia flushed bright red, staring at his palm, even as her own fingers twitched. “Take my hand and come dancing with me, Kai. Take Jay’s and he’ll feed you until your stomach groans. Anything you want tonight, that’s the way this works. Anything and everything you want.”

He was saying what we’d agreed to last night. When our parents talked us out of storming over to Kai’s place there and then, and got on the phone to the alphas, we’d had some time to think out how this would go. We’d had so many ideas, until we’d settled on this.

Telling Kai what she wanted would be no good, us taking over the role of bossing her around instead of her mother. We might be alphas, deep down in our hearts, but we needed to let her lead.

“Anything?” There was always something so damn sweet about her voice, like she was scared to be happy and, when she was, she never took it for granted.

“Anything,” we promised her.

“Well, all right then.” She put her hand in Xavier’s and I think we all sighed then, not sure she’d say yes until she did. He twirled her around like they did on those fancy dancing shows, making me wonder where the hell he learned that, because when she stopped, she let out a giddy peal of laughter.

“Dancing? Food? A beer you can actually drink, not use to water the grass?” Xavier asked.

“All of it,” she replied. “I want all of it.”

Chapter 11

So this was what a party was like.

People talked about them all the time at school, but I was only ever allowed to go when Anna was in tow, so I'd never experienced this. Drinks brought over for me when I finished mine, then plates of food. Then when I was done with that, another set of hands dragging me up onto the dance floor, the couple of beers I'd had helping me to lose my inhibitions. I felt like I was caught up in the bubble of happiness, one that would never pop.

"I need to go to the loo," I told Jayden as the last song ended.

"Kaia, wait..."

I just tossed him a smile over my shoulder, then made a beeline for the Portaloos that had been set up on one end of the paddock. I strode across the grass towards it, every step feeling I was light as a feather, and found that as I walked up there wasn't even a line. The portable toilet I went into was clean, had toilet paper and everything, so I was thinking my luck was up when I stepped outside.

Then I ran into them.

"Hey, baby..."

Stanthorpe girls didn't mix with human boys. Not all of us would end up in relationships with more than one man, but it happened often enough that we kept away from humans. They didn't understand our wolves, the fact we were drawn to one

or more people who were our fated mates. They didn't get that our love was written in the stars, instead they judged us and thought us 'easy'.

"Seems like you're real popular with those boys," the guy said with a sneer on his face as he looked me up and down, his buddies cackling like a pack of hyenas. "If you're gonna spread the love around, you can send some of it over here."

The wolf flexed inside me. She was close, so close. In her mind, these monkey-brained idiots didn't stand a chance against us and she was right. Or she would have been if I had gone through my first shift already. Shifting with humans around was strenuously discouraged, but if our backs were against the wall... But I hadn't had my first shift yet, and that's when I realised why we'd been warned about human towns, about human boys. They looked me over right now like I was a piece of meat, one for them to tear apart. They didn't know me or my family. I had no value to them apart from what they could do to me. So they shifted closer—

"And what the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Jayden's voice was a low growl, full of threat. In Stanthorpe, anyone else would've stood down, backed the fuck off, knowing what was coming if they didn't. But these boys? They didn't have the sense god gave a cat, so they kept on coming, facing Jay off like a pack of aggressive dogs.

But Jayden was no dog.

I saw their sneers falter when they saw the silver flash of Jay's eyes, knowing somehow, deep inside, that what they faced wasn't another guy. No, he was the thing that lurked in the dark, setting their teeth on edge, sure that something was tracking them from the shadows, even if they couldn't see it.

"Don't want to share your little slut?" the leader asked and that was his first mistake. He might've got somewhere with Xavier, maybe even Atlas, but not Jay. He was an act first, think later kind of guy and that was exactly what he did.

The choked off sound of a man's windpipe being squeezed was evidence of the guy's second mistake. He wasn't fast

enough to see Jay's strike coming, so he had no way to deflect it. Instead his hands clawed uselessly at the fingers that closed tighter around his throat.

"Jay—" I said.

"Don't go making the mistake in thinking the three of you can take me on," he told the other guys who milled around, torn between the idea of attacking or running the fuck away. Jay threw the first guy away so violently he went sailing through the air, to land like a sack of potatoes some distance away. "I can take you all out, no problems."

"And he's got two brothers at his back."

We turned around to find Xavier and Atlas standing there, staring the remaining guys down.

"Fucking Stanthorpe pricks," one of them spat.

"Fucking Granville mouth breathers," Xavier shot back with a cock of his eyebrow. "So you gonna have a go, now the numbers are more even, or what?"

Atlas suddenly lunged forward a step at the Granville guys, chuckling as he psyched them out, making them totally lose their cool bro stances. But that seemed enough to derail the stand-off, and they all turned tail, muttering between themselves as they grabbed their buddy and hauled him to his feet.

"I thought I said eyes on Kaia all night," Xavier growled at Jayden.

"She just went to the toilet," he explained. "I was talking to Jacko and..." Jay sighed, then turned to me. "Sorry, Kai."

I flung myself at Jay, not seeing if he was going to catch me, but somehow knowing he would. My arms went around his neck and he pulled me to him, holding me tight, keeping me close, and then his lips brushed my ear.

"What brought this on?" he asked, his voice a low buzz in my ear. "Because whatever it was, I'd have done it a long time ago if it got me this."

I pressed my lips to his to shut him up, but as soon as our mouths touched, something else took over. A frank need to explore every inch of his lips, his tongue, to dig my fingers into the nape of his neck before Xavier pulled his brother away.

“Do we all get kisses like that?” he asked in a teasing voice, but there was a glittering intensity to his eyes that made it seem like it wasn’t a joke. “No? Well, how about a triple chocolate sundae from Melva’s?”

I groaned then. Melva’s was a twenty-four-hour truck stop in Granville, but unlike a lot of places like that, it wasn’t to serve pies that had just been sitting in the bain-marie for way too long, breeding bacteria. Melva was a well-rounded older woman who prided herself on the quality of her food. If I was with the guys, we always dropped in when we were going through town.

“You get me that sundae,” I said with a smile. “You can have any damn thing you want.”

Chapter 12

Xavier

I loved Kaia when she looked like this. Cheeks flushed, hair wild, her eyes shining bright as stars as she smiled, really smiled. She didn't know what all her smiles looked like, but I'd studied them for long enough to know. The half smiles and quarter ones, the small ones she dared to let her lips form when her damn mother wasn't looking. The ones that felt like they lit up my damn soul, that either happened without her realising, before she could smother that feeling, or were secret ones that she let herself show when she thought all the attention was on someone else.

Primarily on her damn sister.

But this version of Kaia's smile? All teeth and ruby red lips? I would do just about anything to see that smile. So we all piled into the car, ditching the party and heading for Granville. As soon as we arrived at the truck stop, I was out, racing my brothers to get around to her side of the car, to open the door and seize my prize.

Kai.

She grinned even wider as I grabbed her around the waist and swirled her around as I pulled her from the backseat.

My girl.

As we'd got older, as the end of school had drawn near, I'd started to get a feeling that things were slipping away from me. That the end of summer would result in more than us just

finding our place in the pack, but that we would be leaving as much behind as we gained. *Let me hold onto this*, I thought as I set her down on her feet, then took her hand. *Let me keep this*.

“Well, well, if it’s not the fine young men of Stanthorpe,” Melva said, looking us up and down. “And their fair lady.” She winked at Kai, then grabbed her well-thumbed order pad. “So what can I get you this evening.”

“Four of your finest triple chocolate sundaes,” I said, with a grin.

“With extra cream and chocolate shavings?” she asked, even though her look made clear she didn’t need to. We always ordered the same thing.

“Kai?” I stared at her, could barely stop doing that normally, but it was twice as bad now. She was close now, all I had to do was just reach out... And she seemed to sense there was some subtext there, meeting my gaze with a shy smile, then nodding.

“Yeah, that would be amazing thanks, Melva.”

“Right you are,” the woman said, moving to grab her ice cream scoop and the glass sundae servers. She went to work, putting our orders together as we found a booth out the back.

The place was mostly empty at this time of day. Locals flooded in for the main meal times of the day, but now, this late in the evening, Melva kept the place open for the drivers passing through, the truckies pulling up stumps for the day and settling into the capacious car park at the back, crawling into their sleepers once they’d had a hot meal. I often wondered at the long hours she put in, but she always shrugged that off.

“Home is where you make it,” she’d said when I’d asked her direct. “And this is mine. The truckies, those passing through, some of them are as familiar as immediate family, others are more like those distant second cousins you’ve only heard about, but they’re family just the same.” She’d winked at me and my brothers. “Just like you lot.”

“There you go.” Glass dishes of chocolate ice cream, dripping with hot chocolate fudge sauce, cream, chocolate shavings and a drizzle of Nutella. “That’s a diabetic coma in the making,” Melva said with a shake of her head. “Oh, to be young again. Will there be anything else?”

I shook my head and thanked her for the desserts before handing over some money. But when she turned away, that just left this.

I was dimly aware of my brothers the same way you could say you sensed the sun on your skin or the sound of the rain. It was a background thing, not important: not compared to her. I picked up the long-handled spoon on my sundae dish, because it was that or grab her. Kai. My girl, my love, the feature of all my fevered dreams and fantasies, I couldn’t help but shoot her a sidelong look. And when I did, she caught me, because she was doing the same. She snorted then, busted along with me, and the two of us just stared at each other for a second before Jay said, “This shit is amazing.”

“It is,” I agreed with my whole heart, barely able to feel my fingers as I scooped up a mouthful of ice cream and then offered it to her. Kai’s brows creased slightly as she looked at it, then she darted forward, sucking the ice cream from the spoon. Those lips, the way her tongue flicked over them, that small gasp of pleasure: I ate it all up with far more appetite than I had for food.

“Stop with the creeper staring,” Jay said with a nudge to my ribs. “Kai knows we’re into her now, so you don’t need to freak her out.”

“Do I?” She licked her own spoon clean before looking at the rest of us. “Xavier staring isn’t creepy, not to me. As a matter of fact, I’m not sure I’ve had enough.”

“You want our attention?” I said, aware of the need bleeding into my voice, but this time I didn’t stop it. “You’ve got it, beautiful. Every moment of every day.”

“I’ll fucking never blink again if that’s what you need, Kai,” Jayden said. “But…” He shifted restlessly, which

warned me I wasn't going to like what he had to say. "We'll do anything you want, but how far did you want to go?"

All of that rebellious, vital energy she'd had when Jay was fighting those guys shone in her eyes as she smiled around her spoon. It seemed like some particularly painful form of flirting, because I was imagining something else between those lips, but then she set the utensil down.

"What're you offering?" There was challenge in her voice, something that had the wolf in me standing up and taking notice straight away. "We're only supposed to go so far before the choos—"

"Everything." That wasn't smart or wise and was definitely not what the dads had advised when they 'had the talk' with us last night. I'd nodded along as they told us about this and that, made it look like I was being their normal dutiful son, but they were going to have to understand, everything changed when it came to Kai. The rules went out the window and so did my good sense, replaced by my emotions.

I loved her. I knew that back when we were younger, but there's a special kind of love that hits you when you're just making that shift between man and boy. Your defences aren't strong enough to beat love back, train it into a socially acceptable shape. All I knew was everything in me needed her, and if there was anything she wanted from me that I could give her, I would.

"Everything, huh?" She toyed with her ice cream and suddenly I wanted to be covered in chocolate and cream, so she'd do the same with me. "OK." Kai nodded slowly. "I want that. Everything."

"Fuck this for dessert," Jay said, shoving his bowl away. "I don't want this on my tongue. I want something much sweeter."

I was about to tell him to shut the fuck up and keep his filthy comments to himself, but then we all froze. The floral sweetness of Kaia's arousal filled the air, turning each one of us to stone.

“Yeah...” She breathed out a gasp for air. “I think I want that too.”

Chapter 13

We left our sundae bowls on the truck stop counter, but Melva didn't take us to task for not eating much, nodding at the four of us with a knowing look. She knew—the whole world had to know—what was coming next. It felt like the boys and I had been on this path since the moment we were babies, not realising what the hell it would mean, this bond between us, not until we were old enough to understand what sex, mating, bonding was.

But we knew that now.

I was escorted back to the car. Xavier opened the front passenger side door and put me in the seat, Atlas leaned over to do up my seatbelt, but then Jay reached around, turning my head to face him. We kissed then, just a brush of lips that was enough to set my body on fire, as Atlas drove.

"WHERE IS THIS?" I asked, as we rumbled along a dirt track.

"An old lookout," Atlas replied. "You'd never get out here without a four-wheel drive and, even then, you have to know it's here."

The place was somewhere halfway between Stanthorpe and Granville, between wolf lands and human, but when he stopped, killing the lights, it was wholly ours. Jay opened my door and then pulled me out, letting my body slide slowly against his.

“You sure you’re ready for this?” he asked me in a low whisper. “I’ll fight the others off if you’re not.”

“I’m ready,” I replied, not entirely sure that was true, but I wanted it to be.

“Yeah?”

His voice was so much lower, huskier as he moved closer, slowly, slowly, so I could pull away if I wanted to, but when my hands went to his hair, he let out a low grunt, right before I kissed him.

Jayden moved at speed, pinning me to the side of the car, the cool metal and the heat of his body creating a special kind of frisson inside me. Our mouths opened, because this was not time for coy or teasing kisses, and every single thing I surrendered, Jay took. His mouth plundered mine, his tongue flicking out, his fangs raking across my bottom lip until I jerked back at the feel of a bright spot of pain.

“You fucking bit her?” Xavier shoved his brother away, moving in to take Jay’s place. Those clever fingers that fixed my bike tyres, helped me across river crossings and grabbed a hold of my hand when I was scared as a kid, they tipped my head up for him to inspect, his eyes almost as bright as the moon above. But him dipping forward, sucking my bottom lip softly at first, then with long pulls, as if he would draw out all the blood in my body, right before he pulled away? I hadn’t expected that. “You good, Kai?”

I answered him the only way I could, wrapping my arms around his neck and drawing him back down.

We weren’t the first teenagers to sneak off and do something forbidden, but it was different with us. In a week we’d be able to stand before the entire pack and claim each other. Just not now. But like a whole lot of other young people, the idea of waiting that time felt too hard, too long, impossible. I touched one of them then the other, not fuelled by beer or freedom or the rush of having three men I’d fantasised about my whole life finally acknowledge what we all now knew to be true, but by something more.

We were meant to be together.

And I was claiming them because, in my first act as a woman independent of my mother's control, I was going to acknowledge that truth with mind, soul and body.

“Kai...” Jay tried to pull away but I clawed him closer. “Wait, Kai...”

I finally acknowledged what he was saying, my flush concealed by the darkness as he opened the back door and then pulled out a rolled-up mattress.

“You brought a swag?” Xavier asked.

“The dads would've lost their shit if they knew,” Jay replied. “But Mum...” He stared at me for a second, then walked around to the tray of the ute, unwrapping the mattress and letting it unfurl in the back of the car. The big broad cargo area was now an open-air bed. “She suggested it.”

“Jenny...” I shook my head at this tacit adult approval, it was apparently all I needed to do this.

I dropped to one knee to undo my shoes, and the guys stepped in around me.

“Let me,” Atlas told me, taking over.

“And I'll make short work of this damn dress,” Jayden muttered under his breath, his fingers going to the zipper down the back.

“Hang on.” Xavier tipped my face his way. “You sure this is what you want, Kai? We don't have to—”

“Yes, we do.” Could he hear the need and desperation in my voice? Did he feel an answering one in his own heart? I thought he did, but it was hard to tell. I smelled arousal and musky male scent and family and home when I was around them, but there was no scent for love, as far as I knew. “We do, because... I don't know about you, but I can't go to sleep in the spare room of your parents' house, knowing what I know now. You're mine.”

“Gods, yes, Kai,” Jayden muttered, pressing his lips to the back of my neck.

“And I’m yours.” Atlas’ fingers closed around my ankle as I said the words, holding on as if he would never let go. “And I’m not going home tonight until we’ve made that clear to each other.”

“You mean—” Xavier started to say.

“You think I haven’t wanted you? That each time I swim with you, or watch you play sport with your shirts off, or when I’m balancing on the handlebars of your bike, that I don’t want to touch you?” I pulled away from Jayden and Atlas then. “That I don’t long to put my hands on your perfect golden bodies?”

My fingers trembled as I undid his top button, Xavier’s hands stopping mine for just a second as he took over, then bared his chest to my eyes. And when I touched him, we both seemed to know what this meant, him hissing along with me.

Xavier was hot to touch, his wolf close to the surface and ready to spring free, but not now, not yet. I wound my hand upwards, across his collarbone and then around his neck, thumbing his pulse. When I felt his heart rate thundering fast under my touch, I frowned slightly, the golden idol of Xavier replaced with this: just a boy who wanted me as much as I wanted him, as he tugged me closer and then slammed his mouth down on mine. He was done being good, checking in with me, and now he was ready to be bad. He kissed like the devil, making the lip that Jay had nipped sting, right before he pulled away and turned me around.

“All of us?”

One last question and then the issue of consent would be resolved, the two other men standing there like they were facing a firing squad, not me.

“Of course, all of you,” I replied.

My dress was hanging on my shoulders, now that the back gaped after Jayden slid down the zipper, and the two of them stepped forward.

“Fuck, Kai...” Atlas kissed me hard, brutally so, his massive hands raking across my skull, grabbing handfuls of

my hair, kissing me over and over until we were forced to pull apart to catch a breath.

“Got some of that sugar for me?” Jay was both cocky and unsure in the same moment and somehow that was perfect. We were all unreasonably brave and scared. I went into his arms willingly, feeling his lips brush mine as he took his time to kiss me. Soft lips parting, mobile tongue thrusting forth, little gasps, whistles of breath, then long, slow sucks of my bottom lip. And I did the same to him. It felt like with each pass we were getting deeper and deeper until we had to stop.

Because there was only so far we could go with kisses. Jay nodded, sliding one strap of the dress off my shoulder, then the other. I felt a pang of guilt that Jenny’s pretty dress landed in the grass beneath us, but before I could say anything, Jay picked me up and laid me down on the mattress to watch.

The three of them got naked with brutal efficiency, making me want them to slow down and go faster, all at the same time. I’d seen them half naked too many times to count, but that was nothing compared to this. Before this, they were still just boys, and I was just a girl. But once this night was over, we would all have stepped across this part of the threshold between childhood and becoming an adult.

“Kai...”

Atlas’ hands slid up my legs, moulding the calves to his hands before edging higher. My legs parted with little protest from me. I wanted to be bare for him. A kiss pressed to my knee, then my inner thigh, then my hip.

“Kai...”

Xavier settled down on one side of me, tilting my lips up to meet his, his hand settling around my throat. He kissed me slowly but surely, feeling my response as my pulse leapt under his grip.

“Kai, your tits...” Jayden settled down on the other side, all of his brother’s reverence in his voice and then something else. He was always blunt, so when he said the word tits, the others snorted.

“Fuck’s sake, Jay.”

“What?” He lifted his head reluctantly. “They’re fucking beautiful.”

He touched said breasts with just the tips of his fingers, as if he didn’t dare do anything more. But when I arched into his touch, feeling an alien need pulse through me, he grew bolder.

Mum had talked to me frankly about sex. We weren’t human and weren’t constrained by some of their prudishness, so I knew exactly how little wolf shifters were made. But my mother had been much more blunt about who I’d do it with.

“Be careful,” she’d said, not long after I’d had my first period. She’d sniffed scornfully, as if she could smell the traces of moon’s blood on me. “There’ll come a time, much, much later, where you’ll find yourself wanting to mate with male shifters. The animal decides.” Her lip curled then. “Makes the decision about who you’re to be with and, if you’re not smart, you’ll find yourself mated to someone you have no business spending your life with. Be careful, Kaia.”

She stared into my eyes as hers went silver, her gaze intent and staring. It was then I felt the first traces of my wolf inside me, shifting restlessly, trying to decide if my mother was responding with concern or aggression.

“The wolf is a predator and naturally comes with fine instincts, but not these...” She shook her head sharply. “You’ll think you know just who to give your heart to, but... You be smart, Kaia. Use this head.” She tapped on my skull. “Not the wolf’s. She only comes out some of the time, but most of the time...” For the first time my mother actually looked pensive. “Most of the time you’re left to cope with her decisions.”

But the wolf and I were in perfect agreement right now. I was exactly where I wanted to be. Atlas’ kisses moved higher, closer to where it ached and Xavier’s fingers seemed to follow Jayden’s lips, both of them clamping down on my nipples. I was aware from talk at school I was meant to be doing something, anything, but right now all I could do was stare up at the moon and gasp out my pleasure.

“Yes...” It felt like I was agreeing to so much more than just this. “Yes...”

“Fuck, I’ve been waiting for so long to hear you say that...” Xavier groaned and that’s when they all moved.

Atlas’ tongue flicked out, separating folds that had never been touched by another man and wouldn’t be by anyone but these three ever again. So it felt precious, beautiful and oh-so-fucking-good when he did.

“Atlas...”

I barely breathed out his name, my hand going to his head, running my fingers through his hair as he delved deeper. He just seemed to know. Where I needed him, the two points aching so sweetly as his tongue flicked over. My clit throbbed in time with my heartbeat, the sensation getting more intense with every lick, and then there was the other place. That place deep inside me, where his knot would lock, if he was truly an alpha, tying the two of us together and...

“Oh fuck...”

“Looks like our brother is giving it to our girl good.” Jay tried for levity and failed utterly, because when we all turned to face him, his brows creased and a look of almost pain crossed his face as he pulled me closer. “You’re gonna let us, right?” His hand slid down my body, coming to settle on my stomach, where the fire inside me seemed to flare harder. “We’re gonna make you feel so damn good, Kai...”

And they did.

I couldn’t reply, couldn’t make words out, not as all of them moved to please me. Some girls I knew ignored the pack rules, sleeping with guys before the choosing, but their reports back about the process hadn’t been promising: that it was painful, unpleasant and that they didn’t see what the big fuss was about. And that made me think they must have been doing something else entirely. Because ...me?

I was in heaven.

It felt like it literally, with the sky massive above us and dotted with a million stars and I felt like I was one of them.

Except I was shining bright and growing brighter with every pass of Atlas' tongue, every kiss from Jayden, every draw of Xavier's mouth on my nipple making me burn hotter and hotter until I thought I would burst into flames. But right when I was starting to feel heavy, dense with pleasure, Atlas reared above me.

He was a dark shape, no longer my gentle giant. His eyes gleamed bright silver as he stared down at me.

"You're ready to take me," he said, sliding his fingers where his tongue had been, his saliva, my slick, making it easy for them to push inside me. My body flexed though, stiffening at this sudden intrusion, then pushing back against his fingers, needing more. Deeper, harder than his fingers could go, even when he pulled them out to add another. I felt a pinch of pain, but then so much pleasure, his fingers pumping in and out of me way too slowly.

"Yes..." I agreed, finally finding my voice after a moment of delirium at the sensation. "Yes..."

"Go slowly," Xavier growled as his brother moved between my thighs, one hand slapping down above my head, smelling of me, the other going down between us to rub something far bigger than his fingers against my aching hole. "Don't hurt her."

"Hurt...?" I stiffened momentarily.

"Just for a second." Atlas' voice was deep, calm, reassuring. "Your body's going to change now, from girl, to ours. You need me inside you." I whined at that, the wolf pressing hard, insistent that this had to happen. This was mating, exactly what we needed, she made clear. "And I need to be in you."

His hips jerked forward, a bright burst of pain taking my breath away, but when I caught it again in a series of rapid pants, that faded and was replaced by something more.

"Oh god..." I groaned, but when Atlas went to pull away, I jerked him closer. My ankles locked around his hips and he sunk deeper into me. "Atlas—"

“I know,” he ground out. “I know, beautiful. So fucking good. You’re taking all of me, blowing my fucking mind.”

But I couldn’t make a single word out, my teeth locking down, my stifled moans forced past them. God, I was so fucking full. Of him, of them, of everything good in the world, which I felt like I was always missing out on and so my arms were flung around his shoulders, holding tight.

“Just stay there...” I gasped. “Just like this.”

“Are you OK?” All the heat deserted Xavier’s voice, replaced now with deadly concern. “Does it hurt? I’ll fucking kill him if it does—”

“No.” I buried my face in Atlas’ neck, placing little kisses on his neck. “I...” I’d never be able to say this in the cold, hard light of day, but here in the dark, the truth came out. “I don’t want this to end.” Atlas pulled back slightly, those silver eyes glowing as they stared down at me. “I feel... I feel...”

“Complete.”

Atlas didn’t say as much as the others, but when he did? It was always the right thing.

“Complete.” I nodded. “Full of you.”

Chapter 14

Atlas

“Complete.” She nodded. “Full of you.”

Did Kai want to rip my heart out with one hand and make me feel like king of the world with the other? I’m sure that wasn’t her plan, but here we were. I cradled her head with one of my arms, dropping my weight down lower and then both of us groaned as I sank deeper.

“This will never end, Kai. Never. Whatever you’re feeling right now, we’ll do whatever we have to, to make sure it continues. You’re ours...” My voice caught on that, became ragged and scratchy, my eyes aching with tears that came from nowhere. “You’re mine.”

She didn’t quite believe me, because that was the fucking bullshit about her mother. Kai was born to be a motherfucking wolf, but her mum had worked damn hard to try and pull her fangs before she even got a chance to bare them.

“Take it, Kai.” My hips started to shift and I felt the tight wet clench of her around me, shredding my control. “Take all the pleasure I’ve got to give you. Because I’ll make sure there’s plenty more.”

“More than you could possibly want really.” Jay was trying for light-hearted, but I saw the vulnerability in his stare as he gazed at our girl. “Like if you think you are getting out of bed for a week...”

But right as she let out a little laugh, I ground deeper, making clear what else I had to give her.

“Oh... oh!”

She tensed underneath me as the incontrovertible truth that we were the next alphas for the pack rubbed against her. Beta males didn't sport a knot, but we did. We'd told our dads about them the first time they'd started to swell, when we were about fifteen. Each one of us had started sneaking kisses from Kai, daring little touches, and the effect of the scent of her arousal? Getting hard was to be expected, but this? My knot swelled like it had those other times, heavy and hard, aching, *aching* to be buried inside her.

“You feel it?” Xavier asked her, trying for concern, but failing. I knew he'd be wondering just how she'd feel around his when the time came. “That's his knot. We're your alphas, beautiful.” But right as he kissed her and stroked her face, he said the magic words. “You don't have to let him in yet, but...”

What would it be like if she did? She hadn't revealed as an omega yet, but she was getting closer and closer every day. It's how we'd managed to get our parents on board, knowing exactly what Abigail would do if she found out Kai was the omega, not Anna. We should wait, I knew that. As soon as she went through her shift, she'd have the greater flexibility to take all of us, the knot giving her pleasure rather than pain. But when I went to pull back, not wanting to hurt her, Kai's ankles locked tighter around my hips.

“You knotted for me?”

Her voice was soft, tentative, even as her body said something else altogether.

“Of course, beautiful,” I told her, my voice breaking now as my heart shattered to pieces. “I always have, Kai. You're the only one for me and when you reveal—”

“Now.” She tugged my head down, held me close and whispered this in my ear. “Now, Atlas, I want all of you.”

“Fuuuck...” Jayden groaned, having heard everything, obviously, and I glanced at Xavier, making clear to him, too, that this was her choice, not ours. He nodded slowly in recognition.

“Then you need to open up for me.” My voice shifted, no longer the boy she grew up with, now becoming the alpha she needed. “Open up and let me in.”

She did in a series of slow, purposeful rocking movements. I was going fucking nuts, the feel of her, the smell of her, the knowledge that I was with my Kai bringing my body to the point of explosion, but I held back. For her, that was what beat hot and true in my chest. For my Kai. Slowly, but surely, I felt her cunt part for me, sucking me in deeper, her pants coming so quickly, her moans high and sharp that they sounded like whimpers of pain, right before something happened.

I was going to stop. We could try again another time because as I stared down into her wide staring eyes, I became convinced I was hurting her. My cock threatened to go soft, shrivel back at that thought, but then all of a sudden something just flexed around me and then I was in.

“Fuck...!” I ground out. “Fuck!”

“Atlas...” Kai hissed, her hands slapping around my head before yanking me down. Her lips crushed against mine and everything devolved into a messy struggle, one we’d both win. Her hips moved in tiny little pulses, but every micro-movement felt fucking amazing. Pleasure, so much fucking pleasure I was almost drunk on it, but I forced myself to stare down at her.

“Good?” That’s all I could get out, right as I prayed fervently it was for her.

“Oh my god, so good!”

And that’s when I felt her body flex, ripple, her snug little cunt wringing everything I had to give out of me, right as she reached her peak.

She was beautiful when she came. Her head was thrown back, the stars themselves seeming to cast patterns across her

skin as she outmatched their brilliance. She was loving this, gasping out her response to everything I gave her. And I rocked back and forth, not letting my control shred for a second, drawing her orgasm out over and over, until she started to come again. But that second time. I couldn't resist the velvety clasp of her around me, tugging me deeper, dragging what felt like the depths of my soul out and ejecting them into her. I lost all fucking control, roaring at the sky, at the darkness, at the world itself, my claim.

Which is perhaps why I did this.

“Atlas, no!”

Xavier's command was nothing, something I could bat away with little thought as the wolf rode me hard. My beast's fangs, my teeth, found the juncture between her neck and shoulders and we locked down, right as my cum jetted into her. Kai was mine, mine, mine, and I'd show the whole fucking world that, by giving her my mark.

No one would ever question who she belonged to.

No one would ever get between us, dare to lay a finger on her.

No one would ever touch my fucking girl again, because she was MINE.

But when she reached up, tears sliding free of her eyes as she stared at me, smiling so sweetly, I knew I'd said all those things aloud.

“Yours,” she agreed with a nod. “Yours.”

Chapter 15

“Fuck,” Xavier said from the driver’s seat of the car as he drove us back home. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

“Calm your tits,” Jayden told him from the passenger seat before looking back at the two of us. We were huddled in close on the backseat, neither Atlas nor I able to take our hands off each other. We were tied together tightly now, the newly formed bond pulsing between us like it was a living, physical thing. “This was always going to happen.”

“But not now. Not yet.” Xavier glanced at us in the rearview mirror with a frown. “We’ve gotta tell the dads.”

“We’re not telling the dads,” Atlas growled. “We’re announcing it. Kai belongs to us. You know it and I know it and if the dads or the alphas or any other fucking idiot in the pack doesn’t like it...” I snuggled in tighter to Atlas, that feeling of wellbeing that came the moment I did washing over me, driving out the concern. “Then we leave.”

“Damn straight,” Jayden said with a nod to us, before looking at Xavier. “We talked about this—”

“As a last resort.” Xavier’s gaze when he stared back at us was filled with worry, I realised, not condemnation. “The life of a lone wolf...” We all knew what that entailed. We’d been given enough lectures about it at school. Lonely, unprotected, shunned, even hunted by humans, and then there were other packs. “It’s not the life I want for Kai.”

“So we won’t have it,” I replied. “It’s less than a week now to the choosing. I can hide the mating mark...” Atlas let out a low growl, making clear his disinterest in that plan. “Until the day of the challenge. But... maybe we can bring the challenge forward?”

“I’ll ask the dads,” Xavier said and when we got home, he did just that.

“JESUS FUCKING CHRIST,” Greg said as he stared at the bite mark on my neck. I was wearing Atlas’s shirt over Jenny’s dress, so I tugged the collar closer to cover it, but Jenny put a hand on his arm.

“This isn’t the end of the world, so stop over-reacting.” She smiled as she turned to me. “We all knew this was going to happen.”

“After the challenge,” Jackson said, shooting his sons a meaningful look, Xavier especially. “Not before.”

“As if people haven’t found their mates before the choosing,” Jenny replied and that’s when she said something that surprised me. “Look at us. I was pregnant with Xavier the day of the choosing.”

“Only just...” Greg mumbled before flushing bright red.

“So we’ll talk to the alphas and let them know what’s happened,” Jackson said. “Hiding shit just breeds mistrust. The alphas are reasonable men. They’ll remember what it was like when they mated their omega.”

“Omega...” Jenny blinked then. “So Kaia, you’ve revealed —”

“No.” I blurted that out, my hands wringing the hem of the shirt. “Not yet.”

“Not yet,” she agreed. “But come the choosing—”

“So Kaia is sleeping in the spare room, alone,” Greg said firmly, pointing a finger at each one of us. “One mating bite we can explain as an oops, but three?”

“Agreed,” Jackson said with a firm nod. “Is that clear, boys?”

“C’MON.” Jenny moved closer and steered me towards the spare room. “You’ve got nothing to be ashamed of. The men are just scared and they can’t express that in any other way than puffing out their chests and talking big.”

“I’m not.” I paused then in the doorway, then looked back over her shoulder, where Atlas and the others were getting a dressing down from their dads. His eyes found mine within seconds and I felt like we were connected beyond just the physical, as if our souls reached for each other when our bodies couldn’t. “I’m not ashamed of anything,” I told Jenny.

“Well, good.” She nodded then, as if convincing herself, not me, but I let her lead me into the room and sit me down on the edge of the bed. “Now, are you OK? Do you need some pain meds or anything?”

Atlas, was my first thought, then Xavier and Jayden, but I just shook my head.

“No, I’m fine, but...” I looked up at Jenny and she frowned slightly, as if not quite sure what I would say. “Thank you for this. I don’t know what Mum would’ve done if I came back with a bite on my neck.”

“I do.” Jenny spoke with such confidence, with a strange kind of vehemence I didn’t really understand and she stared at the wall for some time, seeing something I didn’t, before she snorted. “But you don’t need to worry about that. You’re safe here.”

Jenny fussed over me, finding me some pyjamas to put on and getting me a glass of water, then tucking me into bed as if I was much younger.

“Get some sleep,” she said. “It won’t be long before the choosing happens and then you’ll be able to walk amongst the pack with my sons’ marks on your neck with pride.”

I FELT weird when I settled down in the bed. Because it wasn't my bed, the same one I'd spent most of my years sleeping in, was my initial thought. Because I wasn't sleeping in the same room as my sister, hearing her gentle sighs and breaths, then mumbled replies to her dreams. That was the only way I could explain the... disquiet I felt, my body feeling both restless and beyond exhausted in the same breath. But when I nestled down under the thick covers, I experienced a loss.

The ache inside me reminded me of what I'd had in that moment, the swell of Atlas' knot driving me beyond pleasure and into delirium, a high I never wanted to come down from, but as my fingers trailed over the healed bite mark, I felt an echo of that pleasure. It washed through me, forcing a bittersweet pleasure to rise, rise, until finally it ebbed away and I dropped off to sleep.

I'D FELT like my wolf was like a chicken inside its egg, tap, tap, tapping its way out and into the real world. But as I dreamed, it felt like she wasn't doing anything as neat and tidy as tapping. She raked her claws against the interior of her shell, digging like a wolf would when she ran her prey to ground, except here she was using her whole body to try and break free. I felt a feeling of terror, elation, as I saw thin cracks appear.

And then relief, right?

Right?

But that was never going to be my fate. People said that finding your wolf was like exhaling fully for the first time, some part of you that had been staying hidden all this time leaping out, manifesting in the world. So I knew something very, very wrong was happening, as I bent over double in my sleep.

The pain that was ripping through me, it should've pulled me from my sleep, but it didn't. My dream was like a heavy blanket, smothering me. And the bite on my neck, it throbbed in sympathetic pain, but that was nothing compared to this.

Sweat prickled all across my skin, drenching me, the sheets and the covers, the fabric sticking to me as I thrashed around in bed, translating into something else in my nightmare.

“No, you don’t.” Mum stood over me, massive now, her head high enough to graze the stars. “Don’t you bloody dare. You’re not the omega, Anna is.”

You’re not the omega...

That played around in my head, reverberating like an echo, but it grew louder, not faded away.

You’re not the omega...

That sentence pressed down upon me, as if delivered by the gods themselves, becoming not just words, but a prophecy.

You’re not the omega...

Mum’s face screwed up in a terrible mask, part wolf, part woman, but her entire focus was trained on me, her eyes gleaming like twin moons in the sky as she made a ruling about my future.

You’re not—

Omega.

The wolf stopped then, her head jerking up, her nose twitching as she breathed in, the sweet, sweet scent of new roses filling the air right then, followed by a massive sigh out. I was glad I slept through it, because a great rush of fluid was expelled from me, soaking the sheets, my thighs in a clear mucus stained by blood.

My slick.

All women produced a small amount of it. But omegas? We generated so much more to help ease us through what would come next. My alphas... I could feel them, my body moving sluggishly, my eyes feeling like they were made of lead as I blinked, an aeon passing before I tried to blink again. But when I finally cracked them open, it was to see the door open and Jenny bustling in.

“Kaia...” She stopped where she was, her nose working, her pupils dilating and then she saw the mess I’d made. I let out a pitiful whine, feeling a flush of shame, but she rushed over. “Oh, sweetheart! It’s OK. It’s OK. You know what this means though, right?”

Did her eyes glitter as she smiled? Did she hold me just a little too tight as she gave me a hug? It was hard to say. My skin was too alive, too sensitive, my eyes aching at the small cracks of light pouring in past the blackout curtains. I just let out a little sob in answer, one that had me dissolving in tears moments later.

“Honey, it’s OK.”

She held me close and rocked me back and forth in a way that felt frankly disorientating, but maybe this was what other daughters expected. Their mothers comforted them when they cried, rather than barking at them to shut the hell up.

The way Mum always comforted Anna when she was sad.

But I found myself unbending, softening, dissolving into her arms until the tears fell away.

“The boys are at the alpha challenge,” she told me. “That’s why I came in here. Their dads got on the phone last night and the alphas agreed that it was only a formality that they go through the challenge and that bringing it forward wouldn’t hurt.” She smiled then. “There’s plenty of parents who are keen for their kids to find their place in the pack, so changing the date...”

Her voice trailed away as her phone rang and she pulled it out, frowning when she saw Greg’s name on caller ID.

“Hello?”

I couldn’t hear the conversation, because Greg’s voice was a terse, metallic buzz in my ears, but I felt the way Jenny pulled away, going stiff.

“The boys...? Atlas?” She shot a sidelong look at me. “But Kaia’s revealed... Yes, of course as an omega. What? Oh my god, I’ll be right there.”

She ended the call abruptly and the stink of fear was setting my teeth on edge.

“Kaia, I need you to be calm,” she said, in a voice that was anything but. “I need to go to the forest for a bit. That’s where the alpha challenge is taking place. There’s been a... complication.” She frowned when I let out a little whine. “Nothing bad, but I need to get over there now. I’ll be back soon, but you’ll be OK here, right? I’ll lock the doors to make sure you’re safe, and as long as you don’t let anyone in, everything should be fine.”

There was so much to those words, a world of unspoken knowledge and information. She didn’t seem so much surprised as worried. But she put on a brave face, patting my shoulder before pulling away.

I DIDN’T HAVE time to wonder what else was going on. The pain was back, like period cramps, but ten times worse. My world was reduced down to the painful flex and shift of my womb, then my sharp little pants as I sucked in breaths between contractions. If this was what childbirth was like, I’d never bear the boys sons. My nails raked at the sheets, screams were stifled by my teeth, right before they walked in.

“You were right.”

“No...” I ground out, when I saw *her*, then I sucked in a breath and another, as she drew closer.

“I told you Kaia was the boys’ omega, Abigail,” Greg said, shooting her a wary glance from the doorway. “There’s nothing that can be done now.”

Letting her in here was his first mistake, but telling Mum she couldn’t do something? That was by far his worst one. Mum shot him a dirty look, then waved Anna forward. My sister walked in slowly, eyeing the mess, then wrinkling her nose.

“It stinks in here and... ew! Did Kaia wet the bed?”

“Of course she didn’t wet the bed!” Mum snapped. I might not be the favoured daughter, but I was still a reflection of her, so she wouldn’t allow that to go unchallenged. “Your sister is transitioning.”

Is that what this was? I groaned, curling up around myself, hugging my body when I knew I needed another set of arms holding me. Everything ached for Atlas, for all of the boys.

“Look, whatever you’re going to do, do it,” Greg prompted, looking down the hallway then back furtively. “Jenny will work out my call was bullshit—”

“Yes, Jenny.” Mum seemed to draw herself up taller then, becoming every inch the imperious bitch she usually was. “The woman you left me for.”

Wait, what?

“The woman you felt was your ‘true mate,’” Mum continued.

“She was, is,” Greg replied heatedly, even as his eyes darted around. He was conscious of the audience he had, even if Mum wasn’t.

“What kind of true mate are you, that you’d sleep with me then, all those years ago?” she asked, the gloves well and truly off. Mum had come out swinging and she wasn’t going to pull any punches.

“Ab—”

“She’s not your fated mate at all,” Mum pronounced and then shifted her focus to Anna. “And we’re not going to let another travesty take place today. Your sister is trying to take your place at the boys’ side.” Anna stared at me then, her eyes starting to narrow. “She’s making this whole disgusting display, this mess, to try and seduce your true mates away from you. There is nothing Kaia won’t do to satisfy her terrible jealousy of you, Anna.”

“No...” I gasped, the pain in my heart finally outstripping that of my body. “Anna, no.”

“See, she tries to dissuade you even now, play on your feelings, manipulate you into second place when you know you are born to rule this pack. Take your sister’s sheets.”

“What?” Anna was going along with the story, right up until now. Her eyes glittered with a familiar look of malice; one I’d seen all too often. But that faltered when my mother gave her order.

“Grab the sheets, darling, before your sister takes fur for the first time. You’re not due to shift for some years, so your mates will need to be patient. But once you are marked by them—”

“Like this?”

My voice sounded like gravel as I tugged the pyjamas down to reveal the pink scar on my neck. I stared at my mother, daring her to respond, but when she did, it wasn’t how I expected.

“You see?” Mum pointed imperiously at the bite mark. “This is how she tries to take what’s rightfully yours. She’s already started the process. But if you manage to get all three mating marks, one mark won’t matter.”

Anna strode forward then, glaring at me with a kind of viciousness that had me scrambling back in the bed, even as the wolf lunged forward.

But she was not free yet.

So the wolf and I, we were forced to watch as Anna tore the sheets and blankets from the bed, gagging when she felt the sodden stains of my slick, and that’s when Mum stepped in.

“Rub it all over you,” she said.

“Mum, no...” Anna cried.

“You can’t allow this attempt to take what’s yours to succeed,” Mum assured her. “I know it’s distasteful, but it’s the only way.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Abigail,” Greg said, stumbling into the room. “This? This is not what we talked about.”

“Shut your bloody mouth,” Mum snapped.

“The girl, she’s the boys’—”

“Enough!”

Because that was the thing about Mum. She was strong enough to overrule many people in the pack. Her dominance was such that, perhaps if she’d been born a boy, she might have been in the running to become one of the alphas of the pack.

But she wasn’t.

However, her command was enough to shut everyone up, including me, until there was no other sound in the room but her rapid pants.

“Anna, take the bedclothes and rub them against your skin. The wet parts, not the dry ones. Everywhere, darling. We have to mask your natural scent.”

The wolf didn’t understand words, but she understood threats just fine. She lunged and lunged against my internal walls, taking my understanding of what my mother planned and howled her challenge.

But she was stifled by me.

I just stared at the two of them, watching my sister gag and whimper as the bloodied slick was smeared over her skin, my mother working to help her, when she noticed my stare. My mother met mine head on and I knew then that there was no lack of comprehension in her eyes.

She knew what she was doing to me and she was going to do it anyway.

I was her daughter; the boys were my fated mates. There would be no other men in the whole world I would love, cherish or need like them and my mum was working quickly and efficiently to implement a plan she’d been holding close to her chest for some time.

Because she knew.

Anna wasn't ever going to be the omega. I was. My sister wasn't their mate. I was. And even though Mum knew that this would break my heart, she showed me again how little she cared for me, and how much she worshipped my sister.

And something inside me died right then.

The world went still, quiet, and cold, as Anna did everything that my mother asked and then dropped my sheets to the floor.

"But won't they know?" Anna said. "Once they get past Kaia's scent and smell mine, after I have my first shower."

"It'll be too late then." Mum stared at me smugly, as if I was the bad guy here and she the plucky underdog. "You'll be marked as their mate and there'll be nothing that can be done about it."

Greg, Anna and Mum left not long after that, Mum instructing him to lock the doors behind him, keeping me from bursting out and circumventing their plan. I just watched them, completely numb, so divorced from my body I couldn't feel a thing. But as the car pulled out of the driveway, taking them to the forest and the alpha challenge, something cracked. The wolf had tried and tried to get free, but something had stopped her.

So she obliterated everything in her way.

One minute I was a catatonic girl and the next I was a huge wolf, standing on the bed, my lips pulled back from my fangs. I shoved the door open, ran downstairs, then paced, paced around the rooms, not able to find a way out. She ransacked my mind, trying to find a way to open the door, remove the barriers, but nothing I showed her made any difference.

But she was done being held back, and no man-made cage would hold her ever again.

Her back legs coiled in the boys' lounge room, her eyes on the big picture window, right before she ran forward.

Windows smashed and my heart went with it, tumbling to pieces on the grass as we strode forward. There were cuts, bruised flesh, but we just ran on, knowing instinctively where

to go. They were in a car, forced to follow roads, follow the rules, to get where they needed to go, but me? I was a wolf. I streaked down the road, then through someone's yard, over a fence as one of the boys' neighbours shouted, then sailed over the next and the next, until I got to the outside of town. Then through paddocks, past skittish sheep and cows, over barbed wire fences until I came here.

I'd stepped into the forest that day, after slipping away from my mother, but that feeling of rebellion paled into insignificance to what I felt now. The wolf didn't care about baulking at my mother's heavy-handed authority.

She wanted to rip my mother's throat out.

Chapter 16

Jayden

Earlier that morning

“Hey...”

I jerked my head off the pillow, the dream where Kaia and I were locked together tighter than Fort Knox still playing out in my head, but it wasn't my mate standing there, it was my dads.

“What?” I snapped. I had no chill when woken up.

“The alphas have agreed to allow the challenge to take place tomorrow,” Jackson said. “Well, today now. It's 2am. Get up, have a shower and then meet us downstairs in twenty. It's go time.”

I rolled out of bed then, his words clearing my head better than anything else. The challenge. This was more than me and my brothers finding our wolves. Today we were going to find out if we were suitable mates for Kaia and potential leaders of the pack. So I stumbled into the en suite and turned the taps on, ready to carpe this diem.

The dads obviously got Xavier and Atlas up too, because by the time I stumbled out, Xave was brushing his teeth and Atlas was pushing past me into the shower.

“So we're gonna do this?” I asked the two of them, forcing them to pause.

“We’re gonna do this,” Xavier replied with a nod. “For Kaia.”

“For Kaia,” we all agreed.

SO THAT WAS the kind of energy we brought to the challenge. We ran downstairs dressed in loose clothing. We would need something we could get out of quickly when the change happened and we met our wolves, and I could feel mine shift inside me in anticipation. Alert, finely tuned to the environment and ready to go in a way I’d never be able to match when I was running the show. I was shit in the mornings. But the wolf had my eyes shifting, away from the dads and towards the staircase.

“What about Kaia?” Atlas asked, his wolf thinking the same thing as mine. “She should come.”

“She—” Jackson started to reply.

“Will just be a distraction,” Greg finished. My other dad frowned slightly but then nodded. “You need to focus on the dominance fight. Remember the Randalls?”

Four of their boys had proposed a challenge to the alphas when they came of age and it’d all gone very badly for them. They’d been so focussed on their girl, they’d barely made it five seconds against the alphas. Michelle, the girl they were so into? She left them for someone else when they weren’t successful.

And we couldn’t have that.

Kaia was far more loyal than Michelle, but we didn’t want to put her in that position. If we failed at this, we’d all be forced out of town... I jerked my attention back to the dads.

“All right, let’s get this show on the road then,” I said. “We’ll smash the challenge and then be back before Kaia even wakes up, ready to serve her eggs, bacon and piping hot alphas for breakfast.”

“You fucking idiot,” Xavier muttered. “If we fuck up because of you—”

“Stay focussed.” Atlas didn’t have the last word often, but he did now. We all nodded slowly and then moved out, climbing into our dads’ truck.

“Do us proud today,” Greg said, staring at us in the rear vision mirror. “Just do your best. It’s all anyone can ask of you.”

But doing our best was never going to be enough, not for Kaia. She deserved so much more than that. To find her wolf, that was the first thing. Once she did, she’d become recognised as an adult in the pack and never have to deal with her stupid bitch of a mother again. But the second? Omega Campbell? That had a damn nice ring to it. She’d wear my marks and Xavier’s, alongside Atlas’. Not only would she belong to us for the rest of her life, but a small shitty part of me loved the idea of her lording it over her mother at council meetings, shouting her down or fuck, silencing her outright. Omegas had the power to overrule anyone, even if they didn’t use it often, and if Kai couldn’t, I would. Those vicious little fantasies kept me amused, right up until we reached the forest.

IT WAS VERY EARLY in the morning, the moon still high and the sun nowhere in sight, so the night air was cool, curls of mist rising in the moist air as we passed. Made the place look damn spooky until we stumbled out into a clearing to find the alphas standing there along with some of the other boys.

Their son, Colin, and a few of his buddies, were going to have a crack at the challenge, as well as some guys who’d been puffed up by their dads, despite all evidence to the contrary. They weren’t challengers.

We were.

“Welcome.” Brock was one of the alphas and he stepped forward then to survey the lot of us. “Today all of you will find your wolves.” No question there, even though a very small minority didn’t. The guy just gave off serious vibes, like he could see the future or something. “And today you get to find out, one way or the other, if you are the next leaders of this pack.”

His eyes, and that of the other alphas, scanned the lot of us. They all seemed to take our measure in a neutral, observant way. We were left to fill in the gaps in what they didn't say, what they didn't do, work out for ourselves if that was good, bad or indifferent. But somehow I knew. When Brock's eyes met mine, each time any of the alphas stared at me, I felt like they were looking back at an equal.

Because this was the first part of the challenge.

Dominance was like a vibe, an atmosphere, but it took on a strange kind of weight. It wasn't just that someone that was more dominant could trick you into backing down, scare you into doing what they wanted. You had to. You moved without meaning to, obeying them, and the flush of shame that came afterwards? It stopped you from trying shit with them again, to save face.

I saw the other boys in the clearing tense their muscles, cords standing out in their necks as they tried to hold the alphas' eyes. Small groans of frustration made clear how successful they were. But us? It took nothing to meet their gaze. I could feel their dominance like it was a weight on my chest, but it was one I could carry easily. I straightened up, squared my shoulders and stared right back, making clear my intent, my brothers doing the same. The alphas nodded to me and mine and that's when I felt a white hot burst of something. Relief, I later realised. We'd passed. We'd fucking passed. As long as we could get through the pack fights, we'd—

“We'll summon forward your wolves now,” Jack, another alpha said. The other two men stepped forward then and faced down each group. “And when you are in fur, you'll have your one and only chance to fight this shit out.” Muttering immediately started around the circle of boys. “Under our instruction. The bonds you've created with the other men around you will be respected. You'll have a chance to test them today. We'll pit one group against the other until only one lot stands.”

Us, I thought furiously. *Us*.

“The winner of each bout will go onto the next round and so on and so on, until only one group is left standing.”

Mike was the biggest alpha and when he stepped forward, plenty of boys stepped back.

“There will be no attacks to the jugular or anywhere else that can cause irreparable harm or death.” He then pointed out each area we had to avoid. The big veins in the neck were the first, obviously, but there were others in the groin, at the wrists that were also off limits. I listened, but didn’t really focus, seeing instead what would be...

A vision of us standing before the alphas, our skin streaked with blood and sweat, the victors. We’d be breathing hard, our muscles shaking, but we’d know that we were the only real contenders amongst all the young men of the pack. Then the alphas would approach us, slowly at first, taking our measure, seeing how we didn’t back down for a second. The resulting fight? We wouldn’t be able to overpower the alphas, but we’d be able to put on a good enough show to prove what we already knew.

That we were like them.

I was so caught up in my own head, their order came as a bit of a shock.

“Shift!”

I knew that it was coming, but had no idea how to make it happen, the wolf having paced back and forth inside me for days. But even as I experienced that moment of ‘what the fuck do I do?’, it happened. I’d lived my whole life with one understanding of my body. Two legs, two hands, had been walking upright since I was a few months old. I knew what I could and couldn’t do. And becoming a wolf was firmly in the ‘couldn’t’ column. My brain was stuck in my human form, aware of the other one, but never able to reach it. But the alpha’s order was not to be denied. Before I could even think twice, a bridge between the two halves of my soul formed and everything changed.

My body felt like it was turning itself inside out, joints breaking as they turned in directions they'd never been able to, muscles snapping and reforming, all before I could even scream. My brain throbbed in time with my heart as my skull changed, my spine lengthened, my legs twisted, until I fell forward on my hands and knees.

Actually, make that paws.

I stared down at them, my long ears flicking, my pants coming in so much louder now. And all around me were other boys, other wolves. There were no words, no thoughts, just a few stray whines and an abrupt bark. But then the alphas stepped forward.

“To the edges of the clearing,” Mike ordered and we moved without thinking, backing up, even as our much sharper eyes sized up our opponents. “If you move from that spot before your group is called, you and yours are automatically disqualified. Now.”

He looked us over, focussing on the sizes of our beasts and the way we clustered together. Some groups seemed to fracture the moment they took fur, the bonds the boys had forged meaning nothing to their wolves. But my brothers and me? We sat still, quiet, and waited.

“Colin’s group and Jared’s.” Mike nodded. “Begin.”

HUMANS IMAGINE WOLVES TO be savage beasts. The way they portray werewolves in the media? We’re always a bee’s dick away from going into beast mode and rampaging through human settlements. But while actual wolves are vicious killers when they bring down prey, that kind of energy is saved for the hunt. It takes too much energy to bring down an opponent and kill them, without having the resulting reward of a massive meal, so it’s only done when it’s really needed. So fights between wolves, while terrifying for humans to watch, are largely for show.

There’s a lot of snarling and baring of fangs, lots of slamming into each other to throw them off balance—because

once you're on the ground, you're fucked. The other wolves will pile on top of you, fangs going for your throat, your legs, the softness of your belly, and they'll fuck you up. So, while we listened to the brutal music of the other wolves' battle cries, we waited calmly for our turn.

"THE CAMPBELL BROTHERS," Jack said after another group who had lost were sent to the perimeter of the circle to rest. "And the Lalors."

Finally, it was on.

Chapter 17

Jayden

There were four Lalors, brothers and cousins, and only three of us, but we didn't acknowledge that advantage as we stepped into the ring. Our paws moved with certainty, taking sure, slow steps towards them. We noted the way several of the other wolves took a step backwards, their animals acknowledging our dominance, even if the men inside didn't. But this was the way it had to be.

Humans were always pushing at each other, trying to see who'd come out on top. Their monkey beginnings meant that they couldn't just accept shit; create a stable hierarchy. Someone was always looking for a way up, but that wasn't the way it was with us. This was our proving ground. We would give it our all today and then we would know: whether we really were the contenders we thought we were, or if we were actually a lot further down the line in power than we thought.

I stepped forward, maintaining my wolf form, and my brothers clustered in close, watching, waiting for the others to move. Some of the Lalors started to snarl, bare their fangs, but Atlas made clear how little he was impressed by that by sitting down on his haunches. The wolf at the front, Dave Lalor, I was willing to bet, lunged forward at that, jaws snapping, a terrible snarl gathering in his chest, but we didn't move a muscle. Because somehow, maybe due to our wolfsense, we could tell which way things would fall. Dave stopped short, snapping on air, not fur, even though I did feel the breeze from

his movement ruffling my pelt. I just stared him and his boys down, and so did my brothers.

“Stop playing,” Brock told the Lalors. “Make your play or step down.”

Dave growled, paced back and forth, obviously trying to rally the troops, but we saw the weakness in his group. He was out for blood, but the others? I looked at my brothers and they nodded, before we attacked.

Dave’s packmates were sent yelping away with a few well-placed nips, and we harried them right to the edges of the clearing, making clear the mistake they’d made in taking us on. Once Dave was isolated from his support, he should’ve backed down.

But he didn’t. And his actions showed why the challenge was so damn important for more than determining who would lead the pack.

It settled this, dickheads thinking they were badder than what they were. The three of us stalked forward, giving Dave ample time to step off, but he twisted and whirled, snarling at me, then Atlas and finally Xavier, as if that was enough to stop us. Without the rest of his pack, he was at an impossible disadvantage: when his back was turned, Atlas strode forward, slamming his much bigger body into Dave’s, and once he had the other wolf on its back, we all lunged forward.

I tried to remember the alphas’ words, I did, really, but once we had him down and the stupid fuck kept on growling, it was hard. Instincts pumped as hard and fast as my blood. *Go for the throat*, they told me. *Snap his fucking legs. He’ll run with a limp for the rest of his life, thinking twice about ever challenging you again.* But being an alpha was a fuckload more than being the biggest, baddest wolf in the pack. There were adults who had bigger wolves than some of the alphas.

But not the same control.

Kaia, I thought, shoving the image of her at the wolf.
Kaia!

My head lunged forward and I gripped the weaselly fuck around the throat. My teeth sunk in enough that Dave's growl came out strangled and choked.

"Jayden!" Jack snapped, but the other alphas clustered closer, nodding when they saw what I had done.

"He's neutralised David," Brock said.

Dave didn't like that one fucking bit, his head jerking against my grip, but an ounce more pressure on his throat had that idea dying a harsh death. Atlas was at his rear legs, holding one ankle between his jaws and pulling the leg into a painful extension, but not breaking it as Xavier had his teeth digging into the soft skin of Dave's belly.

"Well done," Mike said. "You can let him go now."

We did as we were told, acting like perfectly trained puppies, because Dave was never the real fight. We didn't even watch him scramble away, instead keeping our eyes trained on the alphas.

"Return to skin," Jack told us. And the shift? It spun my head, just like the first one, and I could see the same effect on my brothers, leaving the three of us swaying on our feet. "You are the successful contenders."

"Yeah, we are," I croaked out, even as Xavier shot me a dark look. "Sorry 'bout that."

"Have a drink." Jack nodded to our dads, but only Jackson stepped forward with water bottles. I wasn't sure where Greg was. We guzzled mouthfuls down as the alphas moved closer.

"You've shown you have control over your beasts, but an alpha is not chosen on the strength of his animal. You'll spend more time in the form of a man than as a wolf. You have to show that you've got the power to rule successfully: maintaining control of the pack is part of that, yes, for sure," Jack said, pausing for a moment to make sure he had our attention.

"But it's about more than just the ability to beat someone down," Mike said, continuing the point that was being made.

“Keeping the peace means stepping in, quelling discontent, stopping pack members from brutalising others.”

Like Kaia, I thought furiously, dropping my bottle to the ground.

“You have to keep the peace for the benefit of the pack, not for yourself,” Brock told us.

“So how do we do this?” I asked, smiling slowly.

“For fuck’s sake, Jay...” Xavier hissed.

“We want it,” I continued, ignoring my more cautious brother’s warning. “You know we want it and we’ll do whatever it takes to become your heirs, so...?”

“So hold your own, young one,” Mike said, stepping right up to me, making me wonder what the fuck my smart mouth had got me into this time as I stared up, up, up at him. “Nothing below the belt. No bullshit, no sneaky shit. You don’t even have to show that you can take a hit. Show you can go toe to toe with us and—”

I cut him off with a wild swing, one I knew would never actually hit, but I had to try, didn’t I? See if the element of surprise was gonna work in my favour. Mike ducked out of the way before I even got close, but his eyes shone bright silver when he straightened up.

“Looks like we’re doing this,” he growled.

“And I had a whole speech prepared and everything,” Jack said, right before he attacked.

FUCK.

They were so damn fast. Each alpha looked like he had fists the size of Christmas hams, fists that were hurtling towards my pretty, pretty face as I ducked out the way. And that’s all I seemed to spend my time doing. For big fuckers, they swung so damn quick, barely giving me a chance to rally. In the end, I forced myself to take a hit in my shoulder, groaning as I felt the blow reverberate all the way through me, but I sucked that up and then hit out with everything I had.

Kaia, and all my frustration at watching, waiting, for us to finish school so we could be together. And even then the wait hadn't ended, because of her stupid fucking mother. We could've spent the whole summer like most young wolves did, courting her, showing her how good we'd be, but instead her mother'd had her cleaning the shower grout with a toothbrush, or sweeping the floor with her hair. Then there was that red fucking mark on my girl's face. My teeth gritted hard, shifting to fangs, fur prickling over my skin, not in a shift, but the wolf fusing with me.

He gave me his strength to augment mine, the two of us working in perfect rhythm to do what we had to. Strike back, neutralise the alpha, prove we were worthy. And when my fist connected with Mike's jaw? It felt like punching a granite boulder except, somehow, against all odds, the boulder shifted.

Mike's eyes went wide and he just stared blankly for a moment, my fists held high, ready to counter his attack. But it didn't come, and he stumbled back and into his brothers. My brothers clustered closer, wound in tight and ready.

"What the fuck did you do?" Xavier muttered out of the side of his mouth to me, keeping his eyes on the alphas.

"And how can we do it again?" Atlas added, his energy spiking high in anticipation at hitting back at one of the alphas.

"Wolf and man at the same time." That was all the instructions I got out as the alphas quickly rallied, narrowing their eyes as they took us in.

"What the fuck...?" Xavier hissed before clustering closer. "I have no idea what that means, but we're not gonna get through this unless we do this together. Back to back, for Kaia."

"For Kaia," we agreed.

Our muscles coiled tight, our weight resting on the balls of our feet, but I saw my brothers' eyes widen as fur rippled across my skin. They seemed to work out how it was done, because I saw the same along their arms. The alphas nodded

then and any advantage I thought I might have had disappeared as they did the same, hands becoming claws, massive biceps prickling with fur. We were fucking doomed, I knew that, but we'd go down fighting and that was what mattered.

I COULDN'T EVEN TELL you how the fight went. I very quickly stopped thinking, or planning what I was doing. Instead, I just responded. Ducking out the way of one claw, then another, then stabbing my own into unprotected ribs, dancing out of the way in the next second. Initially it was elating, to be treated like a fucking man, fighting like one, having the power of one as I hit, ducked, ducked, and hit again. My whole body sung with the savage music of it.

But all that energy wasn't endless.

The first time I stumbled over my own feet, overshooting a strike, I knew I was starting to get tired and my heart beat faster, my muscles locked down tighter, even more so when I saw knowing smirks on the alphas' faces. They knew they were more powerful than us and we were about to get a lesson in exactly how much. Our hits were now missing the targets, more than they landed, but theirs didn't. We were being fucking pulverised, smashed over and over for our hubris, reminded how we were weaker than them.

But I couldn't seem to admit defeat.

I knew what our fate would be if we did. We'd each knotted for Kaia, and that easily confirmed our alpha states. We'd never be able to submit to the rule of other alphas, so we had to be brought into the fold, our power joining theirs, or we'd be driven out. If the latter path was taken, the four of us would be lone wolves, drifting from human settlement to human settlement, never finding a place to belong. And Kaia? She'd suck it up, stay by our side, but... She was our omega and her scent would draw other less scrupulous wolves to her side every time she went into heat, and we'd have to fight them off and see her through it. And if she bore our

children...? I froze then, staring at the fist that was coming towards my head, then my hand snapped up to catch it.

We were doing this all wrong.

We were never going to beat the alphas down. What we needed to do was show that we were worthy of standing beside them. So, as I held Mike's massive hand in my grip, I used what was left of my energy to keep him right where I was.

"Well, fuck, kid..."

Mike was still trying to drive his fist home, but he grinned and so did his brothers as we were locked in stalemate. He couldn't smack me from here until next week and I couldn't hold him back forever.

When the tension went out of his body, mine did the same, and I let out a sigh so fucking big I felt like I was a balloon deflating. I was dizzy, elated, empty, my heart was pounding way too fast and I was starting to shake all over when Mike surged forward. I braced myself for another hit, but it didn't come. Instead, the big guy wrapped his arms around me and gave me a brief hug.

"You're an alpha, kid. Congrats."

OUR DAD APPROACHED SLOWLY once the alphas had made their announcement. The boys had looked us over with a challenge in their eyes before, but they weren't doing that now. They knew that they'd had their shot, and they'd watched us take ours, knowing we'd proved ourselves fair and square, that we'd earned this.

"Kaia..." Atlas ground out, sucking in breaths. He had a couple of nice bruises forming on his ribs and taking a deep breath seemed to hurt him. "Where's Kaia?"

"Greg's gone to get her," Jackson said, before looking at each of us. "Proud of you, boys. Your mum's gonna think you're the shit—even more than she already does—and Kaia... No one will push her around again, not as your mate."

That, *that*, was all I needed to hear. I dropped to my knees, my strength deserting me and, to my fucking horror, tears pricked at my eyes.

“We did it...” I whispered. “We did it...”

Chapter 18

I ran directly to the forest, feeling sure that's where Greg, Mum and Anna were headed. But once I stumbled into the clearing, I could pick out the scent of my guys, smelled their wolves, but didn't see them. I'd outrun my enemies, but for what? The guys had moved on and... My wolf nose jerked up and we sniffed, sniffed again, catching scent of cooking meat on the wind, then the sound of a bell being rung.

The BBQ in the town square.

It'd be where everyone gathered once the alpha challenge was complete. Every other person my age would be waiting for the choosing to happen.

And I would join them.

I was tired, sore, but I drew deep from reserves of strength I had no idea I possessed, loping over pine needles, then grass, then the harsh asphalt as I ran closer and closer, weaving my way through streets, people, even between cars, until I reached Main St.

I paused just for a second, the wolf's lungs sucking in a breath, as we saw people streaming into the big space. Then our nails dug deep into the artificial surface of the road and we ran straight down the middle of it. People watched me as I passed by, some pulling themselves out of my path. Others called out, sensing something was up, but not knowing what. No one fucking could. Stanthorpe had its problems, but none of them were anything like my mother. But as I heard a cheer go up through the crowds, I knew time was running out.

The wolf hated this place. It smelled bad, harsh, artificial, and there were people, way too many people. We tried to wind our way through the crowds and when that didn't work, we let out a powerful bark. People pulled back without thought, clearing a path, and that was when we dared to hope we were in time.

Until we stumbled out into the square.

A stage that had been erected in the centre of the town square, and the town's alphas stood on it, the Campbell boys, wearing sweaty, worn, old clothes, up there beside them. Despite the fact that it was obvious they'd been through a gruelling challenge, to me they looked like they shone in the morning sunlight, like they were made of gold. Of course they were the ones who had made it through to become the next alphas. Everything about them signified that: the way they looked, the way they stood there and accepted the crowd's applause with slightly flushed cheeks. And then there was the way they searched the crowd...

But if they were looking for me, they were about to discover something else altogether.

Without any fucking shame, Mum pushed forward, barking at anyone who'd get in the way, though she appeared as though butter wouldn't melt in her mouth as she approached the stage. That perfectly composed smile, the hope in her eyes, it transformed her face as she pushed Anna forward.

And my sister? Despite initially looking scared and confused, her expression slowly turned to one of plain, old satisfaction. And, really, why wouldn't she feel like that? She'd never chosen the fate my mother had given her, but she'd accepted it easily enough. So, as she climbed the stage steps, to her mind she did so with a sense of rightness, I realised, as if this was always going to happen.

She was going to claim my mates.

The wolf barked, barked, trying to get their attention and all three Campbell boys' eyes swung my way. I watched them widen, take me in, see me and it was then I was sure my mother would fail. This couldn't happen, part of me still

believed that. It didn't matter what form we wore, we belonged. To each other, forever, our bond was written in the stars and...

My paws faltered then, a strange convulsion racking my whole body. My body went down, but I recovered quickly, forcing myself forward. My panting breaths were loud in my ears, fighting with my heartbeat as to which was louder. And in that moment of weakness? My mother pushed Anna closer.

They were going to come to me. The guys took a step forward, away from the alphas, Mum and Anna, toward me. They were my mates and I was hurting because they weren't with me. Their touch would settle whatever the fuck was wrong with me, I knew it.

But it didn't come.

Anna stumbled forward because Mum pushed her, and the guys looked at her in irritation at first...

Then need.

The way they'd always looked at me.

This was the moment when they would shake off whatever spell Mum was trying to cast and they would choose me, no matter what. This was the moment when all the shit, all the indignities, all the family violence I'd suffered, would be vindicated. They'd shove Anna away, back into Mum's arms, and the two of them would have to go live in whatever strange hell they'd tried to create, away from my mates and away from me.

But they didn't.

Instead, the Campbell boys? Their pupils blew huge as their eyes turned perfect silver, and when they stalked forward it wasn't towards me, but to my sister. They looked half man, half beast, their hands claws, their fangs flashing in the morning sun. And Anna? She just looked back at Mum for reassurance that this was right. I barked once, then again, howled long and mournful, calling them to me, the beast sure they'd hear us even as the woman inside broke down, knowing they weren't going to, weren't able to because of the way they

were transfixed by my sister, by *my* scent. As I continued to force myself forward, everyone stepped back, not knowing what the hell was going on, but somehow aware that something important was playing out.

So I had a clear view of what happened.

As I staggered forward, every cell in my body screaming for them, they turned their back on me. My mates rejected me. I saw Mum's look of pure elation as the boys grabbed my sister, dragging her between them, sheltering the sight of her body from the rest of the crowd, right before Xavier said the words he'd said he'd never say to anyone else.

“Mine!”

“NO!” Jenny fought her way forward, her scream a perfect vocalisation of the one inside me. And Mum? She just stared down from the stage at her former friend, a smug smile on her face at achieving the revenge she'd been plotting for so long. Jenny shouted something, but I didn't catch it.

Because the fight went out of me, both wolf and woman.

We were their mate and they hadn't claimed us, hadn't seen through Mum's bullshit plan, hadn't seen me. Hadn't rushed towards me, picking me up when my paws went out from under me, as I collapsed down onto the concrete. The town's alphas did though, jumping down from the stage, coming closer, looks of concern on their faces, but before they got to me, their attention was caught by a roar that went up through the crowd.

Because when my sister appeared again, she looked very pale.

With three bite marks on her neck, seeping blood.

SUDDENLY IT ALL BECAME CLEAR.

Whatever was pushing me down, it snapped now, my paws digging deep, every muscle tensing. Our pack systems held

that I was supposed to stay here, submit to the choosing, let these people place me somewhere in their pack structure.

But the structure was one that had failed to keep me safe.

I'd suffered so much for so long, tied to this place through bonds of family and familiarity. I'd stayed because of the guys, my heart aching for them, longing for when we would be together, and when I'd be free from my mother. But that same pain? The pain that I was so familiar with? It galvanised me now and I leapt to my feet before turning tail and running.

ALL MY LIFE, I'd been told how bad the fate of a lone wolf was; how dreadful a life it would be to live outside of a pack. But nothing, *nothing*, could be worse than what had just happened. And so I ran and ran, with far more speed and energy than I'd ever experienced in my life, driven by the need to get away, not sure where I was going, but knowing that it didn't matter, as long as it wasn't here.

Not in this fucking pack.

Time seemed to stand still, the world whizzing by, making my perspective seem blurry as I tore along roads, through forests, past paddocks, my feet not slowing until I reached somewhere my wolf felt was safe.

WHEN I FINALLY SLOWED, the sun was setting, dropping low in the sky as I trotted forward, everything aching. But this place? I smelled the savoury scents of food, the sweetness of ice cream and the thought of a mouthful of ice cold sundae was enough to draw me forward.

Me.

The girl, not the wolf. My beast receded, having taken me where I needed to go, so it was a very naked, very sore girl who stumbled forward towards the back entrance to the truck stop in Granville.

“What in the world...?”

The back door was pushed open and Melva stepped out, taking me in with one look, eyes wide, before she whipped her apron off, wrapping it around me as I collapsed into her arms.

“Oh, sweetheart! What happened? I’ll call the police, your family. Who do I need—?”

“Water...” I croaked out, my mouth feeling as parched as the desert right now.

“Water, right, we can do that. Just come inside, love. I’ve got a few old uniforms in the cupboard. They’ll probably swamp your skinny little frame, but that’s better than nothing.”

I stepped into the warmth of the truck stop kitchen, and stood shakily while Melva pulled out some uniform tops and bottoms. I donned the shirt she gave me, but the skirts were all too loose, so I had to use the apron as a kind of skirt instead.

“Now,” she sat me down on a low stool near the prep bench, then handed me a big glass of water. “Drink that up, not too fast now.”

I saw the wisdom of her words, knowing that if I gulped the water down, I’d vomit it straight back up, so I sipped and sipped, slowly feeling my heart rate begin to settle.

“Now, what’s happened?” There was something all too knowing, all too sad in her eyes. “No girl comes in here—looking like you do—without it being bad. You can tell me, love. I’ve seen things that’d make your hair curl, and I don’t mind having a word with the local police if you need me to.”

“No.” Although I keenly felt the need for justice, felt I deserved it—for so many fucking things I’d been made to suffer—I couldn’t get out of my head the notion that once the summer ended, we were recognised as adults. Well, I was going to set aside childish notions of fairness and honesty, of people getting what they deserved, because that was obviously not the way the world worked. “I don’t need that,” I told Melva, staring into her soft, compassionate eyes, while feeling that my eyes probably looked as hard as rock, as hard as my heart was feeling. “I just need to get the hell away from here.”

Chapter 19

“How’s it going, Melva?”

I looked up from the booth I was sitting in. Melva had hustled me out into the restaurant part of the truck stop, and had made me a plate piled high with food. To start with I had just pushed it around with my fork. Then I’d got irritated with that, with neglecting my body, when it’d been made clear that the only person who’d look after me was me. So I’d been shoving forkfuls of delicious food into my mouth and chewing, even as they turned to glue once I tried to swallow them. I looked up from my basic efforts at self-care to see a tall, rangy-looking woman standing at the counter, wearing an old pair of jeans and a worn jumper, with a battered cap on her head.

“Slow this time of night,” Melva replied. “You know how it is. What can I get ya, Jamie?”

“Some dinner and some company. Been on the road for too bloody long this time. Sick of talking to the idiots on the CB radio. Be nice to see the actual face of the person I’m talking to for once.”

“You got it.”

I tried not to listen to their conversation, but it felt like all my instincts were on high alert, that I needed to know everything that was going on around me. And then there were all the other questions that circled around in my head. What was I going to do? Had the guys tracked me here? But why would they? They had what they wanted. They’d claimed

Anna and... Not for the first time tonight, I scowled at the implications, as much as at the extent, of my mother's bullshit. When guys claimed their mate like that? It was usually immediately followed by a mating frenzy, which meant that the couple, throuple, or whatever combination that worked, would not be seen for days as they consolidated the bond. But Anna was just fourteen—

And not my problem.

I stabbed my fork into a chunk of carrot, right as the two ladies joined me.

“Those boiled carrots do something to offend you?” the stranger said with a smile. She held out a hand and I shook it. “I'm Jamie.”

“Kai...” I swallowed, aware I shouldn't be giving out my full name. “Just Kai.”

“OK, just Kai, what're you doing out here in one of Melva's uniforms?” Jamie asked.

“Kai... is spending some time, collecting her thoughts,” Melva replied for me and I loved and hated that, at the same time. “Something happened: I don't know what, but she says she wants to get out of town.” She looked at Jamie. “Maybe you could help her with that?”

Jamie settled down in the seat on the opposite side of the booth then smiled at me as she looked me over more closely.

“Well, you're young enough, pretty enough that most truckers passing through here would give you a ride, but me? I'm probably one of the few that would keep my hands to myself. I know the look of a woman on the edge.” She nodded slowly. “Been that way myself. I'll take you out of here, if that's what you want. I'm heading towards Adelaide. That work for you?”

“Anywhere but here.”

My voice was all croaky, rusty, like it'd been a long time since I'd spoken and in a way it had been. It had been a long time since I wasn't the Campbell boys' mate or my mother's

daughter, even my sister's sibling. I wasn't Kaia anymore, but Kai. Just myself.

"Well, all right, kid," Jamie said, picking up her knife and fork. "We'll be staying in Granville for tonight. Might drop into one of the local shops before we go, though, and grab you some clothes. Then we'll get on the road. You'll need to pull your weight though."

"I'm stronger than I look," I assured her, knowing, after the events of the day, that it was as true of my emotional strength as it was of my physical strength.

"Most women are," Melva agreed.

BY MID-MORNING THE NEXT DAY, we were ready to leave Granville behind. The new jeans, the new jumper, that Jamie had kindly bought me, felt strange, ill fitting, even when she assured me they looked good. It didn't matter if they did. She was footing the bill and I'd be grateful for whatever she gave me. After we'd hauled ourselves up into either side of the cab of her truck, and I'd sorted out my seatbelt, she turned to look at me and threw me a couple of quick questions before pulling out onto the road.

"So what can you do, Kai? What kinds of skills do you have?"

"I can cook, clean..." I said, racking my brain, trying to think what else I could do that would be useful to humans.

"Fair enough. They're useful skills to have almost anywhere. I know a bunch of people in roadhouses in this state and others." She looked over at me. "I can make some inquiries when we pull in at places, see if they've got work going?"

"That'd be great," I replied, settling back in my seat. "As long as it's somewhere far away from here."

"Got that loud and clear," she said with a wink, then directed the truck out on the highway.

Chapter 20

Two years later.

“We need some more chips, Kai!” one of the girls out the front called back to me through the servery window. I looked up from the carrots I was slicing lightning fast and then nodded. As I moved over to the deep fryer to give the basket a shake, more requests came in.

“More pies and sausage rolls.”

“On it,” I replied, pulling several of them out of a pie warmer we kept out the back, the crinkly cellophane wrappers still on. I loaded them onto a tray and pushed them through the servery, one of the girls snatching it out of my hands before I got it all the way through. I didn’t take it personally. We were all here to do a job and that was to feed people that pulled into the truck stop as quickly and efficiently as possible.

“Chips, Kai!” The big booming voice was from Billy, the owner of the place. He walked in through the swinging doors to the kitchen, looking harried.

“Got ‘em!” I said, emptying the basket of golden brown potato chips into a tray, salting them with a shake of the big cannister kept by the fryer and then sending them through.

“More chips,” Billy said, bustling over to dump more into both baskets and then moving to flick the spare fryers on. “More pies, more sandwiches.”

“In the cool room,” I said, pointing my knife at the door. “But, what the fuck—?”

“Didn’t I tell you?” Billy was a massive guy, sporting a full beard and thinning hair. He blinked, looked into the air as though hitting rewind on our last few conversations, and then shook his head. “Fuck, I didn’t, did I?”

“Tell me what.” I stabbed my knife into the chopping board point first, something Kaia never would’ve dared, but I’d left the scared little girl behind me some kilometres and quite a few months ago. I was Kai now, and I’d worked in kitchens in truck stops all across the southern states of Australia, moving from dishwasher, to kitchen hand, and now to a cook. “Tell me what, Billy?”

The way he winced? I wasn’t gonna like his answer.

“It’s shearing season. People are flooding into town, looking for work, and they’re tired and hungry from the drive. We need food and lots of it, now.”

“Shit.” I surveyed the kitchen, looking at what we had and matching it up against what he said? It wasn’t good. “Shit, shit, shit.”

“I thought I’d said something...”

Billy was a nice guy. He didn’t try to pinch my bum or tell me I needed to smile more. So when he’d offered me the position as master of his small kitchen, I’d taken it without a second thought. I’d been in my previous job for too long by that point anyway.

“Shit...”

I wiped the back of my hand against my brow, the skin soaked in sweat. The kitchen was a small, close, hot environment but I shouldn’t have been sweating this much. Another reason why I had to keep on the move. I was due to come into heat and...

“OK, what’s the priority: hot food or cold food?” I asked him.

“Hot.” He raked his hand through what was left of his hair, pacing back and forth.

“So I could do a stew, maybe some spag bol,” I said.

“That’d be amazing.”

“More chips, Kai!” one of the girls called. “And do we have any more sandwiches?”

Billy walked over to the cool room and pulled out a tray of neatly packed sandwiches, then pushed them through the small window for the servers to take.

“So can I have one of the girls to help?” I asked.

“They’re flat out making coffees,” he said. “I need to get out there—”

“Nope, you need to help me if you want more food to go out,” I said, far more assertively than most of the human women I’d met would have, but fuck, if he was gonna spring this shit on me... I walked over to the wall, yanked down a clean apron and then flung it at him. “We’re gonna have to work together.”

“Got it. Right. Right.”

Most of the time, Billy coped just fine with the pressures of running a roadhouse. He just needed a little managing from time to time. He was from the city and, like a lot of people during the lockdowns, he’d fled to a small country town. In his case, he’d found one that had a truck stop for sale, one that needed to be built up. He’d turned it from a grimy, cockroach infested place, by all reports, to a place that sold quality coffee.

And now, hopefully, quality food.

The farming area that spread out around the town was mostly suited to sheep. Billy’s roadhouse was one of the few places in the district where people could pull up and grab a quick feed. Usually there was a steady trickle of customers all day, enough to keep us all moving. But as I ducked my head through the servery window, I saw what he meant. There were people bloody everywhere.

“Empty the freezers,” I said. “Deep fry all the fish fillets, the chiko rolls, the battered savs we have and fill the bain-maries.”

“But we usually do them fresh.”

“Looks like they won’t last long out there anyway. Keep the chips coming and push them out. At the very least people can buy a cup of chips. If you run out of deep fried stuff, start making sandwiches while I get the main meals started...” I walked into the cool room, grabbing bags of mince, vegetables, fresh herbs and some diced lamb, dropping the lot on the bench before chopping like a damn fiend.

Dice onions and potatoes, slice carrots and celery, mince garlic, my knife moved in a blur, all my wolfish strength allowing me to chop at a speed few people could match and that’s what stopped Billy in his tracks.

People assumed I was human until evidence made it clear I wasn’t. Usually that was my wolf slipping from my control, fur prickling over my skin or a low growl erupting from my chest. Billy was mesmerised by my mad knife skills, and he just stood there staring until I barked, “Billy! Chips!”

I had the celery, onion and carrot sweating in two separate pots, adding the garlic as I stirred, the starter for the two different hot meals. Then, when that was fragrant, I turned up the heat and started browning the meat. After adding some dried herbs, some beef stock, breaking up the mince into fine pieces in one pot and stirring all the other vegetables in for the stew in the other, I had the two massive pots simmering away in no time.

Pity the food couldn’t be cooked at wolf speed either.

I then moved to start peeling and chopping potatoes as fast as I could. Stew served with mashed potatoes to mop up the juices, spag bol sauce that needed pasta to make it complete. It wasn’t exactly gourmet, but it was the kind of stick-to-your-ribs food that people appreciated when they were hungry. And best of all? It smelled good. The whole kitchen was filled with the scents of meat, thyme, oregano and garlic, the umami of the beef stock rounding that out and that’s what transported me back.

Back to Mum’s kitchen, working hard to put a nice meal together for my family, trying to get it done as quickly as I

could, but to her exacting standards, so I could sneak off—

“Kai? Have we got any more sandwiches?” one of the girls asked hopefully through the serving hatch. “Or some burger?”

“Burgers,” I said, pointing the knife at her, swinging into the cool room and away from my memories.

The big tub, full of the patties we made ourselves, was in there and I brought it out, slapping down burger after burger on the grill, turning the gas up until the meat began to sizzle. I then laid bread roll after bread roll all over the prep table, smearing the white bread with butter, then adding cheese.

Billy pulled away from what he was doing when the burgers were done, working to help wrap them all up in paper, the two of us stacking them neatly on the tray, right before I smelled the tell-tale scent of chips starting to burn.

“Fryers!” I snapped. “I’ll sort the rest of these.”

And I did. I wrapped the last of them, then had them all set out on the tray before walking out the swinging doors backward, my shoulder blades shoving the doors wide before I appeared behind the counter.

I didn’t serve at the front counter for a reason. Other employers had tried to place me there, seeing someone who was young, female and, by human standards, pretty enough to catch men’s eyes, thinking I’d help bring all the boys to the yard.

It didn’t work.

I couldn’t pretend like the others did, smiling, smiling, as all the fucking customers ignored your attempts to be friendly, or worse, were openly rude to your face. Humans were no different to wolves, it appeared; they had their hierarchies just like we did. But I couldn’t submit the way I was supposed to, fawn over customers, pretend I was glad for every cent they paid, and so kitchen work it was for me. So when I came out the front, I did what I normally did, moved quickly, adeptly weaving between the girls as they handed over coffees, snacks, pieces of cake to those paying, before I moved over to the bain-marie and grabbed a pair of tongs to rearrange the

contents. Having sorted things enough to make space for the burgers, I moved out the empty trays to be sent through the servery window and I started to move the burgers into the trays.

“How much for the burgers?”

If smell was good at evoking memories, sound was even more effective. There’d been days I’d hear a song on the radio, blaring in one of the kitchens I’d worked in, and suddenly I’d be dragged right back to Stanthorpe.

To them.

But this? This wasn’t a song. It was a rich, deep voice, deeper than it used to be. A voice shouldn’t have been enough to upend my world, to do anything to me. I was safe, away from home, a whole fucking state away. I lived among humans. I’d run away. I’d—

When I glanced up, my heart went still. This wasn’t a metaphor. I had that stuttering feeling, where your heart wants to fucking beat again, but it just can’t, and you’re left feeling like the kid on the top of a rollercoaster ride, knowing you’re about to go plummeting down. I stared into those blue eyes, that were just like those belonging to any number of other Aussie blokes. Actually, no, they weren’t. These eyes were starting to turn silver and human eyes didn’t do that. Xavier’s narrowed slightly, but his lips quirked up into a smile. A slow thing, a tentative thing, almost hidden by a thick scruff of a beard.

“Good to see you again—”

“Kai!”

My head jerked around to see Billy shoving his head through the servery window.

“How long do I keep stirring these pots and how do I work out when the fish fillets are ready?”

I jerked myself away from the counter, leaving the burgers where they were, but the girls were already grabbing them and handing them over to customers.

Just not to Xavier.

People looked at him impatiently as he held up the line, but he didn't tell the girls what he wanted when they asked him.

Probably because, apparently, what he wanted was something he couldn't ask for.

He stared after me, just like he always had, with a kind of hunger in his eyes, but I wasn't selling what he wanted to buy. I thrust my hands against the kitchen doors, hearing them swing wildly back and forth against each other behind me as I left the restaurant.

"Fish is done when it's golden brown," I told Billy, hoisting the baskets out of the fryers, then giving them a shake. "Same with anything in the fryers. Don't let it cook for too long. Spoils the food and the oil." I then strode over to the pots I had simmering, turning the heat down a fair whack more, then giving the pots a stir, making sure nothing was catching on the bottom before adding a couple of cups of water to each pot. "You can leave the pots for a bit, just focus on the fried food because I'm going on break."

"Now? But—"

"Now."

That was one thing I'd discovered outside of Stanthorpe: just how fucking strong I was. I'd put myself back together after everything that happened and that made me bolder. I'd lived my life under my mum's control, under the boys' shadows, and where the hell had that got me? If whichever boss I had didn't like my forceful attitude, well, I just moved onto the next job.

I moved often anyway, even if they did like me.

Because nothing good ever came from staying in the same place.

"I have to make a call," I said, holding up my phone. "Family emergency."

"OK, right, well—"

I didn't bother waiting for Billy to finish that sentence, stalking out the backdoor to the dingy loading dock. I paced back and forth over gravel that had been laid years and years ago, weeds growing up between regardless, waving forlornly in the breeze. But none of it, *none* of it registered as I went to unlock my phone.

My hands were shaking so much that my fingers struggled to tap out the required passcode. That had my teeth grinding, then a growl of frustration leaking past my lips. But once the bloody home screen appeared I tapped on my contacts, putting a call through to the first one.

"How ya doing, baby girl?" Jamie said, her voice pitched loud, to compete with the roar of her truck's engine. "Billy treating you all right?"

"J, where are you?"

"Fuck, Kai, what's going on. Hang on, I'm pulling over. Yes, you little fuck, that's an indicator." I heard the tick, tick, tick of her indicator, then the relative quiet as she brought the truck to a standstill. "What's happening?"

"They found me..."

That was all very mysterious and much later I'd apologise to Jamie for not giving her more details, because right as I said the words, three men came walking around the back of the truck stop. Their boots crunched on the gravel, announcing their presence, but that wasn't something that was required. The wolf, she scented them, sweat prickling all across my skin, making me feel hot and cold all at the same time.

"No..." I said, to them, to my phone, to my whole bloody life, shaking my head for emphasis. "No."

"We've been looking for you for two long fucking years," Jayden said, staring at the building, the sky and then me, his brows pulled down tight. "And here you are."

Chapter 21

“Kai...” Billy opened the back door to call out to me, frowned when he saw the three guys, but continued on, “I know you have a family emergency.”

“Jamie,” I said at the same time, holding the phone back up to my ear, wincing as I heard her yelling down the line. “I’ll call you back tonight.” I felt like a fucking bitch when I cut the call. Probably because I was. I’d stopped her, mid-haul, with an emergency and then... “It’s OK—”

“She does,” Atlas stepped forward then and it took me a moment to recognise him. He’d kept his hair relatively short when I knew him, but now it fell in long waves, looking like it was a long time since it’d seen a brush. His beard was as thick and long as Billy’s, and his eyes formed slits when he sized up the other man. “We’re her family and—”

“No, they’re not. Billy.” I redirected the boss’ eyes back to me. “They’re not. I knew them when we were growing up and... things didn’t end well. It’s why I was ringing Jamie.” I looked down when I felt my phone buzz in my hand. “But these guys are just going—”

“We’re not going anywhere.”

I’d heard malice, threat in Jayden’s voice before, but never directed at me. He squared his stance, his feet digging into the gravel, as if preparing himself for a physical attempt to remove him, but I just shook my head.

I wasn't going to try and push him away; I'd just take myself out of the situation.

"Let's go back in the kitchen," I told Billy, but when I put a hand on his arm, a low growl from the guys made clear what they thought of that. "We'll lock the door and—"

"You're not going anywhere."

Xavier? I spun around to find his hand clamped around my wrist, his skin searing me far hotter than any hotplate could. I frowned, jerked my hand once, twice, trying to get myself loose, but he wouldn't let go.

"Let. Me. Go," I snapped in a low voice with just enough of the wolf to make clear my intent, but not enough to scare Billy. The wolf leapt to her feet inside me, snarling her disgust. As if to make sure I didn't forget, she shoved images of the three of them clustering around Anna in my face, each one evidence of their crimes, but I knew those images well enough.

When I went to sleep at night and when I woke up in the morning, in the moments when my guard was down and I was vulnerable. That's when I saw my sister and the bleeding marks on her neck. Their mating marks. I knew that they'd made their choice under false pretences, that Mum had managed to trick them, but...

I had no hope for Mum. She hated me. No, hate indicated she actually cared, on some level. I'd just been a means to an end, and when she got what she wanted she let me go, without a fight. I'd actually done her a favour by running away; I'd realised that later. Jamie and I had talked long and hard about all of this on one of the many trips I'd made with her. She always liked to tell me she was no psychologist but... there was something that came from just having someone listen to you.

But part of me had needed, still wanted, the guys to be better than they were. To see through Mum's bullshit and Anna's. To politely set my sister aside, find Dad so he could take care of her and...

And see me.

See all the fucking pain that my mother had caused. See the violation. See the depths she was willing to go to hurt me and raise Anna up, until I couldn't help but hate both of them. I'd wanted them to be my champions, my soft place to fall and instead...

"We've gotta get inside and get the food out," I told Billy in low, urgent tones. "I'm sorry about all this drama but—"

"Don't."

Xavier seemed to recover himself, pulling his hand away and then staring at it, as if he couldn't believe he'd grabbed me like that in the first place. So it looked like the boy wasn't entirely lost in the man. And what a man he was. I observed, objectively of course, how much taller, bigger, stronger he was now. With a button down flannelette shirt and well worn jeans, a sheepskin jacket pulled over it, he didn't look like a boy anymore.

And I wasn't a girl.

Humans and wolves had one thing in common, they didn't like drama, and I spent my life making sure I didn't bring any to my workplace. I'd been successful, right up until now. I marched back into the kitchen, stirred the pots and then added some extra herbs and spices, a touch more salt, then turned to Billy as I undid my apron.

"I'm sorry, but I'm giving my notice," I told him.

"What?" Billy looked at the back door, then the front, where people were still pouring in. "You can't. You can't be serious! Kai—"

"Stir the pots, let the stew and the Bolognese sauce cook down. Stew needs to be kept a lot more moist obviously, and may need a little cornflour to thicken it. Serve it with some mashed potatoes."

"Kai—"

"Cook up some pasta for the Bolognese. You might be able to pad things out a bit with some cheese to make it go further."

“Kai—”

“Keep my wages,” I said, smiling even though I didn’t feel a moment of joy. “Maybe it’ll go some way towards making up for—”

“Kai, chips!” one of the girls called out.

“I’m sorry, but I’ve gotta go.”

PEOPLE WATCHED me walk past as I wound my way between the many people clustered in the truck stop. Some frowned as they recognised me or recognised what I was, seeming to know what I was walking out on. Billy made things worse by calling out my name, but I just kept going, out the front door and over to my car. I jammed the key in the lock and twisted it, right as I heard the sound of tense footsteps in the gravel, coming towards me. I jerked the door open, intending to slip into the driver’s seat and get the fuck away from whoever it was, when a hand grabbed my door.

“So we’re not even going to talk about this?”

The disbelief in Xavier’s voice, the dark looks from Jayden and Atlas, it was all too fucking much. I got in the car anyway, then went to slam it shut. But I was never going to overpower Xavier Campbell and he and his brothers clustered closer, more than filling the gap.

I might not be able to yank the door out of their grip, but I could get rid of them in other ways.

I’d thought long and hard about what I’d say if I saw the guys again. There were days, weeks, when I tossed it around in my head, over and over, as I stared out the window of Jamie’s truck. I perfected one speech, then another, each one more cutting than the last and so when I looked at the three of them, I felt well prepared for this.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” I said, my tone deceptively mild. “You made your choice and I made mine.”

“But we—” Xavier started to say, but I raised my hand to silence him.

“I know what Mum did. She fucking came into the room Jenny had left me in and told me everything, like some kind of movie villain. I knew all about her shitty plan by the time I stumbled into the square. I called for you.”

I felt a rush of something when I saw Xavier and his brothers flinch.

“I barked and barked. I howled.” My lips twisted then. “But you just clustered around Anna.”

“Kai, don’t—” Atlas groaned.

“Don’t call me Kai. You don’t get to call me that, you don’t get to call me anything anymore.” I shoved my key in the ignition, then when I started the car, I shifted gear into reverse, revving the engine until they were forced to pull away. “You chose Anna.”

“We didn’t—” Jay snarled.

“The only reason why we went anywhere near her was because she smelled like you,” Xavier said, his knuckles going white as he tried to keep a grip on the door, even as I edged the car backwards. “You. You were the only one we wanted.”

“Too late now,” I said, then took the handbrake off and jerked the car backwards. Xavier slammed the door, admitting defeat. As I rolled back, I pushed the button to open the window. “Go back to your mate and live your life. That’s what I’m doing. Next time you come anywhere near me, I’ll make you regret it.”

“As if we don’t wake up every day feeling that.” My eyes went wide as Jayden shook his head, pain replacing the anger in his. “Every fucking day I open my eyes I see you’re not there, lying beside me, and I remember everything your mother did to fuck us all up.”

A loud beep had me jerking my attention back to the road. Someone was wanting to drive past and my car was halfway across their lane. Part of me wanted to go forward, park back in my spot, get out of the car and ask Jay what he meant by that.

But that part of me wasn’t who was in control right now.

I moved then, pulling out of the parking spot completely and then taking off down the road, not watching the three of them get smaller and smaller in my rear vision mirror. Nah, I didn't look back once.

When I walked in the door of the little cottage I was renting on one of the local farms, I pulled out my phone, to return one of the many, many calls Jamie had made while I'd been driving.

"Fuck, kid, are you OK? I've been calling the local cops but they said... without a crime—"

"I'm fine."

I wasn't, but I told lies every day, so why not keep going?

"You're not."

I snorted at the grumpy sound of her voice, then shook my head slowly as I sat down at my kitchen table.

"I'm not."

My voice broke then, because that's what I'd learned, living among humans. Wolf shifters give off scents all the time, indicating aggression or arousal or whatever. But humans? They didn't smell anything but those harsh perfumes they insisted on wearing. So they pretended and pretended they didn't feel what they really felt, didn't want what they really wanted, until they couldn't stop wanting it anymore.

"Look, Kai, I've let my boss know I'm making a detour."

"Jamie—"

"It's all good." She let out a long sigh. "You're the kid I never had; you know that, right? Not that I was ever gonna spit out a fucking baby. Like, could you imagine?" I chuckled then, because Jamie had described this visualisation, in detail, before. "Me, fat, pregnant, with swollen ankles bigger than my head from sitting down all the time, and fucking haemorrhoids."

"Jesus, Jamie—"

“And while I’m sure you were cute when you were a little tacker, I’m OK with just looking after that girl...” I heard her clear her throat, “...that woman I found at Melva’s. They found you, didn’t they? Whoever you were running from, they found you.”

“They did.”

I croaked that out, all of it, everything I’d been keeping tamped down coming rushing up and choking me, because that’s what happened when I talked to Jamie. We’d trauma-bonded, that’s how she explained it, tied tight by links of a pain that never stopped hurting, especially now. It throbbed like an exposed nerve, every breath making me ache so damn fiercely, it was no wonder a tear, then another, then a whole lot more, started to stream down my face.

“Damn them...” I growled. “Damn them! I liked Billy’s. I had a good job there and he kept his hands to himself—”

“That’s not enough of a reason to stay if you don’t want to,” she told me. “Look, I’m about eight hours away. Stay inside, lock your doors and windows and sit tight. I’m coming, kid. I’m coming.”

That made me feel better for as long as it took for her to end the call. But once the phone went dead? It felt like I did too. I was empty and full, all at the same time, any pleasure I got from doing a job well, making food that people appreciated, shoved out of the way to make room for the reality to hit me again.

They’d chosen Anna. No matter what had happened between us, or what was going on before then, that day they’d chosen her. They were bound together in ways that could not be broken, that’s what my mother had insisted, Atlas’ mark on Anna overruling anything he’d done to me. They were my sister’s mates and she needed to call them back to her side.

So why did I slide down the wall of my cottage, sobbing into my arms the quiet, choked back kinds of sobs only kids with brutal mothers like mine learned? Why did I cry like my heart was fucking breaking? And why, amongst the sounds of

the wind outside and the far-off bleat of sheep, why did the
crystal clear song of one wolf, then of three, pierce the night?

Chapter 22

Xavier

She'd been just here.

Kai had just been fucking here but she'd slipped from my grip.

I flexed my fingers, still able to feel the warmth of her skin on the pads of my fingertips, because my hand had heated up until it was almost unbearable, because... I hadn't wanted to listen to her. Everything in me, man and wolf demanded I haul her close, protect her from the whole damn world.

But.

That scent of roses that always hung around her, it'd grown sharp, sour, like the flowers were being charred slowly over an open fire when she'd heard me, when she'd seen me. The smell of her pain. It'd made it hard to take a full breath in and I... I was the one that caused it. I just stared at the empty road, her car having disappeared, gone to god knows where, and my brothers, they just stared after her too.

"Fuck..." Jay muttered and when he turned to me, his eyes blazed bright silver. "Fuck!" He paced back and forth, raking his hands through his hair. "We have to go after her. We have to—"

"Tell her."

Atlas was never one for flapping his gums, but since that day? He'd dropped down, down, down into a strange kind of

darkness, one that was still and silent as a stone. So when he said, did anything, we paid attention, and both Jay and I stared at him now.

“We have to tell her what happened. If she...” His voice broke and he dug around in his jacket pockets, both of us screwing up our noses when he pulled out a packet of cigarettes. He lit one of the stinking things, and I saw his hands shaking as he took a long drag, but he couldn’t look at us until he had. “If we tell her and she still doesn’t want us, well...”

And just like that, our brother stumbled onto the one thing none of us wanted to talk about. We only discussed how we’d get her back, not if.

I looked up and down the road, taking in what little there was of the town in one glance. The place was small, little more than a pub, a supermarket and a truck stop.

“She can’t live far from here if she works at the truck stop,” I said.

“And not in one of the houses,” Jay said. There were a few streets of residences on either side of the main road, but the three of us could sight each one of them with little effort. “I didn’t catch scent of her on the street, not until we walked into the truck stop.”

“That way.” Atlas stabbed a finger at the road in front of us in the direction Kai had left, the cigarette trailing smoke into the air. “This area is almost all farmland. She must be renting a place somewhere out there.”

“So, what, we find her and explain?” I said. The plan had seemed like a sound one, right up until I saw the horror on her face, the pain. And I fucking knew why. We carried around a burden of our own.

That day, two years ago, we’d been riding a high, having proved ourselves to the alphas, told we’d been accepted as their heirs. The whole town had been cheering us on, but it meant nothing without her.

Kai.

When Abigail had pushed her way forward, a scared looking Anna in her grip, I'd braced myself for a scene, for the woman to throw one of her daughters at us, when all we wanted was Kai. For her to scream something fucking insane about Anna being our fated mate, our omega.

I thought I knew what to do.

But then that scent.

Sweet as roses, my mouth watering, my body hard, coming to complete attention as I stared. Anna was just a fucking kid. The same annoying one who tried to push herself forward while she pushed her sister out of the way, the one that tried to demand our attention like it was her right.

I hadn't seen that though and neither had my brothers. That scent had seemed to declare something we knew wasn't true.

That Anna was our mate.

I'd felt like I was a passenger in my own body as we drew Anna closer, that scent overriding every damn thought in my head and then...

It was wrong, I'd felt it then, and more and more each day since. Anna wasn't Kai. She wasn't our mate. We'd shoved her away from us, because, as soon as we got a taste of her, her blood was sour, bitter in our mouths. But we'd bitten her, claimed her before the whole fucking town and Abigail had stood back, a look of pure satisfaction on her face. Then Mum had pushed forward.

"Anna isn't their mate and she's not a bloody omega!" she shouted, demanding the alphas' attention. "Kaia is."

Kaia... Her name had sung inside my head, driving out the foul taste in my mouth, clearing the haze that hung over me.

Right as I caught sight of a beautiful grey wolf streaking out of town.

"Kaia...!"

Back then I still had hope. I was sure we could stop her, find her, but... I shook my head, feeling the full weight of the

two years we'd been apart. Each day added to that burden, until I wasn't sure if I could shoulder it anymore.

But we had to.

We'd found her, scared her, fucked everything up, but we could do better, find her again and make sure she was OK. Then when she finished throwing shit at our heads, we'd explain.

"Get in the truck," I ordered. "And put the fucking cigarette out." Atlas winked at me, taking one last drag before throwing the butt on the ground and then grinding it under his heel. "We think she's gone to ground in a cottage around here?" I looked up at the sky. "We've got plenty of hours of sun left. We'll keep looking until we find which one."

"Damn right," Jay said, striding over to the truck.

"Roses," Atlas said, moving much slower. "We need roses."

"There's no fucking flower shops out here, mate," Jay said, glancing around the tiny settlement.

"Then we need to find some somewhere else," Atlas insisted. "White roses, because that's what she smells like."

I met Jay's eyes, the two of us communicating silently that we were certain that the biggest bunch of roses in the world wasn't going to buy us forgiveness, but... We had to try, right? That's all we'd done since that fucking day. We couldn't stop, couldn't until she said... I swallowed hard. Couldn't until she rejected us as thoroughly as we had unwittingly done her.

"All right, we'll look for flowers, after we find Kai."

And with that my brothers piled into the truck. I turned the engine over, then stared in the rear vision mirror as I pulled out onto the road, setting off to find her. This was a fool's mission. Finding Kai would be like looking for a needle in a haystack, but we had no other options. Jay wound down the windows, letting the cool spring air in and with it all of the scents. Of damp earth and gum trees, of hay and bracken ferns and sheep shit. And her, hopefully her. We breathed deep as we drove on.

Chapter 23

I woke up crying the next morning, but that was OK. I did it so often I'd learned not to pay it any attention. I shut my eyes tight, feeling the heavy weight of my sadness, more stifling than the blankets I'd hidden myself under. I emerged, pushing the covers down from over my head, realising I'd been woken by my alarm, after forgetting last night to turn it off.

Because I wasn't going to work today.

Come this time tomorrow, I'd be staying somewhere else instead of this cottage. And that was a pity. The Hamilton family owned the farm and the land that the cottage was built on, their house a massive old sprawling one, up the main drive from here, but... I liked this cottage. With the old carved wood cornices and lead light windows, it was a pretty place, somewhere I'd hoped to stay for some time.

It was just as well that I was awake. I'd need to go down to the main house, pay the Hamiltons a month's rent for leaving early and then pack what belongings I had so I was ready by the time Jamie arrived. Taking detours was not something her company approved of, but she was a reliable, hard-working driver with a spotless safety record, so they cut her some slack. I sighed, setting my feet on the wooden floorboards and wincing at the cold.

Maybe we'd move somewhere up New South Wales way, on the coast, where it stayed a little warmer. I entertained myself with ideas of sunning on the beaches of Byron Bay, working at some cute bougie cafe, serving people coconut

milk lattes. Yeah, that might be just the thing. But after I poured myself a coffee and went to the front porch to drink it, I found that someone else had been by in the night.

And it hadn't been Jamie.

A bouquet of sorts sat on my doorstep. The roses were the tiny pale pink ones that you found on barbed wire fences, or near the dilapidated ruins of old deserted houses in the bush, having escaped the gardens of well-meaning ladies many years earlier and gone wild. They were the climbing ones that wound themselves around fences, trees, making a pest of themselves and...

Smelled so bittersweet.

I shook my head, not having consciously picked the flowers up, yet here I was, holding them like a bride about to go down the aisle, my nose quivering as I caught scent of musk, wood and nicotine, the familiar and the unfamiliar hitting me right in the gut.

Before I pitched the flowers aside.

They lay on the bright green grass, discarded. No, dismissed. I couldn't even bring myself to put them in the compost heap. My eyes darted around, my heart pounding hard as I scoured the paddock around me, but all I saw were sheep, grass, fences and the sky. I was alone and was that a good thing or a bad thing? I didn't bother to think about that, tossing the rest of my coffee out onto the grass before slamming the door shut behind me.

I grabbed my clothes, books, little keepsakes I couldn't bear to leave behind and then dragged my suitcases out from under my bed. The bed linens were stripped and shoved into the ancient washing machine in the laundry to run through the cycle. I put away clean dishes in the cupboards and washed the few that were dirty, putting them away as well. I scrubbed the cottage clean of me. And when the suitcases were set up by the door and the place was stripped bare, I stepped out of the cottage, anxiety pinching in my gut, somehow sure the boys would come round the corner of the cottage, that they'd lain in wait all this time.

But to do something like that would indicate they cared, and I knew that couldn't be true. If they did, they'd have chosen me. If they did, they'd... I pulled myself away from that thought just like I jerked open my car door. Flinging myself behind the wheel, I turned the engine over, once, twice, the old thing not keen to get going in the morning. But once it roared to life, I eased it out onto the dirt track and up to the gate, shooing the sheep away as I opened it, then got back into the car to drive it through.

But if I thought I'd find any relief when I got to the Hamilton place, I was mistaken.

Mrs Hamilton (call me Vicki) came out of the house, holding her hand up to shade her eyes, smiling when she saw it was me.

"How are you, love?" she said. "It's good to see you. Fancy a cuppa?"

"Ah, Vicki, I came down here to talk to you about—"

"Come inside," she urged as she steered me towards the house. Her kids were grown and gone from the district and it seemed to me that she got lonely out here, just her and her husband. "We've got some new shearers we've just put on, and thank god they turned up. The bigger farms out west are taking everyone right now, offering stupid money to get their sheep shorn. Not enough kids wanting to do the job anymore and the old fellas' backs are giving out."

Her stream of words washed over me as she ushered me into the house. I heard masculine voices coming from the kitchen, but didn't realise who they belonged to until I stepped into the room.

Fuck.

If I'd thought yesterday had been a gut punch, seeing the three Campbell boys sitting around the kitchen table with Mr Hamilton (George, love), each man with a cup of coffee in his hands, hit me much harder.

"The boys here said they knew you, Kai," Vicki said as she bustled around the kitchen. "It's why we thought we might

give them a try. I mean, beggars can't be choosers and all that, but if you know them..."

Her words faded away as the kettle began to whistle, the high-pitched sound echoing in the whine in my head, one that smothered all other noise. George looked up as the three men got to their feet, each one staring at me.

"Kai?"

Vicki held out a mug for me to take and I did so almost blankly, just staring at her, then at the guys, and that's when the Hamiltons started to get suspicious. Humans didn't have scent to help them identify threats, so they had to use observational skills instead. And George and Vicki seemed to detect the tension in the room.

"Do you know these boys?" George asked, a more serious tone affecting him.

"Yes." I smiled, the same kind of social smile I plastered on my face when dealing with difficult customers or petulant bosses. "We went to school together. They weren't shearing back when I knew them but..." I could almost hear Vicki and George sucking a breath in. "They were always strong and fit, and I admit it's been a while since we caught up—"

"Maybe we should do that right now." Xavier took a step forward and I had to lock my muscles down tight to stop myself from scuttling on out of the house. "It'd be good to have a chat. We've got a lot of news to share from home."

"You're all from Stanthorpe, right?" Vicki asked. "That's a lovely little place. We passed through it on the way to Melbourne. Well, if you want to catch up, maybe you can show the boys the bunk house, Kai? It's off behind the shearing shed."

"Of course." I smiled and then set my coffee down on the kitchen bench, no more able to take a sip from it than I would a cup full of vomit. "Come this way."

I waited until we were outside, daring a sidelong look at the main house and, only then, when I didn't see the shadow of either Vicki or George, I turned on the three of them.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I hissed, keeping my expression polite, even if my tone wasn’t.

“We told you yesterday,” Xavier said, stepping closer, then stopping when I threatened to back away. “We need to talk.”

“About what?” I crossed my arms, though keeping an eye on the main house as I faced the boys down. “How Stanthorpe is going? How the alphas are slowly handing over more control to you?” I swallowed hard but it didn’t shift the lump in my throat. “How things are going with you lot and Anna. Mum must be so pleased.”

“I wouldn’t fucking know.” Jayden’s voice was too loud, too sharp. “The alphas kicked Abigail out of the pack the minute they inspected Anna and realised she wasn’t an omega. They said what we knew all along, that she’s not our mate. You’d have found that out if you had stuck around.”

“Why?” I felt like my eyes sparked like a cut electrical cable. “It doesn’t matter if she’s an omega or not. You claimed her. Those bites mean something.”

“Like the one on your neck?” Atlas looked me over way too slowly, taking in my loose ponytail, my slubby jumper and jeans, the thick sheepskin moccasins on my feet keeping them warm, then settling on the bite visible on my neck. I pulled the collar of my jumper up to cover it.

“If there’s no real connection between people, a bite is just a fucking bite,” Xavier said, with a frown. “The alphas worked out what your mother did real quick. We only claimed Anna because she smelled like you. Those were your bites. It should’ve been you—”

I couldn’t listen to this. I couldn’t. He was saying exactly what I wanted to hear, what I’d thought so violently after my first shift, but... That had been two years ago. They were different people now and so was I, so I turned on my heel and marched across the Hamiltons’ lawn.

“Bunkhouse is this way.”

“We don’t give a fuck about the bunkhouse,” Xavier said, jogging after me. “We’re here for you.”

“Well, you better care.” I jerked open the door to the long building. There were several rooms set up in the same building, each one with its own external door. “The Hamiltons need shearers badly. You can shear, can’t you?”

“Yes, we can fucking shear...” Jayden stepped closer then, his eyes dancing. “And we’ll stay as long as you do... if that’s long enough to shear the whole flock?”

“No...” I said, glancing around me, at the farm, the flocks of sheep beyond in the paddocks. “You can’t put that on me.”

“People like us,” Jayden continued with a sly smile. “We’re fucking fast, strong. We can tear through a flock without even pinking one of their bloody sheep’s skin and keep the fleece intact. We’ll do that for the Hamiltons, if that’s what you want.”

“This is what you’re gonna go with?” I asked, my eyebrow jerking up. “This? ‘Stick around and let us get close to you again, Kai, otherwise we won’t shear a poor old couple’s sheep’?”

“Knew that wouldn’t work.” My attention shifted to Atlas and when he had it, he shook his head slowly, not breaking eye contact for a second. “Talk to us, Kai. Talk to me. Just for an hour or two. We’ll help these people out—”

“Fuck you, Atlas—” Jayden muttered.

“Please.”

Jayden was muttering something dark at his brother, so he didn’t see it. There was a reason why Atlas was the one I’d let claim me first, why it was his mark I wore on my neck and not the others’. He shut up, paid attention, listened the most out of the three of them and it was that same quiet energy that drew me in again, that had me stepping forward. It was like time had turned back: I wanted to get closer to them. None of the guys seemed to realise that the need I nursed inside me ached for them twenty-four-seven, that before they’d come back into my life, the pain had been bearable, but now it hurt so fucking exquisitely that my eyes ached.

“An hour,” I replied.

“Just an hour.” I could hear the hope in Atlas’ voice, buried under the deep growl. “We’ll shear those sheep so fucking well, the Hamiltons will make top dollar, promise.”

I had several hours before Jamie was to arrive and all my stuff was packed and ready. I nodded, then turned on my heel, showing them the bunk house.

“You lot get comfortable in here, move your shit in, get ready for a big day of work tomorrow,” I told Xavier and Jayden. “Because I’ll be gone by then. I’ve got a friend coming—”

“What kind of friend?” Jayden asked in a taut tone.

“A none-of-your-bloody-business friend.”

If there was ever a moment to make clear that time had passed, that things had changed, that I had changed, this was it. I stunned the three of them to silence. Kaia never used to talk to anyone like that. She wouldn’t have dared. But my mother wasn’t around to smack me around, keep me down, and so Kai came to the fore.

“Take it or leave it,” I said finally, staring them down.

“Get our shit and move it into the bunkhouse,” Atlas ordered the others before stepping closer to me. “Tell me where you want to go, Kai.” He held out a hand and Xavier threw him the car keys to their truck. “I’ll take you there.”

Chapter 24

Atlas

The keys felt like they burned against my palm as I followed Kai to her car. She didn't want me driving her anywhere, she said.

She didn't want me.

That burned rose stink, it was getting thicker by the minute and when she opened the passenger side door for me? It made it hard for me to take a full breath. But I didn't care. When I sucked in a lungful of smoke from my cigarette, it felt like the same thing. Breathing in the thing that hurts you and I couldn't stop myself from doing it.

"Thanks for this," I told her and she paused for just a second. My eyes ate her up, taking in all the ways she looked the same and all the ways she looked different. Angry for one. Kai was never allowed to feel that emotion under her mother's thumb, but she seemed to have found her rage now. Her eyes shone, molten silver and taking me in with a slight frown.

"It's fine," she said, biting off every word. "Good, even. We can have this out and move on. I won't have to keep looking over my shoulder, worrying about when you'll find me. And you...?" She shook her head slowly. "You can shear these sheep and then work out what the hell you want to do with your life, away from me."

I watched her then, unable to keep the slight smile off my face. She was so fucking beautiful. I'd thought so when she

was younger, just a skinny little kid, then ate my heart out watching her as she grew into a woman. But now? Fire burned in her eyes and she faced me down like a fucking equal, like she'd go toe to toe with me in any fight we might have. The thing was: she didn't get it.

I was on her side. I always was, always would be, and nothing would stop that feeling inside me.

"If that's what you want," I replied, fighting to keep my tone mild.

"Get in," she said, gesturing sharply at the car. "That's what I want. To get this done."

It was a little car and old, the seat runners groaning as I was forced to push the seat back so I could actually fit in the passenger side seat and, even then, my knees ended up pressed against the dash. She noted that with a frown and then shook her head, throwing the car into gear and then taking off down a dirt track.

"So, talk," she prompted, keeping her eyes on the road, refusing to look sideways at me.

"I will when we get to wherever you're taking me," I replied.

My hands rubbed at the denim of my jeans. I wanted to reach inside my jacket, pull out a smoke, do something. I'd been waiting for this moment for two long years and... I had to see it, see her face, see her expressions shift and change as I told her our side of the story. Because if it wasn't enough, if we weren't enough, then—

"We're here," she said, jerking open her door and walking over to a paddock gate. Her place was a cute little cottage had been built up on a small hill. She swung the gate open and stomped in, shooing sheep away and leaving me to follow, shutting the gate behind us. "So let's get this done."

Kai was standing on the porch of the cottage now, staring down at me, imperious as a queen. She looked glorious. I wanted to smooth down the strand of purplish hair that kept lifting in the breeze, step in and smooth my hands over her,

reassure myself that she was really here. Just looking at Kai felt like a fever dream, because god knew she'd filled mine often enough. I dreamed of her, over and over, of that night, of the moment I claimed her, only to break my own fucking heart when I woke up to find she wasn't there.

"I said an hour. Since we left the main house," She looked at her phone before continuing. "Ten minutes has gone by. You've got fifty minutes left. Fifty minutes to say your piece. Fifty minutes to get whatever it is off your chest and then you leave me alone. If you happen upon me again on your travels, you get back in your truck and drive the other way. Or you come in and order your food, just like any other customer, and then move on. You don't bust into my life..."

When her voice cracked, I moved a step toward her, unable to bear to see the pain on her face even if she smoothed it away a second later.

"You don't force me to give up a good job, leave a nice place, drag my best friend away from a paying job to come by and get me." She shook her head. "You don't get to ruin my life for a second time."

"I didn't mean to do that at all, ever, Kai," I said, stepping forward. "I never meant..." When I drew closer, she didn't move, but that took some effort for her; I could see that in the tense way she held her body. "I made you a promise." I did touch that strand of hair now, pushing it out of the way and then running my finger along the scar on her neck, feeling her shiver beneath my touch, her scent sweetening—

Right before it soured again.

I let out a sigh, then pulled out my cigarettes, putting one to my lips before it was plucked away and then tossed onto the porch deck.

"You fucking smoke now?" Kai peered at my face. "What the fuck...?" She let out a long sigh. "Just tell me, Atlas. Tell me."

I'd remember that, the way she said my name. Like a sigh of breeze, tangling in my hair, trailing through my beard. I

scratched at my chin then nodded before taking a seat on the edge of the porch.

“You knew what your mother had planned?”

“Not until the day I transitioned.” She sat down beside me, though with a heavy gap between us. “Greg let her in to the house.”

“So that’s how it fucking happened? My dad...” I shook my head. “I guess that makes sense.” I turned to look at Kai, willing her to see me, to be able to separate me from who the real fucking enemy was. I had her attention, that was sure, but for how long? I let out a sigh, knowing exactly why she’d run from us. She ran from the pain and I felt the urge to do just that. “Anna’s not just your sister,” I told her, catching the way she flinched at the other girl’s name. “She’s my sister too.”

Chapter 25

Atlas

“What?”

She recoiled then, that instinctual feeling of wrongness hitting her, just like it had each one of us when we’d found out the news. I shook my head, my brows creasing, the pain of it coming flooding back. But I stared into her eyes and forced my mouth to move, to let out everything we’d been carrying.

“Your mum and one of my dads? They had a short affair when we were little kids and that’s where Anna came from.”

“Mum...” I saw the moment her brain short circuited and knew exactly what she was feeling, because mine had done the exact same thing that day.

“THIS WILL NOT STAND,” Mum shouted, striding forward. We were in the alpha residence now, trying to sort this out. Her eyes narrowed in disgust as she looked Anna up and down, but not for long. Her focus was on the alphas. “Anna is not my sons’ mate.”

“Now Jenny—” Mike said.

“She’s—”

“Not.” I breathed that out, blinking, blinking, to shift the haze that hung over my head, because when I did? Something else bled through that scent of sweet, sweet roses.

Fear stinks. It can be enticing, like the smell of a little bunny running before you when you're in fur, adrenaline pumping through his veins to get him the fuck away from you. Or it can be sour, make your nose wrinkle and force you to step back, just like what was wafting off Anna now. I saw her then, saw the kid, not the girl who smelled like my mate, caught the way her eyes darted around, trying to get a read on the adults.

Because she was only fourteen.

But more than that, as I was about to find out.

"Of course, Anna is," Abby blustered. She pointed imperiously to Anna's neck. "The boys have been declared the alphas' heirs and they've claimed Anna, just as I always said they would." She shot Mum a smug look then, but whatever bullshit was going on between them meant nothing to me.

"She's not our mate." I was forced back, away from Anna, and so were my brothers, that feeling of wrongness only growing by the second. Bile filled my mouth, my stomach lurching, wanting to rid myself of the taste of her, of—

"No, Kaia is," Mum said, much more calmly. "Alphas, I left her at my house in the midst of transitioning..." She glanced around then, as if her words would summon Kaia from thin air.

But my mate was already long gone, though I didn't know that yet.

Mum's words trailed away as she turned around, her eyes narrowing as she stared at Greg. My dad.

"You called me..." She was putting things together as she spoke, I could tell and we were getting dragged along for the ride. "You said that Atlas was hurt."

I frowned, my body tensing, fur prickling over my skin.

"You told me I had to come... But when I got there..."

"Fuck," Jackson said. "What the fuck did you do?"

My fangs ached in my mouth, too big for this form.

“Shut up, Greg,” Abby growled, her eyes blazing pure silver. “Shut the hell up.”

Greg started to stutter something out and as I watched his eyes shift from side to side, that expression was all too familiar. Anna stood a few steps in front of me, but I could see their faces then, juxtaposed against each other, and that’s why, when the rest of the shit came out, it wasn’t the surprise it should’ve been.

He snorted, then shook his head, that sheepish expression all fucking Jayden. I’d seen it every time he fucked up, did something stupid and then got caught.

Just like my dad, now.

“Or what, Abby?” Greg said, shooting Kaia’s mum a dark look. There was something desperate in his eyes, something wild. “You’ll tell everyone? Well, maybe you should.” He turned back to face us and the alphas. “The boys are right. Anna is not their mate.”

I didn’t realise it until that moment, but I needed that, needed an adult to recognise what I knew was true. I felt like the whole world had turned upside down, turning black to white, right to wrong, and no one else had noticed. Dad’s throat worked frantically as he fought to get the words out, Abby’s eyes boring into the side of his face.

“Anna’s my daughter.”

My fingers flexed, becoming claws.

“Shut up!” Abby snarled.

Greg swallowed too many times after saying that. “Just like the boys are my sons.” My focus shifted to Mum, who was watching this whole thing play out, the red spots in her cheeks growing brighter. “They can’t be mates. They can’t—”

“The choosing will be delayed.” Mike said to the adults. “Go home and... we’ll let you know...”

He had more to say, I know he did, but it felt like my whole world closed down right then. I looked at my brothers and they

stared at me, the three of us of the same mind. Slipping skin was easy as breathing, because our wolves knew.

They'd been trapped down inside us, howling, clawing, trying to get out to show us this. Belatedly I remembered the sound of a wolf barking, barking, then howling for our attention, but that scent of Anna's. It'd drawn us closer...

And away from Kaia.

We shifted into fur, running out of the front door, our dads, the alphas shouting for us to stop, but we didn't.

“We knew you were out there, somewhere.” I came back to Kai's porch, the smell of grass, an incoming storm and sheep shit grounding me. “We knew...” I forced my eyes up to meet hers, seeing she was milk pale now and I wanted to move forward to grab her. Pull her close, hold her against my body and... “We ran and we ran, finding your trail and following it right up until we reached Granville.”

Kai's breaths were noisy, her eyes silver as she just focussed on drawing in one breath, then another.

“But you weren't there.” My voice cracked on that because my heart was cracking, all over again.

And that's when I understood why Kai wanted nothing to do with us.

What Abby had done had broken her, broken us, the woman's sheer fucking cruelty blowing my mind. She literally didn't give a fuck who she trashed to get what she wanted and we were the ones left to deal with the aftermath. But by dragging all this up, trying to explain our side of the story, it all came back.

The fucking aching pain in my chest that came with each stride of my paws then, and as I stood here before her now. The need to touch her now was the same as the need to take my next breath. But it wasn't just that I needed Kaia.

She needed me.

Her arms went around herself, hugging her body when I should've been the one to do it.

“Anna... Anna’s your sister?”

I sighed, not giving a fucking damn about all of that. We’d left it behind when we ditched Stanthorpe, but Kai hadn’t.

“Your mum and mine, they’ve got history.” I sucked in a breath and pulled out another cigarette, but Kai didn’t stop me from lighting it. That harsh blast of smoke, the crackle as it lit? It went some way to calming me. “My dads? They were your mum’s boyfriends back in the day. But when they all went through their first shift, their wolves made clear... My dads were meant for Mum and your dad was meant for your mum.”

Kai snorted, shaking her head, a death’s head smile on her face.

“Meant? I tell ya, I think the humans have the right idea. Stay together as long as it feels right, finding someone that has the same ideas, the same values.” She shook her head sharply. “None of this fated mate bullshit.”

But we weren’t human and I reminded her of that fact as I stepped closer.

She was partially obscured by the haze from my cigarette, the blue smoke wreathing around her, but my eyes cut through it. I’d searched for Kai every damn day since the moment we’d shifted and I would keep on searching if she scuttled on out of here, slipping through my fingers. I’d loved her with my whole fucking heart my entire life, and that would never ever stop.

“Yeah?” My voice was husky and ragged as I stepped closer and I could feel the wolf riding me. “So what do you think about? What do you value? Talk to me about them, because I think you’ll find I’m on board with each and every one of them.”

“Atlas—”

“Whatever you fucking dream about, I’ll help you find.”

“Atlas—”

I was stepping closer and she was stepping back. This felt like some kind of old timey dance, the steps strange and

convoluted, but I was dancing along as best as I could.

“Whatever you fucking want—”

I was doing all right there for a moment. The fire in her eyes had banked down, and she was talking to me, trying to reason with me. But I’d fucked it up all too soon. Her feet might have planted, not taking her any further away from me.

But she wasn’t coming any closer, either.

Her eyes narrowed, and she stared me down, taking such a deep breath that I was pretty sure I was going to get the biggest serve of my life.

“What I want?” Fuck, I wasn’t gonna like this, I just knew it. “What I wanted? Jesus, Atlas, don’t you know?”

My heart beat furiously, my mind racing, because I was supposed to know this shit, wasn’t I? I was her fucking fated mate and I—

“I needed you to choose me,” she said, tears filling her eyes and I wanted to brush every single one of them away, but she just jerked free of me. “I wanted you to see through Mum and her bullshit and choose me! Someone needed to put me first. Someone! Because if my own fated fucking mates didn’t...”

That hopeless voice. I wanted the anger back desperately as I watched the woman I loved collapse in on herself.

“Then who else would...?”

She let out a sigh, then closed her eyes, leaving me to watch her eyelids flutter, tears streaming down her face. I moved closer. Of course, I fucking did. I wanted, needed to tell her— And that’s when I saw the first tear fall.

Chapter 26

Atlas didn't get it.

He never would and neither would his brothers. Anna being their half-sister as well as mine? That was just the kind of twisted shit my mother would think up. In her mind it'd all make sense, I bet, that this was her second chance to right the wrongs done to her. She'd made clear that she felt hard done by. That she deserved better than my dad, that she... I shook my head, as if that would dislodge my fucking mother from my head.

I didn't want to think about her.

I didn't want to know anything more about whatever twisted logic was going on in her head.

I grabbed at my temples then, feeling the steady thump of an impending headache, my eyes closing as I felt the tears slide down my cheeks. Then, just as I tried to centre myself, he reached out.

As he did, I realised I'd always know where Atlas was. It was the instinct that'd had me picking up stumps and moving onto another town to avoid them, so it beat hot and hard and true in my chest right now. But I was done running from this shit, so I forced my eyes open and stared at him.

"I know Mum tricked you. You didn't have to bust in here, into my life to tell me that." Another tear rolled down my face and his fingers twitched, like he wanted to reach out and catch

it. “I know she fucked you over, just like she always did me, but...”

I knew this, knew everything I thought and felt about this, because I’d spent every spare moment thinking about it.

“I needed...” I sucked in a breath, trying again. “I needed...” *Just get it the fuck out and then you can get away from this shit*, I told myself. “I needed you to see through it all. To not fall for it. I needed someone, anyone, to fucking see through her bullshit. And more than that.”

My throat was closing up and I was struggling to breathe, because going over all of this? It just brought it all right back, that feeling of helplessness. My mother was brutal, abusive, cruel; and I hadn’t really realised that until I got free of her.

“To *see* me.”

And there it was, the thing that hurt me the most.

“I do. I always have—” he started to say, moving forward, but I held him off.

“No, you didn’t! You didn’t! I was in fur and I couldn’t get back into skin, so I barked and I howled for you, to try and get you to turn around and see me. I was your mate.” My voice, my heart, broke on that. “You claimed *me*.” My fist slammed into my chest. “And then you turned around and claimed her.”

I didn’t blame Anna. That had taken me a while to come to terms with, but in the end, she was as much a victim as I was. She was just the one Mum had built up unduly, all while pushing me down. So it wasn’t Anna that broke my fucking heart as she turned to face the crowd, wearing the mating marks that belonged to me. I’d seen Mum get what she wanted over and over and over, until it felt hopeless to want anything else.

But I had wanted more.

I’d wanted the boys in my secret little heart, a passion that felt like a candle’s flame in a stiff breeze, something I had to curl my whole self around to stop it from blowing out.

Until that day.

Because that's what he didn't get; what none of the boys would ever understand. Growing up with Jenny and their dads, they had hope and belief in a great and glorious future, where all I got was whatever my parents had left after loving my sister. To dare to think that I could become their mate was a terrible, terrible dream, but I'd dreamt it all the same, until the reality came crashing in.

"You gave Mum just what she wanted." I shook my head then slowly. "You went along with her fucking plan."

"Kaia, I'm sorry—"

"Not Kaia, Kai." I spat that out. "I ran away from that place, because it was the only thing I could do. I couldn't stop her, couldn't scream at the top of my lungs what she was doing was wrong. That you belonged to me, not Anna. That you always had. The whole town would've just laughed. You gave my sister your mating marks. It just would've been seen as me being jealous—"

"No, Kai." The cigarette was tossed aside and I was backed right up against the wall of the cottage, his body sheltering me from the breeze, the view, everything. But I shoved at him, trying to move him, dislodge him with a shove of my hands, but he went nowhere. "Never."

"She took everything from me," I croaked out, staring into his eyes. "And you let her. You let her."

I don't know what I expected him to say right then. Not nothing, that's for sure. He went perfectly still, his body crowding mine and that musky, woody scent of him filled my nose, reminding me of... I tried to keep the thought back, but it came anyway. Reminding me of home.

Not my parents' house, or Stanthorpe, but him, them, and that's when the tears fell in earnest. The kind of silent, useless fucking tears I used to cry all the time, back at Mum's place.

"I fucked up." I barely looked up at that and when I did, my view of him was blurry, hazy. "I fell for her bullshit and I shoulda known Abby would try and pull something. I... I'm sorry, Kai. Every fucking day I wake up I'm sorry for my part

in what happened, that I didn't stop, that I didn't..." He took a shuddering breath in, then let it out. "That I didn't put that kid out of our way, pushing Anna back into her mother's loving arms and then jump off that stage to run to you."

He nosed my head to one side; the bite mark he'd left on my neck aching just like my heart. But when his lips trailed across it, I wondered if Anna's did the same, growing so exquisitely sensitive that my whole body shivered.

"I bit Anna like a dog would." I stiffened at that, jerked out of this moment and right back into our history. "I left a scar, but not a mating mark. A bite is just a bite, if your heart isn't in it and I couldn't give it to your sister, not when..." He grabbed my hand then, shoving it into the open neck of his flannelette shirt, until it came to rest over his chest. I felt his heart thudding hard and fast beneath my fingertips. "Not when I'd already given my heart to you."

He darted closer, his breath fanning over my skin. I smelled nicotine and mint and him, wild and musky, and I was sent right back in time. Not to my mother and all the shit she tried to put on me, but them. All those stolen kisses, sidelong looks and small brushes of our hands. The way we seemed to be performing a slow dance around each other, getting closer with each revolution. But I wasn't a kid anymore, whose only view of the world was coloured by what I'd grown up with around Stanthorpe. I'd lived all over different parts of Australia and I knew I didn't want this. I ducked under his arm, stepping free.

"I can't," I told him bluntly. "I can't go back to pretending it's the same as it was when we were kids and, more than that, I won't. I'm not that girl anymore and you're not that guy, so..." My hands made vague warding off gestures in the air, even though he didn't move any closer. "I think we're done here."

I felt like I was packing myself back up. Not closing up the yawning wounds inside me, because that would never happen, but slapping enough filler over them that I could continue to ignore them like usual.

“But Kai...”

Didn't he get how hard this was for me? To see him was a gut punch, but to see the pain in his eyes? That was even worse, making me long to step forward, smooth his hair back, then run my hands over his forehead, force that frown to go away. I didn't want to hurt him anymore than he wanted to hurt me, but that was Stanthorpe. I just wanted to forget the whole damn place existed and everyone in it. Because when I did, I could pretend... That the world outside the pack wasn't so big, so empty, yet so full of people that didn't give a damn about me.

That I didn't miss the three musketeers by my side, helping me to negotiate it.

But I crossed my arms and then nodded to him, like Atlas was a stranger or something. Though that wasn't enough to stop Atlas Campbell for coming back for more. He moved forward slowly, as if I was a skittish animal, about to take off. And when I thought of that, I realised how apt that was. My whole body trembled with the effort of holding myself back. Because the wolf? She shifted restlessly inside me, torn between wanting to bound over to him.

Or rip his face off.

“I can't promise I'm not gonna fuck up again, because I know I will, but...” I frowned slightly as I watched his Adam's apple bob. “You know I'll always try to make it up to you. Whatever you want, Princess, I'll do it, I promise—”

I stared at him then, hard. Atlas was telling me everything I'd wanted to hear, so why wasn't I falling to my knees before him, wrapping my arms around his legs? My heart lightened, the fickle little bitch, that strange feeling taking me a while to identify as hope. But I smothered it ruthlessly, just as Mum had done to all of my hopes before.

“I want you to go out into the world,” I said, hating the fact my voice was all quavery, “and live your life.” I dared a smile, even if it felt like my face was cracking. “I want you to be happy, Atlas.”

“That’s never gonna happen, not without you,” he told me, fangs flashing.

“It is. You can. You will.” I let out a sigh. “Or you won’t. I can’t control that, only you can.” I reached over and patted his arm awkwardly, like we were just acquaintances or something. “All I can say is good luck with that.”

But anything I might have had to say was choked off by his grip. He grabbed me, hauling me closer, pulling me up into his arms and wrapping them around me, holding me so damn tight I could barely take a breath. I fought his hold, his touch, him, the feeling of sweet, sweet connection—

“You might want to put the girl down, mate.”

I looked over Atlas’ shoulder to see Jamie had arrived. She shot me a wry smile, then placed a hand on her hip.

“And as I’m guessing you’re the one who put my girl through the fucking wringer in the first place, you might want to step back as well.”

Atlas let me go, but it was to whirl around, to get in her face. Jamie just took in his silver eyes and fangs with a steady look. She’d seen me shift, so it was no longer a big surprise.

“You ready to get out of here, kid?” she asked me.

“My stuff is by the front door,” I told her. “I’ll just go and grab it.”

Chapter 27

“You sure about this?” Jamie asked me.

Atlas was stalking back to the main house, not having said another word after looking at me with a pleading, anguished expression on his face. She watched him go for a few seconds, then looked back at me.

“Of course.” I forced myself to smile. “You came out all this way—”

“That doesn’t mean nothing, not if your heart is here.”

She didn’t mean on this farm or in this cottage. She knew I didn’t put down roots anywhere. Jamie meant Atlas, and, so, she just stood there, her expression the same as it always was. Quiet, still, patient, ready to listen. Sometimes it felt like she was a blank slate on which I projected all of my crap.

But not now.

“Is it, Kai?”

“What do you mean?” I tried to smile, to brush her off, but that’s the thing about people who’ve seen you at your worst and then stuck around. They’re not scared off by your pain, nor will they be fobbed off. She didn’t ask any more questions, just stood watching, waiting for me to answer. “I...”

I had an answer, right? It’d seemed so fucking clear a moment ago. Jamie had to have heard some of what was said, if she’d been there for the last bit, so she knew... But none of that would work, I knew, so I walked over to the front wall of

the cottage and then slid myself down until I was sitting on the porch. I heard Jamie's boots hit the floorboards, then her sigh as she settled down beside me.

"We should get going," I said. "Your job—"

"I ended up palming it off to someone else," she replied, then shrugged when I looked at her. "They'd just dropped off a load nearby and were looking for a paying job to take them back home, so don't use me as an excuse." She nudged me with an elbow. "He the one you were running from?"

One of them, I wanted to say, but I didn't. I just nodded.

"Good looking bloke, if you like them young. They got that weird, too smooth look that's not for me. Kinda like a car that's just been driven off the lot, hasn't been broken in yet." I snorted at that, smiling despite myself, and she joined me. "So, what does your wolf think about him?"

I'd told her about my other side, even showed her what it was like to take fur one day when we stopped right near a forest of trees. She'd lost her lunch in the grass, because apparently the process was pretty horrific. But she'd scratched my furry ears and I'd wagged my tail, the wolf liking her just fine. She knew what family was and Jamie fitted the bill far better than my mother.

"She wants to jump all over him, hump his leg and rip his face off all at the same time," I replied.

"Oh, so it's like that. Well, angry sex is the hottest kind—"

"Oh my god, no."

"I love you, I hate you? That shit combusts in the bedroom," she continued, making me want to pour a bottle of bleach in my ears. I told her that and she just grinned in response. "But you gonna talk about it? I know your mum was a bitch and you ran the hell away from her, but I'm assuming tall, blond and hot had something to do with it."

I sucked in a breath then. It wasn't in Jamie to press, but somehow her presence had it spilling out much more quickly than if she demanded an explanation. I opened my mouth,

starting the story back when we were kids, the sheep looking up occasionally from cropping the grass to stare as I spoke.

Of golden boys, with me as their dark shadow. Of my sister—who I now knew got all her good looks from having the same father as the guys—and then of how pretty much everyone had assumed she would be the boys' mate. Of me leaving my mother's house and thinking for just a moment that all my dreams would come true. Then of my mother's betrayal, and Anna's and the guys' and the whole fucking town's, until my words trailed away.

“Fuck...”

Her small gasp seemed a fitting response to my Australian Gothic story. But when she turned to me, her eyes narrowing slightly, I pulled into myself, against the wall, ready for her criticism. I was pretty sure I knew how Jamie would respond, what she would say, how she would condemn me. Why didn't I stand up for myself? Why didn't I push back? Why didn't I take skin that day at the town square, and shove my sister out of my way, stepping up to take my place beside the guys? Why—?

“So your mum wins,” she said, nodding to herself. “Cunning really.”

“What? They kicked her out of the pack. She—”

“C'mon, kid.” She stared at me then with that same even gaze. The one that saw everything and commented on nothing all at the same time. “You know what she wanted. If what you're saying is true, then the chance of your little sister being accepted as their mate? It'd only last as long as it took for Anna to have a shower and then boom, she wouldn't smell like you anymore. If your mother was smart, she'd have locked you away somewhere to use as a giant scratch and sniff to keep your sister sweet, but...”

Jamie smiled slightly, a wistful thing.

“I think she knew her dreams had died the moment you transitioned. You're their omega.” It felt so fucking weird,

hearing a human say that. “The one fated to be with those boys. Not her golden child, but you.”

Jamie stared at me steadily and somehow I knew I wasn't going to like what she had to say.

“You. The daughter that came from a relationship that she didn't want. The one she couldn't love because of it. It must've fucking destroyed her, realising you were the chosen one and not your sister. One more fucking thing she couldn't control.”

“That's why I'm keeping out of this whole thing,” I told Jamie earnestly, staring at my hands as they raked up and down my thighs. “I don't want anything to do with that town, the pack, anything.”

“Then I'll get you the fuck out of here.” She reached across and took my hand, holding it hard when I tried to go back to clawing at my jeans. “We'll head up north. Too fucking hot for wolves. Who'd want to take fur up there? You can get the fuck away from all of this, there'll be nothing to remind you of them.”

Again, she was telling me everything I wanted to hear, but... But...

“If that's what you want.” Jamie peered over at me, but when I didn't respond, she settled back against the cottage wall and stared out at the sheep. “But... would you have taken the three of those boys as mates if your mother hadn't succeeded? Would you be Omega Campbell, lolling around on a bed of silk, eating bonbons all day?”

I snorted at that, then shook my head.

“Omegas aren't like that. They help run the town, support the alphas.”

“And would you have done that?” she asked me, looking at me closely.

“I...” My mouth moved automatically to answer, but my throat caught on the words. Jamie's gaze had sharpened, grown more observant as she watched me struggle. I let out a long sigh. “Of course, I would've. That night, with Atlas.” My

fingers moved to the bite mark on my neck, the one that still throbbled in time with my heart. “It was the last time things felt right...”

She smiled slowly when I met her eyes, but there was something sad in it.

“Your mum didn’t want you to be the omega—wanted it to be your sister who was—and then when it was clear that nature had other ideas, what did she do? Sounds like she was intent on making sure one of her daughters was mated to the alphas. Why not you?”

That was a good question. One I couldn’t answer, my brows creasing as I considered it.

“But for whatever reason she chose not to accept with pride that fact the guys chose you, instead...” That smile twisted, reflecting pain more than humour. “Instead she made damn sure to sabotage your relationship.”

She shifted on the porch, elbows now resting on her knees.

“You know I listen to a lot of podcasts when driving.” God, did I. I’d learned about crypto investment scams, worldwide child trafficking rings, about women’s metabolic health and how it changes over time, as well as the impact of daily meditation. Jamie was eclectic in her podcast tastes. “Well, I was listening to one recently that made me think of you.”

I knew her eyes were on me, but I didn’t move to meet them.

“Narcissistic parents, they don’t see kids as little tiny human beings, growing into whoever they’re gonna be. They don’t see anyone else as a fully-fledged human being, other than themselves. Other people exist to either reinforce the narcissist’s sense of self, or have to be obliterated because they don’t. The favoured one, the one the narcissist loves, becomes the golden child and the other?”

My fingers traced the seam of my jeans.

“They’re the one who complies or rebels or a combination of both, because nothing they do is right. Their best efforts are

criticised, torn down, because subconsciously the narcissist is irritated by their non-preferred child succeeding at anything. And when the kid rebels? Well, that just confirms everything the narcissist has been pushing all along. That child becomes the scapegoat, the receptacle of all of the family's sins. The dishes weren't done? Her fault. They were done without even being asked to do them? Well, they weren't put away, or they weren't done well enough, or there's more dirty dishes in the sink again, so why weren't they done?"

I went rigid right then, my heart beating way too fast.

"I can't claim to understand the workings of a wolf shifter's mind," Jamie said. "I'm just a truck driver." I snorted at that, shooting her a sidelong look of derision. "But it seems to me that if your mum couldn't install your sister as the alphas' mate, fulfilling some weird script running in her head, well..."

Jamie's eyes always contained a weird combination of compassion and patience, as if she'd seen everything before and, while she wasn't surprised by it, she felt for you, she really did.

"Then she could make sure to destroy any chance you had at happiness, for having the temerity to fuck with her plans."

If seeing the guys was a gut punch, this was a seismic shift. The whole world felt like it shifted and bucked underneath me, because that was the only way to explain this. My whole body shook and shivered, muscles twitching and for the first time in fucking years, I shifted without thought. I couldn't hold it back, my wolf springing from my skin until I stood there on four paws, panting wildly. Jamie scrambled to her feet, shaking her head.

"I'll never fucking get used to that." But she looked me over closely. "So, wolf-Kai? What do you want?"

We yipped then, a wolfish acknowledgement that this woman was pack, even if she couldn't take fur. She smiled, but we didn't see that for long, taking off moments later, our paws digging into the grass. We liked the way the sheep scattered, something inside their deeply domesticated brains

recognising me as a threat. But we didn't stop to bother them, jumping over the fence and then trotting down the path, back to the main house, back to them.

The three Campbell brothers were standing on the paving near the front steps that led up to the wide veranda around the house, talking in low, heated tones; Atlas had his back to me, hands on his hips, shaking his head. Vicki looked up from where she was sitting on the veranda, deep in the Weekly Times, and frowned in confusion when she saw me. Her European heritage recognised what I was, even if her Australian brain rejected it.

“Is she yours?” she asked the guys, walking over to lean on the veranda post as I trotted up to them.

“Her?” Jayden's dimples popped, just like they always did when he was doing something he shouldn't. He dropped down into a squat, holding out a hand until I walked closer. The feel of his fingers in our fur, scratching at our ruff, had me sitting down, my eyes rolling back in pleasure. “Yeah, she belongs to us. She always has.”

Chapter 28

Jayden

“You fucked it up, didn’t you?” I said that the moment Atlas returned, his face like a fucking wet week. “You ballsed it up. You said the wrong fucking thing and—”

“Jesus, Jay.” Xavier frowned at me, throwing an arm up to stop me getting any closer to my other brother. I pushed against it, wanting to feel Xave struggle to hold me back. “Calm the fuck down.”

“So where is she?” I snapped at Atlas. “Where’s our fucking mate?”

“Halfway down the road by now,” he replied, without a single shift in tone. His voice was perfectly flat and so was his mood.

“What the f—!”

I lunged then, forcing Xavier to throw himself between us.

“Jay. Jay. Look at me.” But I didn’t fucking want to. I was gonna tear strips off Atlas, then I’d turn on myself. “Calm the fuck down.”

“Why?” I stared in Xavier’s eyes. “What’s the fucking point? Without her...” I was just saying what they’d both thought, because I knew. I fucking knew. The heart went out of us the moment we worked out where Kaia had gone, when she saw that fucking aberration with Anna. And we’d never really got it back. “Without Kaia, we’re nothing.”

“Kai.” It took me a second to realise Atlas was correcting me. “She doesn’t like Kaia. She prefers Kai.”

“Probably wanting to forget all about the girl she was,” Xavier said and Atlas just stared.

“More than that.”

He let out a sigh, then grabbed for his cigarettes, but I yanked them out of his hand and tossed them in the dirt and that’s when Atlas’ mask cracked. That mulish look, the set of his jaw. He was about to smack me into next week and I was fucking ready for it. Every cell in my body felt like it came alight when I’d seen Kai and then... When she shrank away, took off down the road? Pain, so much fucking pain. So my brother smashing my head in? That’d be a welcome thing, something physical to focus on rather than the psychological.

“We thought we knew how much she was hurting but...” His breaths came in slow and ragged, like every one hurt to make. “Abigail stitched us up perfectly. She had to know we’d never keep Anna around, that the truth would come out, so I’m not sure she actually expected that ploy to work.” He stared at me now, his eyes a flat grey rather than the usual blue. “But if it didn’t?”

He smiled then. No, it was a baring of his teeth, his fangs flashing in the morning light.

“Well, Abby made damn sure Kai would never come to us. We were supposed to protect her, to be a fucking wall between our mate and her psycho mother. We were supposed to be her safe place.” We’d said the same thing plenty of times before, but now it felt like a life sentence, a recognition of how we’d failed her, not an ambition of something we would aspire to. “But we... we...” Atlas shook his head. “All she thinks about when she sees us is pain.”

I wanted to say something, anything to fill the resulting silence, but I didn’t, we couldn’t. Words seemed too small, too fucking weak to pit against this. Because we’d all smelled the burnt rose scent of Kai’s pain until it turned our fucking stomachs.

“So...” My voice was thin and weak. “That’s it? We just...” I tried to swallow the massive lump in my throat, but didn’t succeed. “We just—”

“Leave.” Xavier’s reply was clipped and concise. “We said we would, after we’re done with the shearing. We’ve spent the last two years looking for Kai and now...” He straightened up. “Now we’ve found her. We have to respect what she wants.”

“The fuck we do,” I growled.

“Yeah, we do, Jay, if we love her.”

I could go toe to toe with angry Xavier, bossy Xavier or even artificially calm Xavier, but not this one. Not the guy who stared at me, his whole fucking soul bleeding in his eyes.

Just like mine did.

“If being around us hurts her more...” I watched Xavier’s jaw flex. “Then we can’t do that to Kai again. No more. No fucking more.”

“But...” I wanted to argue, wanted to make some fucking amazingly smart point, but when it came down to it, I had nothing. That scent of burnt roses seemed to hang in the air, my nose working, trying to suck in the clean breeze, even the stink of sheep shit, if that’s what it took to rid myself of it, right before I caught a hint of something different.

A floral scent, it played on the wind, there and gone again, making me question if I really did smell it. But my nose worked again and my eyes raked across the yard of the farmhouse, settling finally on the track leading in. And there she was, a beautiful grey wolf, trotting closer and closer.

“Fuck, is that...?”

“Is she yours?” the old biddy that owned the property asked, coming over to the edge of the veranda to stare at wolf-Kai with a slight frown on her face.

“Her?” I grinned then, able to shove my brothers’ bullshit to one side right then, because suddenly the feeling of rightness hit me, full on. I went down into a squat, holding out a hand. Sure enough, wolf-Kai stepped closer and closer,

sniffing at my fingers. It was then I told them what I knew to be true. “Yeah, she belongs to us. She always has.”

She came then and settled against my chest, the wolf pressing into my body, even if the woman didn't dare. I didn't fucking care about that. I just cared that I had her, had my Kai, my mate. My breath was coming in too hard and too fast as I closed my eyes and wrapped my arms around her. She was mine, mine, mine and I'd tear the whole fucking world down if that's what it took to have this.

“You're my girl.” I tried to say this in the way a human bloke might about his dog, but I'm not sure if it worked. The woman who'd hired us drew closer, looking us up and down.

“You didn't say anything about a dog. Is she one of them huskies?”

“Yep.” Xavier's reply was immediate. “She's well trained and won't harass any of your stock.”

“Well.” The woman eyed us with suspicion, but beggars can't be choosers, right? “See that she doesn't.” Her expression softened as she looked down at wolf-Kai. “Though you are a pretty thing. They say those dogs look like wolves, but hell... this one? With those yellow eyes, she damn well could be one.”

“Right, but there's no wolves in Australia, so...” Xavier said.

“Right.” Logic and instinct warred inside the woman's mind, but logic won. “Well, if you want a nice juicy bone for her, I've got some old leg bones from a roast lamb we had the other day.”

“Cooked bones are no good for dogs,” Atlas said, then clicked his fingers. I didn't want to let Kai go, but she moved to push her head into his hand and he scratched at her ears. “But we might go into town and grab some supplies. We'll be starting shearing early in the morning.”

“Oh, well, that'd be good,” the woman said, brightening instantly. “I'll let George know.”

Xavier watched her back until the woman disappeared back into the house and then all our focus was on wolf-Kai. Our girl. She stared right back, panting lightly, looking so fucking beautiful.

“Well, girl...” Xavier said. “Feel like a run into town?”

Chapter 29

I'd told Atlas I didn't want any more to do with him. I'd sent him on his way, ostensibly for the last time. We were to part ways, go and live our own lives. So why was I in wolf form, sitting in the front seat of the boys' truck, watching Xavier behind the wheel? And why was he sneaking too many looks at me, only looking at the road when I gave a wolfish whine?

I was on a date with the guys in wolf form, it soon became apparent.

"Stay here, girl," Xavier said when he parked his car in front of the truck stop, reaching over to scratch at my ruff. "We'll be back in a sec."

But when the three of them got out, the wolf's feet shifted on the soft car seat. Her eyes followed their every move through the windscreen, watching them get smaller and smaller until they disappeared into the truck stop. I felt her pain, her uncertainty, her whole body quivering each time the door opened, but they didn't come out. She let out a little whine, unable to get comfortable inside the car until... The door finally swung open and out they came, toting a couple of plastic bags full of food. Food that made my mouth water and my tongue loll out when they got back in the car.

"You see anywhere we could stop for a feed?" Xavier asked Jayden.

"There was a lookout not far from here."

It was Atlas who replied, not Jayden, and when I looked in the rearview mirror, I saw that he was staring at me, not Xavier.

“We’ve had some success with lookouts before,” Xavier said, shooting me a long look. They drove out of town until they came to the sign that indicated where the lookout was, and then drove down the beaten track.

Grass had grown long over the winter months, with all the rain we’d been having, but the truck managed to lumber through it, the suspension absorbing most of the impact but we still shifted around with each bump. Rocky outcroppings started to appear in the land around us, the road winding in and out of the rock that formed spears that stabbed at the sky. But then the track ended and Xavier brought the truck to stop, I started clawing at the door. As soon as it was popped open for me, I was off.

There was a particular joy that came from being in fur. An awareness of my surroundings, my sensitive ears picking up the sound of small prey skittering away, the scent of wet stone and green grass and bugs that leapt up in front of my face as I bounded forward.

“Kai...” Xavier called, but I so rarely let the wolf have her head, she wasn’t listening to anyone today, not even me. A rabbit thumped off and we went streaking after it, the wily critter jerking one way, then the next, trying to throw me off its trail. They didn’t have a lot of natural predators here, which had made their introduction to Australia doubly problematic, but right now, the wolf was determined to lessen their numbers by at least one. I heard my name called over and over, but I was intent on streaking after the rabbit, not being with them.

So they joined me.

Howls filled the air, announcing their animals’ presence, and then seconds later I was joined by three massive male wolves. But their blundering into my hunt seemed to galvanise the bunny somehow, untapped reserves of adrenaline sending it pelting off into the undergrowth.

My wolf spun around, snarling and snapping at the air, making a big show of her distaste of their behaviour. But the guys? They edged closer. Their heads were held high, their tails wagging slowly, as they moved toward me, slowly. That forced me back, something the wolf did not like at all. Her growls grew louder, thunderous, filling the air, but they just ignored it. They didn't bait me, didn't rise to my challenge, didn't bare their fangs at me, unlike the 'classic' idea of wolf behaviour, because humans didn't understand what an alpha really was.

They imagined their own primate-like dominance displays, full of violence and bravado, were what we engaged in. But an alpha wolf? He was usually the dad of the wolves in his pack and his job was to make sure everyone was safe and had enough to eat. So the guys didn't barrel into me, putting me on my back and then biting at my soft underbelly, forcing me to submit. Instead they just crowded in, making my wolf get used to their presence, then pushed that envelope of tolerance until this. The first time Atlas-wolf touched his muzzle to mine, I jerked away. And then when Xavier-wolf put his head over my shoulder, I jumped back. But Jayden-wolf was right there, blocking my way out, wagging his tail the whole time, as he reached out to touch his nose with mine. I snarled, bit at the air, made clear what would happen if he did just that, but he didn't pull away. He met my eyes, made clear he'd take the nip if that's what it took to get close to me.

And my wolf sat down then, letting out a little whine.

Muzzles were shoved into my neck, sniffing at my fur. Still others licked at my jaws, like they were puppies begging for food. But most of all, they pressed their bodies into mine, the weight comforting in a way I couldn't articulate, and only the wolf could understand.

Pack.

We didn't choose to run as lone wolves for a very good reason. In the wild it was too damn hard to survive. We might have been apex predators, but our strength came from our pack, not us as individuals. So that instinctual nature, it carried

across in human and wolf form, a sigh escaping me that I'd been holding since the day I saw them claim Anna.

We were clustered in the grass in a big puppy pile, but as soon as I thought of that day, I stiffened. Xavier-wolf whined in response, no doubt smelling my distress. But Atlas? He laid the big heavy head of his black wolf on my shoulder, pinning me to the earth. Jay shuffled closer, licking the soft fur behind my ears in slow reassuring strokes, grooming me like a cat would as I rode the wave of pain, of memory.

Them pulling Anna closer, her face pale as she showed the town her bite marks. Them claiming her. I shifted furtively, but was pressed back down again, because this was what therapy looked like in fur. I had to see this through, bear this pain. No, share it between the lot of us. This injustice was done to us, not just me, and so we all had a piece of it to carry.

I came back to skin with a shock. Whatever lesson the wolf had wanted me to learn, apparently I'd got it, which left me now sitting in the dirt and grass with three heavy wolves pressed into me. And while pebbles were burrowing into my arse and I heard the low hum of a mosquito buzzing around my head, that was all background noise to my awareness of them around me.

I hadn't had the chance to see them in wolf form—Mum had robbed me of that too—so I stared now in wonder. Atlas was massive, a heavy grey beast with shaggy fur I longed to sink my fingers into. So I did. I reached out and touched the wolf, making connection with the man inside who'd haunted every single one of my fucking dreams. But just like in dreams, that touch was snatched away all too soon. The wolf's fur was like down feathers on my fingertips, soft as butter, but they faded away, the wolf subsumed by the man, leaving my fingers to scud over his taut flesh.

Atlas stared at me and all of the fucking pain and love and need there, that each one of us had carried around since we were kids, was communicated in one long look, until Jayden-wolf moved. He thrust his head under my hand, demanding to be patted like it was his due, then moved closer to thrust his

nose into the crook of my neck, snuffling there until I burst out laughing, the ticklish feeling forcing me to shove him away.

But when I did, Jay the man returned.

He smiled at me, some of the wild joy still there, but only a little. It was the same slow, lazy smile that he'd always worn when we were kids, just tempered now. Because before he hadn't known what it was like, that life could front up and kick you square in the gut, completely unprovoked. That he wasn't going to live his life in just one long golden summer. Winter had come and it had bitten us hard, every single one of us. But he looped his arm around my neck, tugged me closer to press my forehead to his, so I was forced to listen to his breath and mine form a noisy chorus.

“Kai...”

Jay just breathed my name out, the sound tugged away by the gentle breeze and I wanted to grab it back. Hold it close to my chest, cradled there, along with all the feeling that came with it. But he said my name over and over as our mouths shifted in the space between us, forming a strange dance, one where we were forced to orbit each other but never actually touch. Then, right as we got close, a furry muzzle shoved forward, landing on my bare thigh.

Xavier-wolf stared up at me with a puppyish look that had me smiling despite myself. I found my hand moving, stroking through his grey tipped fur, the blondish undercoat separating under my fingertips.

Fuck, I'd started out so damn strong. I'd made my case to Atlas, told him just how I felt, spilling out all that pain. I'd been sure I knew just what to do, what we needed to do. People don't fall in love when they're kids and then stay together forever. People change too much to make that possible. So why was I here, my heart feeling like it was swelling to twice its size inside my chest as Xavier shifted into skin, rolling over so he faced me? And why did my fingers run through the golden stubble on his chin, the feel of it so much harsher, wirier than the wolf's fur?

Because this was me, this was us, and no matter what bullshit my mother had pulled before, we'd stayed together, stayed best friends. One fucking evil plan, one attempt to crush my heart like a damn bug, it didn't change that, didn't change anything, and that fucking killed me. Touching Xavier's face right then, tracing the sharp slope of his cheekbone, feeling Atlas shift behind me and place a kiss at the base of my spine, then Jay stroked his hand through my hair, it felt like my whole life had been leading up to this.

"Why do I want to fucking kiss you, after everything that happened?" I asked Xavier. "Why do I feel like I've been waiting for just this moment."

"Don't wait. Kai, fuck... Please don't wait." He reached out then, slowly enough for me to pull away, but how could I, with Atlas kissing his way up my spine and Jay combing his fingers through my hair? "Don't wait." Xavier's voice was much lower, huskier now, as his hand pulled me closer. "Don't let any of it get between us ever again."

I couldn't promise him that, but I could do this, letting my lips brush across his. And the moment I did, he yanked me down onto the grass beside him and then rolled over to cover his body with mine.

That feeling of his body, heavy and pinning mine to the earth and the damp ground beneath me? It was finer than the softest bed.

"If you don't want this, say so now," Xavier growled, staring down at me with eyes the colour of the moon. "If you need me to stop—"

I remembered what Jamie had said, thinking about what my mother would say for the first time in years, before smiling up at him.

"And why would I do that?"

Chapter 30

Xavier

“And why would I do that?” Kai said to me and suddenly I became all too aware of our nudity, her bare body soft and tiny beneath mine. My cock ached with how fucking fast it filled with blood, but I ignored it as I stared down at her.

My Kai.

My mate, the only woman in the world I’d ever love and I could barely feel my face as I stared down at her, my hands gripping her way too tight, as if she’d slip from my fingers and away from me if I didn’t. But holding her made me all too aware of those fragile bones in her shoulders, the graceful sweep of her collarbones.

“Yeah?” I knew she’d changed. She had to have, surviving out in the human world. But the challenge that glittered in her eyes, it had the wolf growling and the man feeling so much satisfaction. “So you’re not gonna take off if I do this?”

My lips still tingled from where she’d brushed the lightest of kisses and I found myself going back for more. And the moment our mouths touched, the world exploded. White light filled my head and a steady whine started up in my ears as I felt her.

Her lips parting, slowly at first, then much more readily, eagerly. And me? I sucked in a breath through my nose, diving right into her. Her taste, the sweet, sweet scent of roses blossoming in the air, melding with that of crushed grass and

wet stone, creating a perfume I'd never forget. Her thighs widened and my body fell into the gap, grinding up and into her softness, though not inside her, my cock rocking against that slick cleft, as I kissed her and kissed her, over and over. I felt her tongue tangling with mine, one kiss bleeding into another until Jay decided to intervene.

"Hey," he said. I growled at him, half blind with need, not even seeing him as my brother right then, just another male. An intruder, someone else trying to get to my girl. But Jay ignored me to talk directly to her. "You got some of that sweetness for me too?"

"Fuck..." Hearing her curse was so damn hot. Kaia was always a lot more careful about what she said around others, but not Kai. "Sometimes it feels like a dream, the three of you."

"Not a dream," Jay assured her, stroking her hair back from her forehead. "Not unless it's one of those real dirty ones that wakes you up in the middle of the night with a wet pussy and a twitchy clit."

"Jesus, Jay—" I growled, but she just grinned, reaching up to drag his head down.

My brother shot me a jubilant look, right before he devoted his entire attention to our mate, kissing her lips until they were swollen and slick. But I was the one who felt her shift underneath me, felt her hips flex, watching the little nipples of her breasts pulling tight. So I threw a look at Atlas and he moved. When I rolled off Kai, she reached blindly for me, but she didn't realise she'd never need to again. We'd be on her tail every second of the day, until she was sick of the sight of us. I settled down beside her, slinging an arm around her waist, my brother doing the same as we shared a look.

Kai had always been the sexiest damn woman I'd ever seen and the years and the new purple hair had done nothing to change that. If anything, it just made it all the more intense, the sway she had over us. But right now wasn't about mounting her, rutting her into the ground, even though my dick was dying to do just that. It was about her. We'd never

really had a chance to court her like we wanted, due to her stupid mother's ambitions, so in some ways this was a moment to reclaim that. Not to fuck her in the dirt, but to learn her: map the ups and downs, the ins and outs of her body, collate her reactions and her responses.

My hand shook as I slid it over her stomach. I had a steady grip when I looked down the barrel of a rifle or when working the clippers over a recalcitrant sheep, but I lost all that the moment I touched her. Tracing the slight swell of her stomach, following the harsh ridges of her hipbones, tangling my fingers in her pubic hair, even watching the shift of her thighs, spreading wider, sweet rose-scented slick filling my nose. And Atlas—I looked up when his hand paused, caught the moment when he bared his fangs, not at me, not even at Jay or Kai, but from need, in response to her scent. My own canines ached the same damn way, with the need to mark our mate. But as Kai moved more insistently, the scent of her growing more intense, sweeter, I jerked my hand away and then looked meaningfully at Atlas, trying to get him to do the same.

Kai broke away from Jay, looking bright eyed, flushed in the face: so fucking beautiful. I used that distraction to haul her upright and into my arms.

“We bought you some food,” I told her.

“Not hungry for that,” she mumbled, right before kissing me again. I wanted to get lost in that, in her, my arms tightening around her not wanting to let her go, loving the feeling of her with me, touching me, tasting me. But we'd get caught up in the moment if we didn't stop things, so I didn't let myself get drawn further into that vortex.

“You know we want to devour you from head to toe,” I said, staring into her eyes and she shifted then, straddling my hips, then lowering hers slowly, so I felt the wet brush of hot little omega pussy.

“Yeah, that,” she said with a smug smile. “I want that.”

“But that's not how this is gonna go.”

Jay groaned and then flopped dramatically on his back onto the grass, while Atlas just shook his head slowly.

“Isn’t it?” Her eyes danced then, bright, bright silver. “Maybe not for you—”

“That’s the spirit, baby.” Jay jack-knifed upright and dragged her from my arms, placing Kai in the same position across his lap. “Dudley Do-Right over there can choke the chicken to the sounds of me—”

“Showing our mate how much we love her.” Everyone went silent when I spoke the words. “Making that so fucking clear to her that no one and nothing will have her thinking otherwise again. Courting Kai in the way we should’ve back at home. Making her feel special.”

“Fuck...” Jay pressed his forehead to Kai’s chest and I knew I’d won. She played idly with his hair, but didn’t seem surprised when he pulled away to stare up at her. “You know how much I want to give you everything your scent is telling me you need...”

“But you’re not going to.” She let out a sigh and pulled away before shooting me a dark look. “Cock blocker.”

“You’re not just a roll in the hay,” I told her, staring into her eyes, wanting to get lost in those silver depths. “Not some chick to just get off with.” My voice was failing me, my heart beating way too fast, but I pushed on. “You’re the only fucking one for us, Kai. Our mate. And I want our first time to be more special than just rutting in the grass while mosquitoes bite our arses.” I slapped at one buzzing insect for emphasis.

“Special, huh?” She nodded at that. “And here was I thinking I’d finally get laid.”

“Finally?” Jay frowned. “What does that mean?”

“Nothing—” she tried to say but he grabbed her by the waist and dragged her closer.

“Not nothing.” Jay’s voice was a growl then and his hand slid down her bare stomach, tracing circles on the skin. “Spill or I’ll tickle you into oblivion.”

“Like you used to do when we were kids?” She went to struggle free of him, but his grip tightened and that’s when she realised she had our full attention. “It’s not a big deal. You guys are building this up to be more than it is. I just...” Her eyes found Atlas’ and stayed there. “I haven’t...” She let out a frustrated huff. “I haven’t slept with anyone else since that night, OK. There were offers—” All three of us growled at that. “But it never felt right.” Her arm went back up, curling around Jay’s neck, leaning into him, and he hunched over her protectively. “Like, I kicked myself every time I turned someone down, because I knew you were Anna’s mates but...”

“But touching someone else felt wrong, bad and set your wolf’s teeth on edge,” I told her. “Because you could never imagine letting your guard down, letting anyone else see you that vulnerable. Because all the times you imagined touching someone else in your mind, you saw us.” I watched her bristle then. “Just like we saw you.” I shook my head slowly. “We haven’t been with anyone else either.”

Her eyes widened at that, then she looked each one of us over closely, as if to make sure we weren’t lying.

“There was never going to be anyone else but you.”

Kai grabbed Jay’s hand, looking at it closely, as if it was something brand new, then stroked her fingers across his palm until his closed around her hand.

“You think I could stand any other woman touching me?” he told her in a low voice, his lips brushing her ear. “You’re the one, Kai, the only one for me.”

“My mate,” Atlas announced, as if that was enough explanation. “I couldn’t—”

“None of us could,” I told her. “We belong to you and only you and that’s why we’ve been everywhere, looking for you, Kai. We don’t care where we stay and what we do, as long as it’s with you.”

I hated the fact that my mate had been hurt so much and so often, that when I offered her my heart on a platter, she just

stared, her frown growing deeper and deeper by the second. Loving Kai was like giving your heart to a wounded wolf. Its teeth were bared, expecting you to be yet another enemy, while secretly hoping you weren't.

“That’s what you want,” she said finally. “That’s why this can’t be just a means to scratch an itch. You want more than that.” She met my eyes then. “You actually want me.”

Everything, that’s what my heart beat out, all she had to give and then a bit more. But I didn’t say that, not wanting to send her off running again, this time potentially further away and much harder to find.

“Always,” I said, smiling slowly, even as I felt tears prick at my eyes. “Always.”

Chapter 31

When I'd started the day, I hadn't expected to be sitting in the tray of their truck, wearing Atlas' hoodie like it was a dress, munching on a burger. I also never expected the three of them to be so focused on me that they watched my every mouthful. Things were different now and it wasn't just that we were away from fucking Stanthorpe. There was no hiding what we felt, pretending the bond that throbbed between us wasn't real. We didn't need our parents or the alphas or anyone confirming what we knew.

They belonged to me, like I did them.

That thought was like a long, deep exhalation. It eased a persistent ache in my chest that I'd just learned to live with, so much so that I hadn't really been aware of it most of the time. Knowing the depth of our connection, fully taking it on board, made me feel whole again. No, not just whole. It was more than that, it made me feel like I was overflowing with something hot, intense and beautiful and so I reached out, my pulse picking up when I grabbed Atlas' spare hand. He didn't put any pressure on me, he just watched me move, and his fingers laced through mine the minute I touched his hand.

There's something about actually holding the hand of someone when you've been dying to do it for so damn long. More than just a touch of the fingers. It wasn't just Atlas' hand in mine. Of course, I felt the warmth of it, the calluses, the strength in his grip; but what I got was more than that. This was Atlas, the man who'd sunk his teeth into my neck,

claimed me before the moon and the stars, the other half of my soul and as I stared at him, I realised my mother's bullshit had forced me to cut off that part of me, discard it and leave me limping through life, incomplete.

"Yes," he said, meeting my gaze, our burgers forgotten.

"What?" I smiled, shaking my head in confusion.

"Whatever the hell you're thinking, whatever you want, the answer is yes," he said.

At first I wanted to reply with something cheeky, flirty, fun, but I felt like all of that was unnecessary. Instead, my response was more intense: a need to lean forward, a desire to press my lips against his, one I could freely indulge in now, so I did. His burger fell to the ground, unneeded now, as he fed off my lips.

"So how's this gonna work?" Jayden asked when his brother and I finally broke free of each other. "Are you going to stay with us in the shearers' accommodation? Are we gonna settle here?"

"Jay, not yet," Xavier said.

"But, seriously, are you gonna run again?"

There was something almost accusatory in Jayden's eyes, but I understood where he was coming from. The wolf was restive inside me, not giving a shit about all the human niceties. She either wanted to chomp each one of them and claim them as ours, or turn tail and run so far no one would find me.

"We're gonna work it out together," I replied. "The way we did at that lookout that night." Atlas' arm slid around me and he tucked me into his side. "Away from home, away from our families, away from the whole damn pack."

"We'll make our own instead." I glanced up at Atlas as he said the words and he smiled at the attention. "You're the only pack I've ever needed."

"So, together..." Jayden nodded slowly at that, his enthusiasm increasing with every second. "Yeah, I can work

with that.”

“WHAT DOES this place actually look out onto?”

Jayden asked the question as we walked now, single file along the track, trees everywhere, right up until we reached the lookout itself. It was a large flat area of rock that gave you a panoramic view of the scrubland beyond.

And the river running in the gully beneath us.

The three of them walked to the edge of the lookout, looking at each other with the same grin when they saw the river, but it was the look they gave me that had me stepping backwards. It was weird to see that same impish look on the faces of these men, not the boys I’d seen it on so often. But when they started pulling off their jeans and yanking off their shirts, I knew that they hadn’t matured all that much.

“No,” I said, stepping backwards. “No.”

Jayden came prowling towards me, tossing his shirt to one side, then pulling his belt free.

“You are not chucking me in that bloody river.”

Atlas came at me from another angle, a small smile crossing his face as he got closer.

“No means no, didn’t you learn that in the human world?” I stammered out. My feet moved faster, but running from wolves? It triggers that deep primal impulse to chase, to hunt. But I wasn’t prey, so I locked my knees, trying to plant my feet deep to stop them from forcing me backwards.

Only for Xavier to swoop in and jerk me up and off my feet.

“No, Xavier! No, no, no.” He just grinned as he carried me towards the edge of the lookout. “I’ll give you kisses, all the kisses—”

“You’ll give them to me anyway,” he said, the shadow of the cocky boy he’d once been rising back up.

“Kisses on the end of your dick!” I promised hurriedly, just as he lifted me higher.

He went very still, his brothers clustering closer, each one of them staring at me with eyes of silver.

“Big, wet ones with extra tongue?” I said.

My case was hopeless but I made it anyway, watching the way each one of them went slack-jawed at the suggestion, right before they moved, shaking off their stupor and getting back to the task at hand.

“You gotta trust us enough to make the jump,” Jayden said, looking at me intently, so I knew that he meant literally at this moment in time, and, more than that, beyond this. My response was to stiffen.

“It’s fucking cold and we don’t even know how deep it is,” I shot back. “You could break my back or yours.”

“Not us,” Xavier said, with the complete arrogance of a fucking alpha, and the only warning I had was his arms tightening around me before he jumped off.

Would I always feel this terrible lurch in my guts when I was with them? Like the rug had been ripped out from beneath my feet, the world turned into a blurry mess, the sound of all of the guys’ whoops twining with my ungainly screech that just got higher as we hit the water. Xavier held me, pulled me down, down, into the river’s depths, my eyes blinking furiously as I held my breath, struggling to rise up. But he swam up, taking me with him until we both burst up above the water, sucking in breaths.

“Fuck!” I yelled, fighting my way free of him, scowling at the wild grin on his face, at the way his eyes glittered. “God, it’s so fucking cold!”

I swam towards the bank, ready to clamber out, but hands grabbed my ankles, dragging me closer until I was settled against Atlas’ chest. He shoved the hoodie off, throwing it up onto the rocks on the banks, rocks that might’ve cracked our heads open like eggs, but I couldn’t focus on that. As my

clammy hands went to grip his shoulders, I felt it, the volcanic heat of his chest.

“How’re you doing that?” I asked between chattering teeth. “I’m so fucking cold and I don’t have any clothes to warm up in.”

“I’ve got more clothes,” he told me. “A whole bag full of them, and a swag with lots of warm blankets.”

“Oh my god, that. Gimme that,” I moaned.

“Why?” I turned around to find Jayden at my shoulder.

“Because it’s supposed to be spring, but it still feels like winter and I’m bloody cold...” My complaints trailed away as I felt him plaster his body against mine, sandwiching me between the two men. “Oh.”

“You drove me fucking nuts when we were kids,” Jayden said in a low, urgent voice, his fingers trailing through the water to caress me. “I’d sneak glances at you, dripping wet, at the way your tank tops would cling to your tits.”

“Fuck’s sake, Jay,” Xavier growled, coming closer.

“Like you didn’t do the same,” his brother shot back, before pressing a kiss to the back of my neck. “I wanted to tell you to strip off; even more, I wanted to peel every damn stitch off your skin so you were bare for us.” He shifted closer, so I could feel that he’d stripped off his jeans before jumping. “So I could see those ripe little tits right before I kissed them.”

“What?” I pushed myself up out of the water to turn to face him. “These tits?” Jay looked spellbound, staring down at my wet curves with wide-eyed fascination and I used that distracted state to my advantage as I launched myself at him.

Water fights with the boys were always tough for me to win, because they were so much bigger and stronger than me, so I’d always had to use whatever means I could to take them down. I shoved Jay’s head under the water, not holding him down for long, only enough time for him to emerge spluttering. But when his eyes narrowed, I knew it was on. I threw myself backwards, Xavier catching me in a reflex motion, and I clambered onto his back as Jayden attacked.

Xavier batted him away, then as the two of them clashed, I was swept away by Atlas. He held me close as the other two fought, too evenly matched to be much of a competition, though I enjoyed the sight of every muscle popping as they wrestled.

“No one ever wins on their own,” he said to me, holding my gaze when I met his eyes. “We make terrible lone wolves, always needing to hunt in a pack.” He set me then on a large rock before wading back in, coming to Xavier’s aid to drag Jayden down into the water, but when he emerged again with a shake of his head, he yelled at Atlas to help him to get Xavier and the two of them did the same to their brother.

Sitting there, shivering in the cold, it was easy to pretend. That nothing had happened, that this was the end of summer not the end of winter. That the choosing would still take place. But as I watched them wrestle and throw each other around in the water, I knew. That was the thing about becoming an adult. You finally realised that there was no one around who was going to tell you what to do and when to do it, that your life was your own to make of it what you could. So I got to my feet and stood tall on the rock, their horseplay stopping and their eyes following me the moment I did. And I jumped, this time under my own steam, not Xavier’s, knowing that they’d move to catch me.

And they did.

Chapter 32

Sometime later, we were all snuggled down into one big swag to watch the sun set. It was a tight fit, but no one would volunteer to lie down on one of the other mattresses, so I was plenty warm as I watched the sky become stained with gold, orange and purple. Lying there wedged in tight between Atlas and Jayden, the feel of their hot, hot bodies was distracting and reassuring at the same time.

“So is this the way that day would’ve ended, if it wasn’t for our parents?” I asked them idly.

“Mm...” Jayden pressed his lips to the crown of my head before turning towards me. “Almost.”

“Don’t go grinding on my mate,” Xavier grumbled. “I don’t want your lily white arse shoved into my leg.”

“He’s just jealous.” Jayden’s voice was low and husky as he kissed me once, twice. “But Xave can jerk off while we—”

“Food,” Atlas said, staring out at the sky, then back at me. “We would have brought you food, back then.”

My stomach grumbled as if on cue, and I slapped my hand over it with a sheepish smile.

“We can pack this up, head back to town.” Xavier sat up, starting to pull blankets off us. “If you’re hungry—”

“One missed meal isn’t going to kill us,” I told him, waiting to snuggle into Jayden until Xavier had settled back down. “And what else?”

I was teasing him, then, because I knew what would happen. The same thing that had happened last time we were at a lookout. But Jay just chuckled, cradling me in his arms.

“Whatever you want,” he said in a low voice, stroking his hand down my back. “You know that.”

But right as I was simmering in that feeling of warmth, of simmering heat, Xavier was the voice of reason.

“But not now. We’ve got work in the morning, with a long, hard day of shearing ahead of us, so if we’re not going out for food, then we need sleep.”

I wouldn’t have thought that possible, that my body was wound too tight by the press of theirs, but as quiet fell over us, the sun dropping lower and lower, my eyes followed it, finally closing and going dark right as the sky did the same.

IT WAS my habit to dream of the guys, all the time. Often in frustrating dreams where I woke up screaming, or sad ones when I burst into tears as soon as I opened my eyes. But this one was hot, sensuous, made of a thousand little caresses. I was slowly, slowly coaxed out of sleep with feather light touches, reminding me I had a body, then of the pleasure it could feel.

When my eyelids fluttered open, I saw the world was covered in that light grey haze, heralding the end of night, even if the day hadn’t quite started. So there was enough light that I could see Jayden staring down at me, his face shadowy and indistinct, all except for his eyes, burning bright silver. He watched my mouth fall open as I felt him slowly trace the shape of my nipple with one finger, so that I felt the moment when the skin crinkled and the point became a hard bead, exacerbated by his finger and thumb gripping it and then giving it a little tug.

Pleasure burst between my legs, in time with his caress, my body shifting in response to each pull of his fingers. Atlas muttered something in his sleep, then rolled over, pinning me

to the spot. Jay just grinned as his brother unwittingly kept me right where he wanted me.

It was torturous, feeling Jay's fingers, as he circled them, moved them to slide up, across my collarbone, down the slope of my shoulder, then back up, pausing when I shivered at the feel of him touching my mating mark, then circling it. Heat flushed all over me, sweat prickling. I was now uncomfortably hot, but not enough to throw Atlas and the blankets off.

Because part of me felt like if I did, this would all go away, that the boys might vanish—like the fae—overnight, leaving me alone, naked and aching in an empty field. But my lovers were wolf shifters, not the fickle fae, so rather than disappear with the first light of the morning, he leaned forward, kissing me so softly, so carefully, that it felt like it was someone else. Not my reckless Jay.

And then I realised that it might be because he was taking other risks.

His hands shifted again, covering both of my breasts with an abruptness that made me jump. Atlas snorted in his sleep at my sudden movement, then burrowed his face back down, groaning into my hair. I could feel him hot and hard as he pressed into my hip. And Jay just smiled, pulling both nipples, that biting pleasure forcing me to move, writhe against Atlas, my clit throbbing in sympathy, right up until I inadvertently woke him up.

“Hmm...?”

Jay pressed a finger to his lips, shooting his brother a warning look, because we all knew what Xavier would say if he caught us at this. It wasn't even that we disagreed with him, but the three of us were much more confident of their ability to both court me *and* fuck me. But despite only just waking up, Atlas worked out the game real damn quick, pulling me back harder against him, then pushing my thighs open so his cock was fed between them. Not to push inside me, but so that hot, hard length rested against my sopping seam, the slick pouring out of me making it easy for him to thrust back and forth.

At first it was just to tease me, Jay's cruel fingers forcing the tension inside me to ratchet tighter. But Atlas didn't stop, didn't angle his cock better and shove himself deep inside me, like I wanted. Instead his fangs found the mark he'd left on my neck, nipping at the skin there until my breath was coming hard and fast. His hand covered my mouth, forcing me to be quiet as Jay smirked, dropping his head down, then using his own cruel teeth to nip at my nipples. It hurt so fucking good and I couldn't do a thing about it. Couldn't beg for more, just grab his head and keep him right where he was, jolting when he sucked the pain away in long, slow swallows, only to give me more.

My cunt was dripping all over Atlas' cock and his fingers slipped through the mess I was making to tend to my clit. Seeming to sense the mood I was in, he pinched at the hood, forcing the pleasure to expand around me in a great spiky cloud. My bladder was full, I was sweaty and hot and needed to shove the blankets away, even though I knew I would only want to cover my body with them. But instead I was forced to feel.

Jay worshipped every inch of my breasts, even if the rites involved in his worship were kind of savage. I wondered if I'd wear his bruises afterwards, even as I pushed his head and forced him to bite down, to suck harder. And Atlas? He shoved his cock back and forth, missing everything that I wanted stroked, that disregarded need making me all the more achy. So I tilted my hips back, gasping into his hand and biting down on the skin when the head of his cock notched in my cunt. My cries were muffled, strangled, but still audible as I pushed back, enveloping him.

And that's when we stopped.

It was as if, up until this point, we'd just been playing, but all of a sudden, things had become serious. Or perhaps it was to mark what was about to happen. All of us went still. I heard Atlas' ragged breath, felt the huff of it against my neck as he gripped my hip so as to push himself deeper inside me, the big head of his cock nudging something inside me that had me seeing stars. All the more intense because it was Atlas, it was

Jay, one of them burrowing deep inside me until I felt his knot grind against me, the other watching me closely with a hopeful and hopeless expression, his lips finally quirking into a smile. Jay nodded slowly, staring into my eyes, a silent witness to my pleasure, then an active participant, his fingers sliding between my legs, finding my clit and flicking that as Atlas pulled back and then slammed back inside me.

Would it always feel like this? Like I had to claw at Atlas, at Jay, trying to hold tight to both of them so they didn't slip through my fingers. Because this was still a stolen moment, with Xavier snoring on as we came together. Again and again, it felt like Atlas' cock punched into me, forcing me back open again, just like the first time, claiming me, inside and out. My cunt clamped down around him, a small groan escaping him each time, the space between them shortening in time with his strokes. Atlas kept driving himself into me, his gasps, his groans coming in time with mine until he gave up trying to stifle them. His hand pulled away from my mouth, slapping down on my other hip, anchoring himself against me, as he fucked me into a strange kind of oblivion.

I'd worked out what the hell my body liked and disliked when I got away from Mum's house. Renting out my own room or my own cottage, I didn't need to hide anything from my sister, or my mother. But no matter what I'd discovered on my own, it was *nothing* compared to this.

Fucking a wolf shifter, that was a pleasure that had fangs that dug deep into my skin, just like Atlas had that night. It marked me, claimed me, made my body its fucking bitch. And I came at its call, clamping down around Atlas, frantic little moans escaping my throat. But Atlas didn't stop for a second, thrusting hard and deep, prolonging the sweet, sweet pleasure of orgasm on and on, until one became another and another. Then, right as the sun began to peek over the horizon, Jay moved his hands away from his continued ministrations on my nipples.

He knelt before me, hard cock bobbing before my face, and my mouth opened without a thought on my part. "Good

girl...” he growled, right before he shuffled closer, cradling my jaw so my throat was one long line and then he thrust in.

I sucked him in, my throat convulsing around him, flexing and swallowing and he let out a low groan. Xavier came to with a snort, looking around, bleary eyed, his focus sharpening when he saw us. I couldn't see his expression because my eyes were starting to go blurry with tears.

“Don't you knot Kai,” Xavier ordered. Atlas groaned into my shoulder, nipping at my skin. “Don't you fucking dare. You hold back and...”

Whatever else he had to say, it faded away right then, as I felt Atlas buck up deep inside me, grinding against the spot that ached for him, right before he erupted. I followed him down, down, in a delicious spiral of pleasure, swept away in it as Jayden whispered something in a hoarse voice.

“Coming, beautiful. Swallow me down. That's a good girl. Every fucking drop. I can get through a day if I know you've got something of me in you.”

WHEN WE WERE FINISHED, the three of us dropped back down on the mattress, our limbs weightless. Xavier got to his feet and stood above us with a frown on his face.

“I thought we talked—”

“No, you talked and expected us to listen,” Jay shot back, drawing me close and holding me against his chest. “You want to do this the way you think is right, spend your time dating Kai, but...” He looked down at me then and I stared into his eyes. “I've been dating Kai my whole damn life. Finding her stuffed toy when it 'went missing' and somehow ended up in Anna's toy box. Making crowns out of daisy chains and making Kai my queen. Playing in the forest and the paddocks, chasing her down, knowing even then that she was mine, and I had to catch her to prove I was strong enough to stand by her side.”

He stroked the side of my face and then gave me the most angelic smile.

“I’ll bring you flowers every day. Roses, if that’s what you’d like, or daisies, or gerberas.”

“Gerberas?” I smiled at him. “And where would we find them out here?”

“I’ll go to a bigger town and find you some if that’s what you want.” His hand came to rest on my cheek. “Whatever you want, Kai. I’ll take you somewhere nice for dinner or out dancing.” I wrinkled my nose at that. Dancing was not a skill I’d ever mastered. “But when we get home, I’m gonna want you in my bed, on my cock, riding me until we’re both gasping, before I force my knot deep inside you, feeling you squeeze every drop out of me when you come.”

“Mm...” I pushed my face into his neck, sucking in the scent of him. “Promise?”

“Damn fucking straight.” His hand grabbed a handful of my hair and he used it to force me to stare back at him. “Whatever I’ve got to give is yours.” But when he let go, he shifted focus to Xavier. “And I’m not holding anything back on your say so.”

“This is what you want?” Xavier asked me, not Jay or Atlas.

“All I’ve ever wanted is you,” I told him, then glanced at the others. “All of you. And if you want to take things slow, then that’s what we’ll do.” Jay muttered something indistinct at that. “And if Jay doesn’t, then that’s the way it’ll work for him. What do you want, Atlas?”

He nestled in closer and as he shifted position, I felt the wet spurt of his cum leaking out of me.

“Just you, princess,” he said, kissing my forehead. “Just you.”

Chapter 33

I floated home on a kind of high, the strained expression on Xavier's face not strong enough to pierce it, but the bubble popped as I got out of the truck.

"Shit..." I stumbled a step when I saw Jamie sitting on a chair on my porch, nursing a coffee. "Oh my god, Jamie—"

"Hey, don't get yourself worked up on my account," she said with a slow smile, then peered past my shoulder to where the guys' truck was turning around and heading for the main house. "Looks like you solved your little wolf problem."

"I did." I shook my head sharply. "But you came rushing over here and ditched a job—"

"And I will again, if those boys fuck up." She stared at me steadily. "That's what families do, Kai. They turn up when they're needed and they go back to their lives when they aren't." She smiled then. "There's a job over in Healesville I can take if you're doing OK?"

"Yeah, of course." My cheeks felt like they were burning from the shame I felt. "You should definitely take that job."

"Only if you don't need me," she said, then got to her feet. Just like always, when she wrapped an arm around me, I went stiff until I forced myself to let a breath out and hug her back. "So, how'd things go?"

"I..." I stepped back and turned to look out, staring at the sky and the sheep, but not really seeing them, only able to see the memories of the life we'd spent together and the

possibilities of the life we could have ahead of us. “Nothing’s changed and yet everything has.” I paced back and forth across the wooden floorboards. “I think that’s what I was scared of, because the moment I saw them, it all came back. Everything.” My hands flexed and fur prickled across the backs, there and gone again. “I’ll love them forever.” I finally managed to meet Jamie’s gaze again and when I did, I saw a softness there. “I didn’t want that, didn’t want that... weakness.”

“Nothing weak about love, kid,” she told me. “That shit is so strong it can have mothers lifting cars to get their kids out, make families strong or tear them apart.” She rubbed a hand down my arm. “It can transform your life, but only you can say whether that’s in a good way or a bad one.”

I nodded slowly, the golden haze starting to subside.

“Before they...” I let out a sigh. “Before Mum pulled her shit, I would’ve said good, one hundred percent of the time. Always good.” I nodded slowly. “But then she—”

“If your mother is the only drawback here, then remove her from the situation. Those boys don’t want you to go back home, do they?”

“Wouldn’t matter if they did,” I replied. “Mum was exiled from the pack for her bullshit. I didn’t even need to leave.” I looked up then and met Jamie’s gaze squarely. “She did.”

“So there’s nothing standing in your way.” She smiled, grabbing my arms and giving them a squeeze. “That’s good, kid. It’s all I ever wanted for you. Since the moment I met you, you’ve been hurting but now...?” I couldn’t keep staring into her eyes, not when the skin around them began to crinkle, her eyes shining with emotion. It stirred up an answering one in me. “Now I’m starting to see that lift. I feel like I’m starting to see the woman behind the trauma.”

My breath came in long, slow, noisy whistles because... what she described? Sometimes you hang onto pain, not because it feels good, but because it’s all you’ve got. And letting that go? It’s terrifying.

“So, you too tired from your sleepout with those boys to have breakfast with me?” Jamie asked, breaking the spell I was under. And just like that I smiled. Breakfast. Cooking for someone. I went inside to the kitchen to pull out ingredients. But she settled her butt against the sink and smiled. “I was thinking we could go somewhere for a feed, not suggesting you cook.”

“The roadhouse is probably falling apart since I quit,” I said, then winced as I heard my own words. “And the pub doesn’t open for a few hours. I’ll cook...”

Jamie just shook her head slowly, but her smile softened as she sat down at the dining table.

CRACKING eggs into a frypan and then laying down rashers of bacon was a ritual so familiar that it helped to settle me, ground me. Being with the boys was like some kind of crazy dream, dragged from the depths of my subconscious, but this? I’d been doing this since I was old enough to stand safely in front of the cooker at home. I knew how to do it and it was something practical to be accomplished that didn’t rely on too many variables. I pushed thick-sliced bread into the toaster and set the kettle to boil, the sounds of bacon crackling, the rumble of the kettle bringing me right back to the here and now, although still on autopilot. Just focus on cooking the whites but not the yolks of the eggs and make sure the bacon doesn’t burn. Swipe a generous slather of butter across the toast when it pops up and then lay the eggs across the toast once they are cut into halves, placing the bacon in neat lines on the other half of the plate.

“Where’s yours?” Jamie asked as I walked over and put the plate before her.

“I’ll just grab—”

“Where’s yours?” Her tone was full of the authority of her years, but if that wasn’t enough, those faded blue eyes stared into mine until I was forced to look away. Jamie wasn’t a wolf, but she had plenty of dominance throbbing there.

“I never really eat breakfast,” I told her. “You know that.”

“You don’t because your shitty family trained you to put their needs first and by the time it came around to seeing to your own, you had nothing left for yourself.” She got to her feet, then searched through my cupboards before she found another plate. She set it down on the table beside me and then half of the food I’d made was pushed onto my plate. “You eat breakfast while you’re with me, you know that.”

She shot me a meaningful look as she echoed my own words, not looking away until I picked up a piece of toast and started to nibble on it. But when I did, my stomach began to rumble. One eyebrow raised, Jamie stared, but she nodded when I began to eat, only starting on her own food then.

Part of me wanted to linger over the food, draw out the process, because I knew what was coming next. I couldn’t say what I really felt to Jamie: that I wanted her to stay, to be my support network as I tried to navigate whatever the hell was going on between me and the boys. But I couldn’t do that. She’d already dropped a job and come running over here and for what? There was no emergency, no problem she needed to solve and so she needed to get back to work. But the wolf whined and paced inside me as we both rose to our feet, once breakfast was done.

Jamie was pack and so were the boys, according to my beast, so she was never able to understand why we had to live apart from either of them.

“Call me,” she said, putting her hands on my shoulders and staring into my eyes. “If anything goes wrong, or you need help. Hell.” She shrugged and shot me a rakish smile. “Even if you just want to gloat about rolling around in the hay with three fine specimens like those boys. Call me. You got that?”

I didn’t answer her. I couldn’t. My throat was closing up, my heart always breaking any time anyone left, but that was something I couldn’t share. So I just flung myself at her, wrapping my arms around her and holding her tight.

And she hugged me back, showing me in more than words that she was there for me. Which was why she would always

have my undying loyalty. I'd tear the head off a trucker who dared be rude to her, rip the throat out of anyone who dared get in her way. But she didn't need that from me, so I just hugged her instead, for far too long, smelling the scent of citrus in her perfume, the traces of savoury bacon and egg on her breath and the scent of her, which for me had become the scent of home. But then I forced myself to stand back, nod and let her know I'd call her.

"I'll be back this way in about a week. And if I don't hear from you," she said, "I'll be on your doorstep, demanding news."

"I'll call," I said, shaking my head. "Promise."

She stepped off my deck then, onto the grass, then down the track. Her truck was parked down by the front of the property, as the shitty dirt track was too narrow and rough for her beast. Because she was walking away from me now, I jerked up a hand to wave goodbye and forced my lips into a smile, feeling a strange kind of sweet, sweet pain as she turned and headed off.

I'd run from the town square two years ago, I realised, because it was a lot easier being the person who left, rather than the one being left behind.

Chapter 34

I didn't have a job to go to, I didn't have anyone who needed me fussing over them at home and my bags were still packed and sitting by the door. I felt lost, pacing back and forth across my floor as the wolf whined and whined, until I was forced to grab one of the bags and start unpacking.

Or...

Or I could give into the impulses the wolf kept pushing at me. I could see her trotting over the grass and then leaping over the fence, not paying the sheep any mind as they scattered. Then running up, up the long path towards the main house, only to come to a stop at the shearing shed. There'd be sheep clustered in a holding pen, to stop them from eating or drinking for a while before they were shorn, preventing them from pissing and shitting all over the shed floor. Vicki and George would be rushing around, collecting fleeces and handing them to the wool grader to be sorted, but I wouldn't care about any of that. The wolf would allow me to come back to skin there, in the shearing shed, and every eye would be on me as I emerged naked. But it would only be my mate's eyes, the way they turned silver the moment they saw me, their expressions openly lustful, that I would notice. I'd crook a finger and—

Lunch, I thought, that was what I would work on. It was pathetic really, but I'd either spent no time on my own or had long, long hours of it, and I was never comfortable with either. Mum had taught me to keep busy and those instincts were

what I fell back on, the tension in my body only easing when I was pulling ingredients out of the fridge and starting the prep.

Around lunchtime I carried a bag full of food towards the shearing shed. I could hear the plaintive sounds of the sheep's bleats, the muffled sounds of men talking, but then the shed door opened and George, the Campbells and a few other men came spilling out.

It was lunchtime.

"We'll take an hour for lunch," George said, all business. "Vick's cooked up a roast..." But his voice trailed away when he noted that he didn't have the attention of my boys. George looked at me and then the Campbells, his lips twisting into a knowing smile. "But it looks like you might have other plans. We start again at two."

"Got it," Xavier said, right before he leapt off the shearing shed veranda and over to me, Jayden and Atlas following hard on his heels. "What're you...?"

"What have you got there?" Jayden interrupted, pushing forward and peering at the bag.

"Lunch," Atlas said definitively, shooting me a secret smile before he threw the butt of his cigarette down and ground it under his heel. "You made us lunch."

"Um... yeah, but it sounds like Vicki—" I started to stammer out.

"Don't care." Atlas plucked the bag from my fingers, then offered me his arm. I took it with a splutter of laughter. Then, just like a gentleman of old, he escorted me around the shearing shed and to the back of the accommodation they'd been given, where a bunch of logs had been set up as a kind of impromptu outdoor seating. He dusted one off and then indicated I should take a seat.

"Whatever you've made is gonna taste the best," Jayden said, sitting down and then pawing through the bag. "Oh my god..." He groaned as he pulled out a sandwich that I'd marked as his, but he didn't look at the identification, knowing it by smell. "Corned beef, cheese and pickled onion?"

“They were always your favourite,” I said.

“Fuck. Salami, cheese and onion,” Xavier said, pulling out his.

“You remembered.” That’s all Atlas would say, staring at me, not the sandwich in his hand.

“Of course, I remembered,” I replied, then dragged my hair back from my face. “It gave me PTSD flashbacks, making those damn sandwiches over the last two years.”

“But not now,” Atlas said. He moved until he was sitting right beside me on my log. It was then that I questioned my decision to come over to bring them food, because as soon as I was close to him, my senses came alive, feeling the heat radiating off him, smelling that spicy scent I knew so well. I felt on edge, ready to run away and yet about to throw myself at him, all at the same time, humans’ sensibilities be damned.

“Not now,” I agreed, looking up.

But doing that had my eyes locking with his, seeing that they were perfectly silver in the bright sun, just like I was sure mine were. It meant I saw clearly the moment his eyes dropped down to my lips and up again, only to slide back down more slowly, more sensuously. I watched the small crease of his eyebrows, then watched his head drop a little closer, heard the whistle of his breath, before Xavier’s words broke in.

“We’ve only got an hour for lunch.”

So we couldn’t be spending it kissing, was the timely reminder, but also it helped remind all of us where we were and who was close.

“You didn’t have to make us lunch,” Xavier said, holding up his sandwich. “You don’t have to do anything—”

“But we’re glad you did, right, Xave?” Jayden shot his brother a meaningful look. “Like I’m gonna love anything you cook for us. But this was always my favourite. I haven’t had a sanga like this since...”

And there it was, the ghost of our past, but this one wasn't an entirely malevolent one. So many of my memories with them were ones I treasured, held close to my heart. That's why it had hurt so much—their betrayal—because it had felt like they'd torn away the one bright thing... I forced a smile, willing myself back to the here and now.

"I'm happy to bring you lunch," I told Jay. "It's not like I'm doing anything currently. I quit my job—"

"But that doesn't mean you need to run around after us," Xavier said, his expression serious. I found it hard to meet his stare. "Your family had you bowing and scraping after them, but that's not how it's gonna be with us." He started off strong, then shook his head sharply, his tone lowering as he spoke. "If anyone's going to be doing anything, it's going to be us fussing after you." There was something so earnest, so desperate about his voice that I had to stare to be sure that it was him speaking. "You deserve that, Kai, all of the spoiling, not you doing shit for us."

"So how about having some lunch with us?"

Atlas passed me one of his sandwiches. I'd made them all several, because wolf shifters, especially alphas, burned through food at a rapid rate.

"No, you need—" I started to say, but Atlas pushed one of them into my hand.

"You need to eat too," he told me in a low rumbly voice. "We can't eat if you're not."

I wasn't super keen on ham, cheese and mustard, which was Atlas' favourite, but as I unwrapped the sandwich, his arm went around me. He tugged me into the shelter of his body and right then it didn't matter what I was eating, because I couldn't taste any of it, not when I was close to him. I found myself leaning into his chest, drowsily focused on the feel of his fingers as they traced circles on my arm, and when I shook myself and came to again, I found my sandwich was gone and so were theirs.

“You ready, fellas?” George called out from the shearing shed.

“Thanks for the sandwiches,” Xavier said, getting to his feet and then squatting down in front of me. He pulled the crumpled clingfilm from my fingers, adding it to his own rubbish to dispose of. “But we’ll sort dinner out for tonight. Whatever you want. Right?”

He still wasn’t sure I would say yes and that confused me. They’d always assumed I’d be right there with them, but not now, not this time. My fingers flexed, wanting to cup his sharp jaw so I let myself do it, remembering that I could. The tense expression in his eyes softened, and the tension leached from his body.

“Right,” I said, rubbing my thumb over his skin, then he turned his head to place a kiss in my palm.

“We’ll come around once the day is done, after we’ve cleaned up,” he told me in a low urgent tone. “Don’t go cooking anything. Let us do the work.”

“I like cooking,” I protested.

“And we like looking after you,” he told me with a grin, before glancing at his brothers. “We always have and we always will, so you’re just going to have to accept that.”

“Bossy fucking alphas...” I muttered.

“You boys out the back here...?” George asked, then froze when he caught sight of the four of us. He blinked, not knowing what to say or do, I was willing to bet, catching sight of me with Atlas and Xavier.

“We’re ready to get started,” Xavier said, standing up. “We’ll see how many we can knock over before dark.”

“You’ve been going at a bloody good clip this morning.” George seemed torn between admiration and concern, because obviously the boys had been doing a good job, but then there was what he was reading into the scene before him. I was surprised to see some of that concern directed at me. “You keep going like this, you’ll be able to shear most of the district’s sheep.”

“We’ll be happy to keep working as long as Kai wants to stay here,” he told George, both confirming the other man’s suspicions and making clear the bond between us. It was a sweet gesture, but it felt like it drew a target on my back, as George looked me over thoughtfully.

“You’re not working for that Billy fella anymore?” he asked me. I shook my head. “Well, if you want to earn a quid while your... young fellas work, we really need a rouseabout.”

“What’s one of those?” I asked with a frown. “I’ve not done a lot of farm work before.”

“Picks up the fleece after the boys have shorn a sheep, and then throws it out onto the sorting table to be graded. The wool classer will tell you what to do after that. Then you get in and sweep up around the shearers to keep that area clean. We’ve got enough blokes to pen the sheep in the mornings,” he said, eyeing me in a whole other way, as if assessing if I’d be fit for the job. “It’s hard work, but you look strong.”

“Kai, you don’t—” Xavier started to say, but I nodded.

“I need a job. I tossed in the other one and...” I nodded to George. “Show me the ropes and I’ll give it a go.”

“Working with us?” Jayden said as the others filed into the shearing shed, his hand holding me back so he could murmur his response into my ear. “So I can keep my eye on you the whole time. Yeah, I like that a real lot.”

Chapter 35

“So you’re gonna try your hand at being a rouseabout?” Vicki asked as I walked over to the sorting table.

“Ah yeah?” I shrugged. “I don’t really know what I’m doing so—”

“I’ll show you the ropes.” She nodded for me to follow her. “In here are all the sheep in their pens.”

I’d smelled the stink of sheep shit, of fear, or a prey animal backed into a corner, but the scent wasn’t that much different to the usual ones on the farm, so I admit I was surprised when I saw all the sheep packed tight in pens. There was something so... alien about it all. A wolf would never allow itself to be herded so, and if it was, it’d be up and over those pens in seconds, streaking away. It made it hard for me to look at the sheep, their placidity irritating me.

“The boys will let one through when they’re ready.”

Jayden winked as he did just that, hauling the animal closer by its legs, then grabbing the cruel looking shears.

“What you’ll be doing is sorting through what he shears off,” she said. “If we had enough people, we would be doing it as he shears, sorting the wool that’s stained with piss and shit into that pile.” She pointed to a dark clump of dirty fibres next to each man. “That can’t contaminate any of the fibres we want to sell. The shank wool has to go as well.”

She bent over and spread a fleece that had already been shorn, out on the wooden floor. “These bits here.” Her hand

hovered over the long trailing ends that would've run down the sheep's legs. "Those fibres can't contaminate the good wool." She yanked off each offending part of the fleece and then held it up to me. "See those white bits there. They don't take dye, and will wreck any batch that has them in it..."

She walked me through how to separate the undesirable elements from the good wool and where to deposit them, then how to pick up a fleece (something I would've thought was more straightforward than it was) and how to toss it onto the table so it could be sorted. I don't think she expected me to do it right the first time, but I did.

Vicki couldn't have known, though.

That I'd learned to do things right the first time or cop a stinging slap, so that 'training' was what made me pay greater attention, catch the way her fingers moved as she gathered the fleece, as well as process her instructions, so that when I gave it a go, she stood back with a slight frown.

"Well... you're a natural at this."

She sounded pleased and slightly confused as to how I could pick the process up so quickly, but Vicki didn't get to dwell on that. I could see why she and her husband thought all their Christmases had come at once when the three brothers rocked up. They moved like lightning, shearing one sheep, then another, without a single nick on the sheep's skin, before the animals were shoved outside, naked and gangly looking, before they dragged another sheep in. Vicki and I were forced to move quickly to try to keep up, to discard and sort and then throw the fleece out onto the table to skirt it, over and over.

"OH, TO BE YOUNG AGAIN..." Vicki sighed.

She'd been forced to take a break, but there was something in me that forced me to continue. If I could do a job, I would do it to the best of my ability, and there was a strange kind of pleasure that came from the relentless tasks. I couldn't think when I was sorting, gathering and throwing. For every fleece I picked up, there was another and another waiting for me. So I

moved faster, feeling the wolf stretch inside me, lending me her strength. But as I threw the last fleece, my arms wobbling slightly, hands reached out to grab me, to hold me still long enough to realise the afternoon was over and the cool of night had fallen.

“You OK, Kai?” Jayden asked, staring into my eyes.

Beyond him I could see the others watching us, noting the way all of the brothers clustered closer. The floor was empty but for a few stray tufts of wool. My heartbeat pulsed in my ears, a heavy exhaustion hitting me. I would have been wavering on my feet if it wasn't for Jayden's grip on my arm.

“You've all worked hard,” Vicki said with an approving nod. “Dinner will be on the table in about twenty minutes—”

“We appreciate that, really,” Xavier said, and Vicki stiffened, already hearing the ‘but’. “But we'll make sure Kai gets home in one piece and grab something to eat after that.”

She wanted to ask. They all did, as I could tell from the mutters from the others still clustered in the shed, and the look in her eyes. They all wanted to know what the deal was with the four of us. But they weren't going to say anything. I was willing to bet the boys had torn through more sheep than most human shearers would be able to manage and they could've worked even faster if they'd thought they could get away with it. The boys would have to have been the best team of shearers Vicki and George would have hired and they weren't going to mess with that.

“As you like,” she said with a nod. “But perhaps the four of you could join us for breakfast, then?”

“Of course,” I agreed, without thinking, just wanting her searching gaze to be directed elsewhere.

The guys helped that happen by directing me out of her eyesight toward their truck, the shakiness in my legs meaning I got picked up and sat in the front seat. As they climbed in as well, they didn't notice the rest of the shearing team watching us as the truck pulled away from the shed and rumbled down to my place.

“YOU GOT A BATH?” Jayden asked, the minute I unlocked the front door.

“I don’t need a bath,” I said. “I’ll have a quick shower once I start—”

“The end of that sentence better not be ‘dinner’,” Xavier growled. “Jay, the bathroom is down there.”

“How did you know?” Jayden asked him.

“I can smell the froufrou girly scents down the hall,” Xavier replied. “So could you, if you were paying attention.”

“I know where my attention is right now,” Jay said, leading me down the hall and into my own bathroom. It was nice, considering the age and state of the cottage, and even had an old cast iron bathtub with claw feet. “Now, Epsom salts...” He scanned his finger along the stuff I kept lined up on a shelf in the bathroom, pulling a bottle out and then leaning over to turn the hot water on.

“Jay, I can run my own bath,” I said.

“Who says it’s your bath?”

I winced as he poured a ton of the bubble bath into the water, watching it foam up furiously. But as I was distracted by this, he moved in closer. I felt his fingers slide up my back, his touch dulled by the flannelette shirt I was wearing, then he went to undo the buttons.

“Jay...”

“Maybe I want to make up for lost time?” His voice was low and husky. “Maybe I just want to pretend.” He eased my shirt down off my shoulders and when his fingers trailed up my back now, I felt every bit of his touch. “That we were never apart. That we’ve been together for the last couple of years.” I knew when he moved closer to me because I felt his breath on the back of my neck. “That this was just the end of any other day. That you were my mate and wore my mark on your neck.” His lips ghosted across my skin, making me shiver. “And that we were going to have a bath together.”

He spun me around when he undid the clasp of my bra, and I felt as though he didn't know where to look. Jay's eyebrows creased as he stared into my eyes, at my mouth and then my body.

"Fated mates do that all the time," he said. "In packs all over the world. This doesn't have to be a big thing."

But it was, for us: he and I both knew that. As I reached out to undo his shirt buttons, it was the first time I'd been able to do that. I half expected his parents or mine to leap out, but it'd been two years since I'd seen any of them. They couldn't touch us here. And so, I was free to touch him.

Jay sucked in a breath as I pushed his shirt open, sliding my hands over his taut stomach, only for the muscles to bunch and shift as I grazed my fingers across them. He tugged his shirt off, baring himself to me and I took in everything he had to offer. It felt breathtakingly selfish, to trace the shape of his body, to watch him take short breaths, growing shorter so that he was almost panting as I reached for his belt buckle. Then it just felt good, so fucking good, to be able to undo his belt.

After a long, hot, smelly, shitty day, Jay was totally and utterly transfixed by me, his hands shifting, stroking through my hair, cupping my jaw until I eased his zipper down. I stared into his eyes, not following the trail of my hand as I pushed his jeans down over his hips, his hard cock slapping against his stomach the minute it was freed. His gasp in reaction shook us both out of our reverie.

"OK, enough of this," he said, turning off the taps before toeing off his boots as he stripped me naked, then picking me up before I could protest and dumping me into the water. But I wasn't going in there alone. He slotted in behind me, the warm water sluicing over the two of us. "This is what I wanted."

He tugged me closer, forcing me to lie back against him, but I didn't put up much of a fight. Because I wanted it too, so fucking much.

"I dreamed of this," he continued. "Every fucking night. Not the hot stuff, though I woke up hard to plenty of that, but this." His wet hand trailed hot water down my arm. "Like it

was just me and you again, but this time a little different.” He hunched over me, creating a big, hot shelter for me to relax into. “That you were a woman and I was a man.”

A gentle kiss was pressed to my neck at that, and he chuckled when I shivered in response. He didn’t press his advantage though, instead he grabbed the soap from the dish set up beside the tub and then lathered it up between his big hands. I watched him like it was some kind of miracle equivalent to turning water to wine, rather than just soap to suds and while I was covered modestly enough by a wreath of bubbles, that did nothing to save me when he thrust his hands in the water. Not to scrub his own skin. Well, not at first. Instead he rubbed that soap all over my body.

He achieved his goal. My eyes kept darting to the bathroom door, still waiting for our parents or the alphas to come busting in. But they didn’t. We were about as far away from any of them as we could be. So it was just the two of us. It was Jay whose breath hitched the minute he touched me with his sudsy hands. Jay who moved those hands in long, slow strokes, taking the time to wash all the grime from my hands, though the residue of lanolin from the sheep’s fleece made that more of a challenge. Jay who finally put down the soap, once we were both clean, who used those same hands to create magic.

He pushed me forward, my hair dripping points of water into the bath as his fingers went to work, all of the strength of an alpha deployed in massaging my shoulders. My muscles melted under his care, turning me from stiff and sore to loose and languid.

“FUCK, THOSE LITTLE NOISES YOU MAKE...”

I wanted him always like that, his voice raspy and desperate. Galvanised, I surged up out of the water, a lazy smile on my face as I turned around, placing my hands on either side of the bath as I leaned over him.

“What about those noises?” I asked. He took a moment to reply, his eyes dropping down to stare at my breasts, but he

forced them back up again. “What about those noises, Jay?”

“You’ve made them ever since you were little,” he forced out, his eyes wide as they met mine. “When you liked something, when it made you happy.” He made himself relax back against the rim of the bath. “It felt like I made it my life’s work, to notice what got you making those noises and to see if I could get you to do that again.” He smiled as he tilted his head slightly to watch me more closely. “It’s all I fucking wanted: to make you happy, Kai.”

“You were making me happy when you pulled my hair every time I put it in pigtails?” I asked, sliding closer.

“Well, now—”

“It made you happy to stick your foot out every time I was wearing a new dress, to see if you could get me to fall headfirst and mess it up?”

“OK, but you hated those—”

“You were making me happy by pinching and punching me every first day of the month, for years,” I said, gathering steam. “You were making me happy by stamping on my brand-new shoes. You—”

He pressed a finger to my lips, stopping me from saying anything as he stared at me, that smile of his flickering in and out like a flame in the wind.

“You,” he said simply. “You were at the heart of each of those stories. Was I a little dickhead who didn’t know what the fuck to do with the beautiful fae-like creature who was the centre of his world? Damn right I was, but I was always focussed on you.” He hauled me closer by shoving his hands in my armpits and I instinctively squirmed, expecting him to start a damn tickle fight, but instead he pulled me closer to deposit me on his lap.

Oh.

Just what I wanted from him throbbed, long and hard.

“If you think that, based on my childhood antics, I don’t know what the fuck to do with my girl, well...” He sighed.

“You might be right.”

One hand went out, cupping the back of my neck to draw my head down, but he didn't need to guide me. We were like two magnets. Sure, sometimes we were switched the same way so our polarity would repulse each other. But other times? Both of us reached for the other, not feeling whole until we were together, like this.

Jay waited with rapt attention as he drew me closer and closer, his focus flicking between my lips and my eyes, making it clear I was his entire world, and that was ridiculously seductive. So I slid closer and his hands slapped down on my hips as he let out a pained little moan, because my seam slid along his length. I traced the shape of his mouth, that was usually running a mile a minute, laughing, joking, telling wild stories, saying something, anything any time there was a gap in conversation. Except for now because he had shut the fuck up and was listening to me. To my body, my movements, trying to ascertain my intentions, and then I brushed my mouth against his.

He was a fucking alpha, so he let me take the driver's seat for 2.5 seconds, before his hands whipped up from the water to hold my face, to direct the kiss. I wasn't going anywhere. Not when he deepened the kiss, not when we both made little noises of pleasure. Not when I tasted him and he tasted me, our mouths hungry in ways we were still trying to come to terms with, not just in our bodies but also in our hearts, until there was a sharp knock on the door.

“Ah... dinner's ready,” Xavier said, forcing the two of us apart.

“We don't need food, do we?” Jay asked, going back for more, but I pressed a hand to his chest.

“Another evening without dinner?” I looked over my shoulder and down my body. “Is my bum too big now or something?”

“Your bum is fucking perfect,” he growled, picking me up and turning me around so I was standing bent over in the tub. “I want to sink my teeth into these cheeks most fucking days.”

But just as he rose out of the water, my nose started to work. Not so savoury smells started to filter through and I went stiff.

“What the hell did they cook? And can I smell smoke?”

Chapter 36

Xavier

“Fuck...” I looked at the burned mess in the frypan then at my brother. “Is it supposed to look—?”

“Have you ever eaten scrambled eggs that look like that?” Atlas asked me. “Because I fucking haven’t.”

“Maybe we can scrape off the burnt bits,” I said, poking the blackened mess in the pan with a spatula.

“It’s all burnt bits,” Atlas said. Then our heads both jerked up when Jay and Kai appeared. He was wearing a towel slung around his waist and she’d pulled on an old dressing gown.

“So, when I said dinner was ready...” I started, but Kai’s nostrils flared and her eyes widened as she slowly walked over to inspect the mess, as though she couldn’t believe what she was seeing.

“What the hell is...?” Then her focus snapped to the sink. “And the mess—!”

“We’re cleaning it up,” I said, holding up my hands. “Look, we wanted to make you dinner—”

“Is that what you call that? Because I’m not sure I’d eat that in wolf form,” she said, then flushed. “I’m sorry. I know you tried—”

“But we shoulda got a counter meal at the pub, like I said?” Jay cocked an eyebrow at me.

“Right, but we wanted to do something special,” I explained. “You’re always cooking for everyone else.”

“And I will continue to do so going forward.” If there had been any hesitancy in our mate, it was gone now. She eyed the mess and then shook her head. “Like, I’d never try and shear a sheep and—”

“Let me fix this,” I said. “It was my idea and I made the mess.” Atlas’ eyebrow jerked up as I threw myself on my sword, taking all the blame, when the fact was that the two of us had fucked things up together. “If we’re gonna do this...” I stepped closer to Kai then, watching her frown deepen. “Then I don’t want shit going the way it did in your house. You brought us lunch today, made sure every sandwich was our favourite. We really loved that you did that, but we want to feed you, pamper you, look after you, too.”

She sighed then, and while I didn’t like that, watching the heat go out of her eyes was very welcome. Kai marched over to the fridge and started listing ingredients.

“The local shop will close soon, so you’ll need to move your arse, but grab some eggs, bacon, bread...” I tapped out every instruction onto my phone, creating a shopping list. “And while you’re grabbing that, I’ll sort—”

“No, you won’t.” Atlas steered her away from the sink and towards her bedroom. “We might be shitty cooks, but we can wash dishes. We had a lot of practice growing up. Put some clothes on and go with Xavier; make sure he gets the right stuff.”

I waited for her to reject his suggestion, to freeze up and shut me out, but Kai just shot me a speculative look and then nodded. And ten minutes later when she was in the front passenger seat of my car, I couldn’t help but stare at her.

I’d always loved her. When she left, it’d hurt in a deep, dull way before we’d found her again, like an old broken bone that hadn’t healed right. And now? My whole heart throbbed in pain every time I looked at her. I could’ve cursed Vicki for teaching Kai how to work the shearing shed floor. I’d been that close to nicking so many fucking sheep, just from getting

distracted, watching her move out the corner of my eye while I was using the handpiece. Then there were the other blokes working beside us. The wolf was restless, wanting to break through my skin and tear every fucker in the place to pieces for breathing the same air as her.

But I didn't.

I held it to-fucking-gether, right up until we'd got here to her place tonight, and then it felt like we'd fucked everything up.

It was hard not to think it.

We'd ruined her food, made a mess of her kitchen: Abby had always been brutal with her about that kind of shit. This was the moment she was going to run, I'd thought, the fear making my heart pound and my fangs snap down, the wolf ready to give chase. Instead she'd seen the mess and tried to shoulder the burden again, when it was one we'd created. I let out a sigh, gripping the steering wheel tight before turning to face Kai.

"I want to feed you," I told her.

"OK, but—"

"I want to look after you." Once I opened my mouth, the words came tumbling out and nothing was going to stop them. "I want to keep you safe, make sure your life is perfect. Fuck..." The plastic of the steering wheel groaned under my grip and I looked back out through the front window. "I'll clean your fucking toilet for you, mop your floors if..." I swallowed hard, forcing my eyes away from the windscreen and back to her. "I'd do anything for you, Kai, you've gotta know that."

I watched her expression soften and her hand reach for mine and before I could think of a response, I had my hand wrapped around hers, cradling it against my chest.

"I love you. I'll always love you and I'll do anything to make your life easier."

"Then start the car," she said. I blinked, just staring at her for a second before realising what she was saying. "I'm

guessing you always ate what your mum made you and, when you left, it's been counter meals and McDonald's the whole time." I nodded slowly. "So I'll teach you the basics: but first we need supplies."

"I'm a quick study," I promised her. "You'll only have to show me once."

"Good, because if you think you're going to make a mess like that in my kitchen most of the time..."

She smiled then and I found myself echoing the expression, even as my heart pounded.

Which is how we came to be standing in the local shop twenty minutes later.

"THIS BACON?" I asked, picking up a thick packet.

"Too fatty," she said. "This one is better." My wolf growled at that, liking the idea of crunching down on chunks of pork fat but Kai shot me a knowing look. "The fatty stuff splatters everywhere and fat burns sting. You won't think it's so yum if all that golden skin is covered in burn marks."

I watched her wave a hand at me and smiled before stepping closer to her.

"Golden skin?"

"What?" Kai looked at me in irritation, but I didn't think it was real. She looked more like a fluffed up cat, trying to make herself out to be a threat, rather than a wolf shifter. Her eyes narrowed but I just smiled. "You need me to say it? You three were the golden boys back home and you were the most golden." The longer she held my gaze, the happier I was, and so was the wolf. When she was watching us, she was seeing us, seeing the potential between us. "Every guy wanted to be you, and every girl wanted to get under you."

"And all I've ever wanted is you." I was close enough to touch her, so I did, grazing the backs of my knuckles down her cheek. "There was no one else, will never be anyone else but you. I—"

“Need to grab some food and go,” she said abruptly, pulling away to grab some of the items on the list, but she wasn’t going far. Her scent... I could smell that sweet, sweet smell of omega receptiveness, so I moved in closer, shadowing her every move, listening to her advice about what food to buy, and what to leave on the shelf.

I paid the guy behind the counter, standing close enough to Kai to make clear who she belonged to. He looked away automatically, ringing up our purchases, but when it came to pay, I handed him my card. Shearing wasn’t exactly high on a city kid’s list of jobs you wanted to do, but when we’d roamed around the countryside looking for our mate, we’d worked out real quick that it was a lucrative industry to get into if you could work fast enough. Top tier shearers could earn up to 300k a year and have no student loans to pay off, so we had no issues with money. I grabbed the groceries and carried them out to the car, following behind Kai. But when I’d put the bags into the back of the ute, I stopped her, because I needed to make sure she understood what I was trying to say.

“I need you,” I corrected her earlier statement. “I need to make you happy in...” I sucked in a breath. “In ways you don’t understand.”

“That’s what this is?” she asked, the moonlight caressing her face as she peered up at me. “Then we’ll make a great couple, because all my mum taught me was how to make others happy.” Her lips twisted as I let out a low hiss. “So I’ll teach you one thing she taught me. Most people can’t fuck up scrambled eggs, so let’s see if we can work on your skills there.”

“THE IDEA with scrambled eggs is to make them either light and fluffy, in which case use milk and a little bit of water,” Kai instructed, breaking a dozen eggs into a bowl. “Or to make them dense and rich by using cream.”

“Cream all the way,” Jay said, the three of us clustering closer. “Now lemme have a go at that.” He plucked an egg from her fingers and then tapped it sharply against the edge of

the bowl, cheering when he got the egg into the bowl without any shell.

“Looks like we’ve got egg cracking sorted,” I said, taking the rest of the eggs and the one in her hand away.

“OK, so once you’ve cracked all the eggs into the bowl, you need to aerate them.”

“Aerate...?” Atlas asked.

“Whisk air into the mix. Eggs are quite heavy, so putting a bit of air into them makes them lighter and fluffier,” she replied, then handed me a fork. I grabbed it and stabbed at the egg yolks that were already in the bowl, scowling at my brothers when they cracked eggs on top of my hand. “Not like that.”

She grabbed the bowl back from us, breaking the yolks, yes, but using the fork to beat the eggs in a circular motion, until the mix turned pale yellow and uniform in colour.

“Now we add the cream,” she said.

“Lots.” Jay licked his lips as he watched her pour some in.

“Not too much,” she told him. “It can dilute the eggs and make it a bit bland. Now some salt and pepper—”

“Surely we can do that,” I told her, holding out my hands for the bowl. I smiled as I saw the reluctance there, but she handed it over anyway, watching me season the mix.

“Now you can chop the chives nice and fine,” she told Atlas, handing him a bunch of garlic scented grass, or at least that’s what it looked like. A knife and a chopping board were put before him. He started slicing into the bunch so finely it became a green mush until Kai shook her head. “Your mother used to baby you, didn’t she? I learned how to chop chives when I was eight.”

She demonstrated the technique until Atlas took over and chopped the lot up. I assumed they went into the mix so I grabbed the chopping board and used the knife to push them into the bowl, then grabbed the fork she’d been using to whip the mix and beat the herbs into the eggs.

“Good, now...” She picked up a frypan the guys had cleaned before we arrived, then inspected it closely before setting it on the cooktop, turning up the heat, but not as far as we had. “You guys burned it because you tried to cook the eggs too high, too fast. You don’t want the heat too low, just right.”

I crept up behind her, the gap between us little more than a finger’s breadth apart and made a show of watching her as she worked.

“You need to add some fat to the pan, though you could get away without if I had non-stick pans,” she told me.

“Do you want non-stick pans?” I asked as she sliced off a piece of butter from the block and sent it skidding across the heated surface of the frypan. “We’ll get you some if that’s what you want.”

“We might need to with our cooking skills,” Atlas muttered. The stink of our first attempt at dinner was faint but still perceptible.

“Now you’re going to pour the eggs into the pan.”

Kai stepped back, crossing her arms and watching me closely with an air of challenge in her eyes, one I was determined to meet. I grabbed the bowl of eggs and gave it one last mix through before doing just that, pouring the contents into the large pan. The eggs sizzled when they made contact with the hot surface, but not for long. I could see our mistake from before because the edges of the eggs had turned brown then black not long after we’d poured them into a smoking hot pan. I went to grab the fork to stir them around, but she passed me a spatula.

“Just move the whole lot around gently,” Kai instructed. “People have different ideas about scrambled eggs. Some think you need to constantly agitate it, others think that makes it all hard and lumpy, so moving it less and in broad sweeps... Yeah, just like that.”

I’d picked scrambled eggs, thinking it was a simple dish. Camp cooks had made it over a campfire often enough, so

how hard could it be? But when I watched Kai, her eyes on the pan the whole time, I realised that, like a lot of things, it was harder than it looked. But I wouldn't take this shit for granted ever again, especially not with my mate as my tutor.

“Perfect,” she said when all of the eggs were cooked through. And the smile she gave me? I might have shorn a never-ending number of sheep today, but right now this was my proudest achievement. “Now, we need toast—”

“Got it.” Jay held up a plate piled high with buttered toast. “You two looked like you were having a little moment so I—”

“We,” Atlas said, nudging our brother in the ribs.

“We made the toast.”

“Did you want bacon?” Kai asked, shaking her head as if breaking a spell. “Or sausages? You'll want more than this.”

“No.” I spoke then definitively, authoritatively, on behalf of me and my brothers, because my stomach was turning upside down and inside out as I looked at her and I knew theirs would be too. “This is enough.” I stared at her, wanting to store every detail of her away in my head, just in case she got it into her head to try and slip away from us again. “Everything we need is right here.”

Chapter 37

We took our meal out onto the deck and sat down on the edge, the moon shining down on us and for a while all you could hear was the sound of forks scraping across plates and the crunch of toast being eaten.

“So, what do you think?”

Xavier looked at me with a curious shine in his eyes, his brothers just as intent. If you’d told teenage me that one day I’d have the bloody Campbell boys waiting intently on my opinion on their cooking, I’d have smacked you upside the head and called you a liar. Yet here we were.

“It’s perfect,” I told him, them, because, really, any time I was with them, it was. Absolutely perfect. That’s why it’d hurt so much that day with Mum and Anna and perhaps why I’d overreacted. I’d had one perfect thing in my life and she took that away too, but now... I smiled slowly as I watched each one of them perk up, even Jayden who hadn’t really helped with the cooking. “You did good.”

But once our plates were scraped clean and set down on the deck, the silence felt like it thickened, growing more and more oppressive. The guys seemed determined to show me what adult life could be like if we were together, but now that the meal was done...

“Maybe we should—” Xavier started to say.

There were so many ways to end that sentence, from doing the dishes, to flopping down in front of the TV and each one

felt terribly intimate. They were the actions of people that lived with each other, loved each other, were tied to each with mate bonds. And while all of that was true, I wasn't ready for that right now.

"Go for a run," I finished for him, standing up and slipping my clothes off.

I caught the small gasp of breath each one took, as I stood there for a split second, then leapt off the deck, in skin, then in fur. Because the wolf didn't think, didn't worry like I did. She ran forward, getting a thrill from the sheep scattering before her. The tame creatures had no natural predators in this country, but some dim ancestral memory remembered what I was. But I was up and over the fence and away from them streaking over grass and rocks and towards the nearby forest, when I heard a howl.

I whipped my head around, staring back over my shoulder to see three grey wolves approach and that put iron in my legs, my haunches. My mouth was open, panting, but there was something of a wolfy smile to it as I ran faster, further away. They were big powerful alpha beasts, but I was a wily, nimble omega and I would not get caught. The fingers of moonlight combed the ground between the trees, but I was as grey as the light was, blending in with the dappled silver splashes on the leaves and the earth. I wound my way through trees, running deeper, deeper into the forest, when I heard another howl.

It was full of challenge, of admonition, of command and it had me pausing for just a second. My lungs worked as fast as my heart, sucking in breath. My muscles quivered with the need to run, towards them or away, I couldn't decide, some strange instinct kicking in to push me forward.

Because this was what we'd missed out on.

After the boys had been announced as heirs to the alphas, their omega would have stepped forward.

Me.

And I would have found fur for the first time, just like I had that day. I would have run, but for an entirely different

purpose. Those boys who thought to claim me as their mates would have had to prove themselves all over again.

To me.

They'd have chased me through the town in fur, the members of the pack urging us on as we wound our way through the streets of our hometown and into the forests beyond. Sometimes people tried to assist the omega or hinder her, stepping out in front of the boys or the omega, trying to slow them down.

But I wouldn't have slowed my pace.

Not until it was the right time. I howled, throwing back my head and calling out my own cry of rebellion. And when I heard theirs back in answer? My jaws widened, my fangs feeling the play of cool air over them before I took off.

Into the deeper, darker parts of the forest, away from the moon's glow. Away from them, home, my cottage and all of the trappings of my human side. I wasn't in control right now, she was and she ran and ran, with the endless efficiency of a wolf, right up until she came here. The trees had thinned in this spot for some reason, so that the moon beaming down on me was like a spotlight, alerting anyone in the forest as to where I was.

But even if this had happened back in Stanthorpe, it would all eventually come to an end. My alphas would have run me to ground, cornered me until I had nowhere else to run. Just like they did now.

Massive grey wolves appeared at three points around the clearing, their muzzles pulled back into snarls. They stepped slowly, purposefully towards us, but because they were each coming from a different direction, my wolf spun around and snapped at the air, declaring her challenge to each alpha. They thought to bring us down, to subdue us, but we were skittish, wanting to face one challenge, then the other as they got closer. Because it was in an omega's nature to fight the approach of her mates, to bite at one muzzle as it dared to get closer, then spin around and snap at the next as they dared to nose at our behind. Our downfall was inevitable, but right now

instincts rode us to make them prove they were the right ones to mate us. We focussed on Atlas-wolf and then Jayden-wolf, growling our disdain, our fury at their approach, and as we did, Xavier appeared out of nowhere, his wolf straddling mine, right as his fangs snapped down on thick fur of my ruff.

The others approached as I went limp, other instincts kicking in. I dropped down on my belly as my hips tilted backwards. Xavier's growls and his brothers' felt like they reverberated all the way through me, pinning me to the ground. But rather than be a helpless state that was imposed upon me, it was this: Surrender.

The thing I'd always wanted to do the minute I was with them. I'd fought that impulse, obviously, but it bit down deeper the older we got. Our bodies were maturing, growing towards each other like trees that were planted too close, winding around each other, until now.

"Come back to skin." Xavier was crouched over me now, not his wolf. "Come back to skin, beautiful, and tell me what you want."

He ground out those words, part growl, part human voice, but they had the desired effect. My fur receded, leaving my human body lying beneath his.

I became painfully aware of my nakedness, the rocks and moss and leaf litter sticking to my skin, something that my fur had protected me from, before I'd shifted back, but that was just background noise to this. His body covering mine, his heavy weight pinning me to the ground and, most of all, the heavy weight of his cock pressed into my arse, shifting restlessly against me.

"Tell me what you want, Kai." Xavier's voice sounded hoarse and ragged right now. "Tell me you want me, want us."

That was an afterthought, we both knew it, but he'd forced himself to recognise his brothers.

"You know how shit would've ended that day if your mum hadn't fucked everything up," Jayden said, moving forward and tipping my chin up so I met his eyes. "If we hadn't let her

manipulate us into claiming the wrong woman. It was you, always you.”

“So tell us what you...” Xavier’s voice trailed away as I moved underneath him. My body felt slow and sinuous as my spine stretched far further than it ever had been able to, tilting my hips back and up until I was pressed up hard against his cock. “Fuck...”

Atlas dropped down beside me as well, tilting my head sideways to press a kiss between my lips before sliding his hand underneath me. I jerked when he found my clit, one of Xavier’s hands clamping down to stop me from moving. And between them I was caught, forced to feel the pleasure Atlas wrought and that which Xavier threatened to.

“I thought you wanted to wait,” Jay mocked Xavier. “To go on dates and—”

“Shut the fuck up.” Xavier’s grip on me tightened. “I’m holding on by a fucking thread as it is.”

“So don’t,” Atlas told him.

“I need to hear her say it.” Xavier reached down between us, moving his cock until it grazed against my swollen seam, growling when he felt how wet I was. “I need to hear her say that she needs me as much as I need her.”

“Yes.” This came out as a little yip, my body feeling like it was a string being wound tighter, ready to snap. My hips moved in time with Atlas’ strokes, which resulted in me rubbing against the head of Xavier’s cock. “Yes, please, Xavier—”

Any other response from me was cut off as he thrust inside me.

Fuck.

I’d spent most of my life not feeling this sensation of fullness, and, despite whatever Xavier had to say, I wasn’t going to let myself miss out on this again. I moved then, forcing his cock deeper, right up to the hilt. But when he bottomed out, we both groaned.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Kai...” Xavier hissed, his mouth on the back of my neck to kiss me rather than bite, as his hips bucked helplessly forward. “I fucking knew it would feel amazing to get inside you but... fuck.”

“More...” I whined, clawing at the dirt, the rich scents of moss and earth filling my nose. My thighs widened, my hips tilting back so far, I felt the tension in the joints. “More...”

“I can’t, Kai, not out here,” Xavier groaned, but in counterpoint to that, his cock stabbed deeper. I felt an itch build up inside me, one only he could scratch and when he did... It’d feel amazing, I just fucking knew it.

“You fucking better knot our girl,” Jayden snarled and when my eyes flicked up, his were purest silver. “You better give her fucking everything she wants or pull the fuck out.”

“No, I can’t...”

Xavier’s helpless groan was music to my ears, because I was the one dragging him down into the place of instinctual pleasure I lived in. His cock pistoned in and out of me, Atlas’ fingers flicking harder, faster, turning everything into a long, lazy spiral of pleasure. He kept mumbling some kind of protest about all of this, the man trying to muscle in with his logic and reasoning, but the wolf knew. I was his and he was mine and I’d claim him tonight.

I pressed back against Xavier, feeling that terrible stretch as his knot threatened to breach me. That sharp nip of pain, it told me that this would come at a cost, but in my overheated state, I was willing to pay for it. Xavier babbled out something, some warning, but he didn’t stop me, didn’t stop himself from thrusting forward, grinding that fat knot against me over and over until my body started to open.

“Fuck... Oh fuck...” I hissed out, Jayden stroking my hair and telling me how beautiful I was, Atlas making the pain translate as pleasure, but it was Xavier’s growl that sealed the deal.

“You want this?” There was nothing sweet in his question right now. The wolf was running the show, not the man. “You

want my fucking knot? Well, take it!”

His alpha bark made my body his bitch, opening up so that knot was lodged deep, right as my cunt snapped tight around him.

For a few seconds, there was only the sound of our pants and the far off cries of night birds. But that was never going to be enough. I was sick of pretending, of pulling my forelock and being a good little human, when I was never that. I was an omega, their omega, and I was made to take them, so I shifted my hips experimentally, hearing Xavier’s gasp at the tugging feeling inside me, right before I started to move in earnest.

I’d never be satisfied by other men, not after I felt this. What had happened with Atlas two years ago was the fumbling of clueless teenagers, but right now I chose this. Chose Xavier, chose to rock my hips back and forth, feeling the great swollen waves of pleasure that came from every rub of his knot against that spot inside me. Pleasure that just seemed to grow and grow, blossoming with each stroke.

“Fuck, Kai...” Xavier collected me up in his arms, forcing me to bounce up and down on top of his knot, right as his brothers swarmed closer.

“He got you feeling good?” Jayden asked me, one hand circling one breast, the other plucking at the nipple on the other side. “Is Xave giving you everything you need?” But he didn’t wait for an answer, swallowing my moans with his mouth as he kissed me.

Atlas’ cunning fingers slid up my thighs, through the mess of slick there, before gripping the hood of my clit and pinching. The intense pressure made the pleasure I was feeling spike, becoming something almost sentient, beyond us, a massive presence. It was one with sharp teeth, because this pleasure felt like it bit into me, marking me as belonging to it.

“Kai, I can’t hold off.” Xavier mumbled that into the crook of my neck and I shivered each time his lips passed over Atlas’ mating mark. “Tell me you’re mine, Kai, mine forever.”

At his words, his brother's caresses, the flex of Xavier's cock in my cunt, I gasped out the only thing I could say.

"Yes."

I said it over and over again as his teeth bit down, marking me as his, as he confirmed to the whole world something we already knew. That we were bound together by something more than a bite, the link soul deep. Nothing Mum, Anna or the whole pack could do would keep us apart and right then light burst behind my eyelids as I fractured into a million pieces, each one more intensely pleasurable than the next.

Chapter 38

Jayden

Kai passed out for a moment, but although she might have been done and dusted, I wasn't. Xavier licked the bite mark he'd left on her neck, slowly cleaning away any blood welling there and she shifted in response. Every mating mark would make her super sensitive and that gave me an idea. I pushed her thighs wider, her eyelids fluttering, right as I moved between her legs.

I was greeted by the sweet scent of roses and honey, her scent and her slick making my mouth water. So there was nothing to do but dive in and lick, sip, suck. She moved restlessly, threatening to close her legs around my head. I didn't mind. She didn't have to hold me in place because I wasn't going anywhere, but I was willing to let her grip onto me as I delved deeper. Long licks of her whole seam, I wanted to bury my face deep inside her, but my brother was still there connected to her.

"Jesus, Jay..." Xavier groaned as I flicked my tongue across her clit. Probably because it made Kai squeeze down on him, wringing the last drops of cum out, right before she pushed him out entirely.

Which had been my plan all along.

Freed of his knot, Kai was mine, all mine, so I surrounded her sensitive little clit with my lips and sucked on it lightly, just enough to make her squirm, make her work him out. Xavier protested but my girl's hands slapped down on my

head, holding me there, forcing my face hard against her tender flesh.

Right where I wanted to be.

I heard her little moans, felt the way her fingers dug into my hair, heard my brother's protests, just before this happened. I made my girl come, felt her whole body buck up and into my mouth, licking her through her orgasm and into the next. But the minute Xavier made a sound like his heart was breaking, his cock pushed out of our mate, I was on my feet and hauling Kai up and into my arms to sling her over my shoulder.

"Jay...!" Her cry was muffled by my back as I carried her out of the forest. "Jay...!"

I felt her little hands pummeling my back, then my arse, but I didn't care. I walked out of the trees like a fucking king, because I had my queen. I told the sheep to shoo as I jumped over the fence, having transferred Kai into my arms and she just stared at me as I carried her to the cottage.

"You could've waited for your turn," she said as I stepped up onto the deck.

"We were all supposed to be waiting," I told her as I swung her down the hall and then kicked open her bedroom door. The scent of her was thick in the room, making my mouth water and my cock ache. I put her down on the side of the bed where the covers were pulled back, then drew them up as I climbed on top of her. "I could've knotted you, claimed you in that bath."

"Why didn't you?"

I loved the look of challenge in her eyes, something that had me smiling.

"Because my stupid brother made his point eloquently and in detail during morning smoko," I said. "But the prick forgot all about his big words once his wolf caught scent of you." I bent down slowly to nip at her lips, but her arms went around my neck, holding me right where I was. "I get it, I really do, but I don't feel any guilt about helping you to force him out."

“That right?”

The door was shoved open and there were my brothers. Atlas looked smug and Xavier looked pissed.

“Yeah, it’s right and there’s only room for one other body in this bed.” I rolled off Kai and into the space beside her, then pulled her into my arms. “And I’ve claimed it tonight. You two dickheads can sleep out in the tray in the swags.”

“Or we could bring all the swags in and set them up in the lounge room,” Atlas said, shouldering forward. “Then we could sleep together as a pack.”

“Jay—”

I could hear the change in her tune, the way my fucking brother was seducing my girl away from me again, but I hauled her closer, locking her down in my arms.

“I don’t think I feel like sharing you with those two fucks tonight.”

Kai turned then, her eyes searching my face, doing the thing everyone always did. Is Jay joking or is he being serious? And the answer was both. I’d wanted to claim Kai that night after the party, but Atlas had got there first. I’d wanted to claim her last night, yesterday, but Xavier had got involved. I let out a low growl of frustration at all the stupid fucking obstacles that kept getting in the way when...

I blinked. Kai twisted her neck then, baring the other smooth slope, the one unmarked by my brothers. The invitation was obvious. Wolves never bared their throats to another, not unless they were being forced to submit.

Or chose to.

She gifted me this sight right now to placate me, sure, but more than that. She’d never have invited me to bite her, not unless she wanted it. She’d be tied to me forever if I took advantage of that, something that the wolf pacing back and forth inside me knew and was willing to take as her gift to me. Her body trembled, her hands going to my chest as I leaned over, my brothers making small sounds in the backs of their throats, right up until I pressed a kiss there, rather than a bite.

“Soon,” I promised her. “Actually, make that tomorrow night. After work is done, you come with me and only me, yeah?”

“Fuck, Jay—” Xavier spluttered but Kai held up an imperious little hand.

“Just you and me,” she agreed with a quick nod.

“Good.”

I was placated somewhat now, so I snuggled down with her in her bed, feeling like I was drowning in her scent and not once did I want to push my head up above the waterline. I spiralled down, down, down into her, my eyes closing as I just luxuriated in the feel of her in my arms, my nose burrowing into her hair.

“But tonight we sleep together,” Kai said.

“Nooo...” I groaned, like I’d done when I was a kid and Mum was waking me up for school. “I licked you, so you’re mine for the rest of the night. Them’s the rules.”

“I can be yours in your swag,” she said in a persuasive little voice. “I can sleep by your side and your brothers will have to sleep behind you.”

“Fucking great...” Atlas grumbled.

“Promise?” I cracked open an eye to peer at her.

“Promise.” She turned around in my arms and pressed a kiss to my forehead and right then I’d do anything for her. And she fucking knew it. With a low grumble I got out of bed, smirking when she squeaked as I picked her up in my arms and then laid her down in the swags the other guys brought in.

My brothers had words to say, complaints fermenting, but I’d worked out now that this was a dog-eat-dog situation. All of us were fighting over Kai like she was a juicy bone and right now she was mine, just mine. They’d have to wait their fucking turn to get close to her.

After I’d claimed her as mine.

I snuggled down into the swag, holding my girl close as I dropped off into dreams of just how I'd do it.

Chapter 39

“Those boys...” It was the next morning and we’d stumbled out of bed and got dressed for work, turning up at the main house to be on time for breakfast. She’d asked me to come into the kitchen and give her a hand. I had a platter of eggs and bacon in one hand and one of those multipacks of different cereal in the other as Vicki stared at me, then looked through the door into the dining room. “They’re not just old school friends to you.”

“Ah...” How did I explain to my landlady what this was? Those keen eyes of her narrowed slightly, as if daring me to lie. “No,” I admitted, “they’re not.”

“They’re special to you.” She was growing bolder now, walking over with a bunch of coffee mugs dangling from each hand to take out to the dining room. “Very special.” I just nodded in response. “All of them?”

“Um... things happen a bit differently where we come from,” I replied lamely, not able to think of another way to put it.

“I guess it does.” She nodded slowly and I just stood there, wide eyed and not knowing what to do until she spoke again. “Well, if they’re treating you right...?” That was meant to be a statement, but came out more as a question and I nodded sharply. “Guess there’s not much I could do if they weren’t.” She let out a hiss of breath. “They’re bloody good shearers those... boys of yours. If they’re willing to do the right thing

by you, you'll have a lot better life than working for that idiot, Billy."

"Yeah." I smiled genuinely for the first time since I'd walked into the kitchen. "I hope so."

WE ATE BREAKFAST. There was a lot of conversation at the table, the shearers talking about what they wanted to get done today, then what they intended to do after work.

"We're heading to the pub after we're done for the day," Ned, one of the other shearers said before settling his gaze on me. "You might like to come, K—"

"Kai will be with me tonight," Jayden said, hooking his arm around my waist and staring the man down. There was a little mumbling around the table between the other men, but Jay's message seemed to come over loud and clear.

"So what are we doing tonight?" I asked him in a low whisper when we walked over to the shearing shed to start the day.

"You'll see," was all he'd tell me before patting me on the arse and sending me on my way.

THERE WAS a challenge to being a wolf shifter in the human world. We could go further, work harder and had a lot more stamina than humans, but we couldn't let them know that. Ned, the guy who'd asked if I wanted to go to the pub with him, stared at me as I ran over to Jay's station, then removed all the bad parts of the fleece before carrying it over to the wool table.

"We're going at a good clip," Ned said and I fought the urge to freeze on the spot. I could almost feel his eyes roam across my skin. "How about a challenge? We'll see who can shear the most sheep in the same amount of time."

"You're on," Jay said, with a wink my way.

“Boys will be bloody boys,” Vicki muttered before stepping forward. “Don’t pink my bloody sheep with your stupidity, nor ruin the fleece.”

“Every one you think isn’t up to standard you can take from our tally, Vick,” the other guy said before nodding to Jay.

Some of Ned’s friends stopped shearing, sending their sheep on their way, then stepping up to the man’s workspace, obviously about to help him by dragging his sheep over for him to shear. Atlas cursed as he finished his last sheep and then he and Xavier stepped up to do the same. I had no concerns. I knew Jay could leave this guy in the dust, but Ned didn’t know that. He just stared at me, smirking when he heard Jayden’s low growl and then George gave them the word to start.

Jayden didn’t need to try. Or rather he did, but it was to slow himself down. As it was people swore as they watched him move, his arm a blur, his cuts precise, skimming the heavy fleece off the sheep’s back in long, regular strokes. But he could go faster, cut neater, tear through the whole bloody flock if that’s what he wanted, because as I stared, I saw it. Jayden was a wolf, whereas Ned? He was just a monkey, his eyes darting from me, to Jay, to his next sheep and then the tally board. His jaw locked tight and it was him snarling now, as he struggled to keep up.

Blood. I smelled its bright coppery notes as soon as Ned’s blades grazed the sheep’s side. It let out a plaintive baa, but that was quickly drowned out by the cries of irritation from Vicki and George. Vicki strode forward with a bucket in hand, one she’d explained the use of. I’d had a crash course in the severity of injuries, with her stressing in a voice far louder than needed for a private conversation that she didn’t want to see anyone needing to use it, but she’d tutored me in the different techniques.

Antiseptic spray to keep the wound from going bad. The amount of piss, shit, and being in close contact with other animals in a pen could mean an infection, and then there was the fly repellent. The British hadn’t really thought shit

through, bringing sheep down to Australia. We had immense plains of grassland well suited to fattening sheep, but the blowflies? Sheep had to be crutched, the fleece around their arse and genitals shaved back to stop from getting fly-blown: infested with maggots. A fresh wound was just as enticing to them. I watched her doctor the sheep, then moved my arse, taking the next fleece away when she shot Ned a dark look.

I moved and moved, only taking Jay's fleece away, not Ned's, but it was clear already who was going to win. Not just win either. Jay was letting things slip, his teeth bared into a silent snarl, one where his fangs threatened to snap down, right up until the point George stepped in.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" he snapped as red blood blossomed on the side of Ned's current sheep.

Beyond a mere scratch, I found myself stepping forward at the sound of the sheep's cry. He'd hurt the beast badly and my twin natures warred. The wolf saw prey, saw blood, wanted to snap her fangs around its throat and gorge on its meat, but the woman? She saw an animal in pain, confused, tired, thirsty, hungry and now hurting. I snatched the bucket up and then rushed towards the sheep.

"Come to me, have ya, girlie?" Ned asked in a sly tone.

"Shut the fuck up!" I snarled and his head jerked back. His eyes widened and I was willing to bet he saw eyes of silver, not brown right now, but before he could ask anything else, I was up beside him, taking the sheep from him while uttering soothing sounds. The sheep fought me but I was far stronger than it, Ned and Vicki and George all together, something I tended to forget. I kept the sheep on its back and then grabbed the irrigation bottle, squirting the wound to remove any debris.

"That's it, girl."

Vicki watched me closely, not willing to step in even as watery blood formed a pool on the floor. I kept my feet, the sheep scrabbling around to try and get away, but I tightened my grip, letting out a little growl of warning. It got the message, going still. Then I reached down into the bucket to

apply the antiseptic. I removed any wool sticking to the wound, then grabbed the needle and thread.

“Slowly now. She’ll fight you the whole way,” Vicki told me. “She doesn’t realise that you’re trying to help, just that you’re hurting her more.”

“I’m not trying to hurt you,” I told the sheep, command vibrating in my voice. Humans just would think I had ‘the knack’, a soft touch. But this is what omegas did. Alphas kept the order, made sure the pack structure was respected, but the omega? She was the heart of the pack. She could help take away your pain, make you feel calm when you were anything but. “You’ll get sick if I don’t do this.”

Those alien yellow eyes stared back at me as I bent over and went to work.

I’d darned socks and hemmed my sister’s dresses, but sewing a living, breathing creature was a whole other thing. Vicki gave me a steady stream of encouragement as I worked, commenting on the small size of my stitches and their neat placement. And when I finally was finished, the sheep was set to rights, then directed towards a pen that had been kept empty for just this purpose. The place for injured sheep to wait.

“I’m gonna have to get the bloody vet out now,” Vicki snapped at Ned.

“You don’t need to do that,” he spluttered. “It’s just one fucking sheep.”

“We do if we don’t want the RSPCA coming down on us, you fucking idiot,” George snapped. “Now, go for a walk and clear your head.”

“We haven’t finished our challenge.” Ned looked seriously pissed right now, especially when Jayden came to stand beside me. “I could’ve beat him.”

“You couldn’t do shit and you know it,” Jayden drawled.

“Walk. Now.” George pointed imperiously at the doorway until Ned finally shook his head, grumbling as he went. But once the man was gone, he turned to the rest of the shed. “We had a good day yesterday and no injured sheep. Don’t need

that getting ruined by idiots posturing to get a girl's attention." He nodded to me. "Kai's made her choice and it's not you dickheads, so don't go throwing away a decent job for a girl that doesn't want you."

The bubble of tension in the room seemed to pop right then, everyone's bodies going loose right before they turned back to what we needed to do.

"I'LL MOP THAT MESS UP," Vicki told me when I went to find the mop bucket. She put her hand on my shoulder to stop me going further. "You all right?"

It always confused me when people asked questions like that, as if I had a right to feelings or something. I just forced myself to smile, still able to see the gleam in Ned's eyes, then the splash of the sheep's blood when I blinked.

"I'm fine," I said with a nod.

"All right then, it's not long until smoko, but you might want to stick with those boys of yours. Some men..." She shot me a rueful smile, "like nothing better than to thump their chest and make idiots of themselves, thinking it'll get them attention."

"That definitely won't work," I said, then moved away. Fleece was building up around the men's feet and we had a job to do. I'd much rather focus on that than what had happened. Vicki seemed to approve of my resilience, the two of us moving like a well-oiled machine to move the wool to be graded.

LUNCH WAS A MUCH QUIETER AFFAIR, with little said around Vicki's dinner table. People asked politely for dishes to be passed around, but that was about it. George tried to start a conversation about how the weather was going, a safe subject if ever there was one, but he didn't get far. But when the meal ended, Vicki asked if we'd be sticking around for dinner.

“These idiots might,” Jayden said, nodding to his brothers, but the other men seemed to take especial note of that, including Ned. “But Kai and I have plans.”

“What plans?” I asked him as we walked back to the shed after lunch was done, but he just smiled, then ruffled my hair.

“You’ll see.”

I DID, once we were finished for the day, Jay having slipped off while Vicki and I retrieved the rest of the fleece from the floor, because when I stepped outside, he was sitting on the back of a trail bike, the engine roaring obnoxiously as he revved it.

“Jump on,” he said, jerking his head back over his shoulder and I wiped my grimy hands on my jeans before doing just that. “Been waiting all day for you to put your arms around me.” People were watching, I could feel their eyes upon us, but Jay didn’t care. He covered my hands with his, pushing them down lower so I was holding onto his stomach and then, with a roar, we took off.

Chapter 40

Jayden

Feeling my girl's arms around me as we roared up a dirt track, it was almost enough to make me forget that fucking dickhead that thought he had a chance with her.

Almost.

I wound the bike along the ragged path, revving the engine harder and harder as we moved faster. If Xavier had seen me take corners the way I was on a track I didn't know, he'd have been fucking furious, but even when the back wheel skidded away from us in a muddy spot, I corrected fast and pushed on. I had Kai pressed into my back, hanging on like a fucking spider monkey.

And I needed to do this.

Ride hard, fast, away from fucking Ned and his dickhead mates, away from anyone who might want to get between me and my girl. I rode, taking us further and further away until we reached our destination.

I'd asked Vicki quietly if she knew a good place for a picnic. She'd told me the top paddock was empty because all the sheep were close to the farmhouse, ready to be shorn. The sky arched up above us, because the paddock was on the top of a small hill, not a tree in sight. As we got off the bike, stars winked into view, one after another.

"Jay—" Kai started to say, but I was on her the moment she slid down, pressing her against the bike, testing the

kickstand's stability, holding her face in my hands as I just stared into her eyes before taking her lips.

"No, not now," I told her between kisses, unable to get enough of her. "I need this, just this."

I hated doing that, pushing at her, demanding something, because Kai would always deliver. Her mother had made sure of that, but... I needed her like my next breath, not able to stop kissing her until something settled inside me.

"I don't want you working in the shed," I told her. Her dark eyes seemed to take on the shine of each star in the sky as she stared back at me. "You don't need to. We make more than enough—"

"You don't get a say in that," she told me, going to push me backwards, but when I planted my feet, she just slipped sideways, striding across the grass. "No one gets to tell me what I do with my life anymore."

"I don't want to tell you shit," I replied, grabbing the basket of food that Vicki had slipped me. For an old biddy, she seemed curiously supportive of our relationship. She'd patted my hand and smiled, telling me to look after Kai. "But I need you to be safe."

"What can Ned or any other guy do when you're around?" she shot back, cocking her hip. "Who can touch me when I'm around my fated mates?"

"No one," I growled at her, at the whole fucking world, if that's what it took to keep her safe. I stalked closer, my feet eating up the distance between us, half hoping she'd turn tail and run again, my wolf loving the prospect of the chase. I was secretly glad when she didn't, though. Because, when I held her in my arms, the only fucking woman I'd ever love, everything seemed right with the world. It was a struggle to remember what I'd been worrying about, something she noted with a sly smile. "You little minx—"

"No one can hurt me when you're around. No one will fuck with me. Would you rather I go back to work at the roadhouse—?" My growl made clear what both my wolf and I

thought of that. “And anyway, I’m far stronger than Ned or any of his mates. If any of them tried anything, I’d snap their fucking wrist.”

OK, now I was grinning openly. Kaia would never have said anything like that, seeming to disregard her own strength, seeing only others’. But now? Strong Kai was a sexy Kai and I told her that.

“Oh, so that’s what it takes to get you going?” she said, wrapping her arms around my waist. “Threats of blood and violence.”

“You,” I corrected, kissing the tip of her nose. “You’re what gets me going. Stories of bringing down arseholes and causing them all the pain they deserve? Well, that just takes it to another level.”

“And that’s why we’re here, isn’t it?” Some of that cocky bullshit in her faded then as Kai went to pull away. I held her tight, not willing to let her slip through my fingers, even if it was just for a second. “You want to take things to another level.”

“I want what I’ve always wanted, Kai,” I told her as honestly as I could, all the bullshit facade I tried to maintain, like most other blokes, falling away. “You. I should’ve had you up on that stage beside me the minute I was recognised as heir to the alphas. I needed you near me, your scent in my nose.” She shivered as I gripped her tighter, burying my face in her hair. “I need my bite mark on your neck, claiming you as mine for the whole fucking world to see.”

“Humans don’t understand mating marks.” Her voice was muffled by my chest and I just smiled.

“They do on some level. They’ll know you belong to me and that any one of them that tries to get close to you will do so at their fucking peril.” My arms flexed around her. “I can’t let you go, Kai.”

But she forced me to, so she could look up at me, the dying rays of the sun turning her coloured hair brighter purple, and I could tolerate that small distance as long as she looked at me.

My girl. I wanted all of her looks, her smiles, her sighs. I wanted to smooth the small line forming between her brows with my thumb. I wanted to kiss those swollen lips. I wanted —

“I know what you want,” Kai said, making me think I’d said all of that aloud, forcing me to smile sheepishly. But she tilted her head to one side, her hair falling away from the unmarked skin. “And I offered you all of it.”

I just blinked, my throat feeling too swollen, my fangs aching in my gums. *Take her*, the wolf howled. *Take her!* He couldn’t endure the pain of being separated from her for so long, demanded we remove all obstacles between us.

But not yet.

That’s what I told my wolf, told my Kai, as I led her back to the bike, grabbing one of the swags that was rolled up on the back and then flicking it out. We’d lounge upon the hilltop and eat like kings, if the weight of the bag was anything to go by. I carried it over, flopping down beside Kai on the swag, and then started pulling the treasures Vicki had gifted out.

“Oh my god...” Kai gasped as I opened up the Tupperware containers.

Because there was roast lamb, still warm, pink and tender, along with containers of perfect roast vegetables all with crispy skins. There was a bowl full of salad, rabbit food I thought with disgust, before shoving it to one side. There were bread rolls, fresh from the oven, the yeasty scent filling our noses, and butter and a pot of gravy and... My mouth watered for the food, but most of all, for her.

“What do you feel like first?” I asked her.

“I don’t know where to start,” she said, grabbing a fork, but I plucked it from her fingers. She shot me a dark look, but it quickly transformed when I cut off a chunk of meat and offered it to her.

“We would’ve done this after we mated you,” I said. “Once we crawled out of bed after all that sex.”

“God, Jay, shut up!” Kai gave me a shove.

“Mum sat up all night baking things you liked, sure you were the one. It was all ready...” I shook my head and forced myself to smile. I didn’t want to keep going back to that moment, yet I kept finding myself drawn into it. “My mum didn’t make this, but I think Vicki cooks with just as much love.” I twisted my fork, drawing her attention back to it.

When she shifted closer, my heart rate picked up and when her lips parted, I remembered the way they’d done that around my cock, the remembered sensation like a punch to the guts. But one I craved. Then when she took the meat from the fork, I felt a stupid, instinctual sense of satisfaction I had to explain to her.

“You were always strong enough to feed yourself,” I told her as she chewed. “You cook a whole lot better than we do, which was probably why Mum did the cooking that day, but...” I brushed a strand of purple hair back. “It’s the symbolism of it. You take food from my hand, take the things you need from me and—”

“And what if I need more?”

She moved then, more wolf than woman, climbing onto my lap and then pushing me back to straddle my hips. I groaned as I felt her hips shift, her denim covered cunt grinding down on my cock.

This was what I wanted, what I needed, my every fucking step bringing me here. When Ned proposed his stupid fucking race, I took him up on his offer, wanting to show off, show Kai what kind of mate I’d be. One that would provide for her, look after her, even if I did dumb shit on the regular. That despite all of that, I’d never let her down deliberately. So I moved, picking her up and laying her down on the swag as I loomed over her. I wanted to block out the sun, the rising moon, even the stars, to focus her whole attention on me.

“I’m going to give you everything tonight, Kai. You know that. I’m done fucking waiting. But you’ve had a hard day—”

“I hear orgasms are really good therapy for sore muscles,” she said with a wicked grin.

“Fucking hell...” I grabbed her then, unzipping her jeans and pulling them and her boots off before she could protest, then pulled down my own fly, jerking my own dick before easing her down on it.

My cock didn't slide right into her. She was plenty wet, wetter when I teased her clit, but with no foreplay, it was a shock. But Kai recovered quickly, rocking back and forth until I was buried in her to the hilt.

“So now what?” she asked when I didn't move any further.

She groaned as I leaned forward, grabbing a dish of food at random and a fork.

“Now you eat.” That came out way deeper, huskier than I had intended, but her cunt clenched around my cock, sending shivers up my spine. I rubbed my hand up and down her thigh, trying to count backwards to stop myself from erupting inside her. “You'll keep my cock warm and ready for you so that when you finish, I'll give you everything else you want.”

“No, now.”

I had to set the container down abruptly, as she started to grind on me. The velvety tug of her cunt on my cock was driving me out of my fucking mind. I'd waited so damn long for this, to be as deep inside my girl as I could be, so I couldn't let it be over so suddenly. My knot ached, wanting to push deeper into her, but not yet. So I grabbed her hips with both hands and then pulled her part the way off.

“I like that you've become about two hundred percent more bossy than you were before, but not now, Kai.”

“Yes, now—”

“Eat your damn food,” I told her, slapping my hand across her arse.

Fuck, that was a mistake, her pussy tightened then, right about that sensitive spot under the head of my cock. My eyes bulged, feeling the need to cum building and building, so I jerked her back into my arms.

“Whatever you want,” I promised, rubbing her inner thigh, my fingers slipping in the slick there. “Be a good girl and eat something, and I’ll give you whatever you want.”

“And what about you?” She twisted as far as she could without sliding off me, the movement making my eyes roll back for a second. Kai held out the container of lamb to me. “You’re a growing boy who needs to eat something.”

I raised my hand to my lips slowly, catching the moment her eyes bled silver, as I licked her slick from my fingers.

“I’m pretty sure I have everything I need right here. Now eat.”

There was a strange kind of tension in this, something I hadn’t meant to introduce. Kai made a show of eating her food now, shooting me sidelong looks until I told her what a good girl she was. And me? I had to pretend that I didn’t want to shove her forward, press my hand to the back of her neck as her hips were tilted up for me, presenting, as I mated her hard. Instead I satisfied myself with running my fingers along her pussy, collecting up her slick and then licking it away, before going back for more.

“OK, if we keep going like this, I’m going to choke,” she said, putting the third dish down. I couldn’t even tell you what she’d eaten or whether it was enough, my brain taken over by a heavy red haze. The wolf was close, so fucking close, ready to take control, take her. Kai watched the fur prickle across my arms, there and gone again, with a slow smile. “I think I’ve had enough, don’t you?”

I let out a strangled groan as she pulled off me, my hands reaching for her to pull her right back, but then she fell down on her forearms before me.

Fuck.

She was beautiful, that curve of her arse always drawing my eye, but now it was mine. I shifted quickly, positioning myself behind her, running my hand across her butt, claiming

it as mine. My fangs ached to sink themselves into those taut muscles, but instead my fingers delved between her thighs.

“Ready for dessert?”

She went to reply, but her words were choked off the moment I pressed my fingers into her. Her cunt felt like it swallowed me up, the muscles inside her flexing and twitching as I shoved them in. My thumb brushed her clit on each downstroke and she jerked in time with each movement. It was then I felt her open. Kai was ripe, ready for me and I pulled my fingers free to the sound of her plaintive wail.

“Something you need, omega?” I asked.

“Fuck, you, Jay—!”

Her words came out as a messy tangle, stopping the minute the head of my cock brushed her opening. Fuck. She was so fucking wet I slipped through the mess she’d made and delved deeper than I’d intended. I wanted to tease her, make her beg for it, force her to articulate just how much she wanted, needed me, so I’d know I wasn’t alone, but everything came undone. Her hips pushed back as mine snapped forward, primal instincts finally taking over.

I needed to be in her: deep, stabbing thrusts weren’t enough for me and they weren’t for her either. Her thighs widened as if to let me further in. I slammed into her body harder, faster, but it didn’t satisfy. She made frantic little sounds, her claws ripping the cover of my swag, shredding it as she keened for me. My claws pricked her skin, fur rippling all over me, the man and the wolf fighting for control, but I had to win. She was ours but right now she was mine. My hand went to the back of her neck, pressing her down into the mattress, holding her still as I pumped into her.

“Kai, you need to open up for me,” I growled. No human would have mistaken me for anything other than what I was. “Open up and I’ll give you everything you need.”

“Yes...” she panted, her voice muffled by the mattress. “Yes.”

But as I ground into her, I felt that tight barrier, her cunt stretching to its limits, but I needed, we needed more. One hand worked her clit, trying to make the terrible pressure feel like pleasure as I ground harder. But even if it didn't, I kept her pinned, just like a male wolf would his mate as he gave her his knot.

Fuck, fuck, fuck... A familiar prickle streaked up my spine, my control fraying and her cunt flexed, twitched, fighting to take the form that would let me in.

And then I felt it.

Every moment she flexed around me there was a split second where she opened up. I felt the ripples of her all along my cock. So then, as my heart beat hard and fast in my ears, I shoved forward on the next one.

Jesus Christ...

People had tried to explain what knotting your mate was like, but no one had mentioned this. Of being lodged down as deep as you could go, with not an inch of movement either way. Of feeling her, hearing her heartbeat twining with yours. Of feeling her fucking heart in your hand. The sun had dropped low in the sky, just a few thin trails of red staining the clouds and I felt like I was sinking down with it, into her.

“Kai...”

I scooped her up, held her in my hands, her back pressed against my chest, my nose questing for her neck.

“Kai...”

“Now, Jay...” she croaked out. “Now, I can't wait anymore. I'm done being apart... I need...”

I knew exactly what she needed, a kind of certainty I'd never experienced before in my life washing over me. Man and wolf knew that she was mine, just as woman and wolf knew that I was hers. That feeling pulsed hot and hard and true in my chest as my teeth sank into her neck.

I felt her, felt the hot, hot flame of her pleasure rush through me, right as mine burst too. I felt her chest heave and

her lungs suck in breaths as I listened to her ragged cries of pleasure. And I felt a deep down feeling of satisfaction that I had been the one to cause it, right as bliss pumped through me.

When I came to, I had tears in my fucking eyes, something thankfully no one saw, because Kai? I'd been searching for her for two fucking years, longing for her for longer and now... She was mine, I felt that in every swipe of my tongue as I licked her mating mark clean.

Mine.

When I finally opened my eyes, I saw a great big grey wolf standing at the edge of the paddock, watching everything that had been going on.

Chapter 41

Atlas

Trouble with Xavier was he talked too fucking much.

“Tonight is Jayden’s night,” he told me as we hit the showers. Our brother had already gone, pulling up out front of the shearing shed on one of our bikes, those fucking idiots who thought they had a chance with our girl all muttering to themselves as they watched the two of them go. “Once he’s mated Kai—”

Everything that should’ve happened that day would’ve happened. I’d told Xavier that plenty of times, that when he gave me a hard fucking time about claiming Kai the night of the party, that he and Jay should’ve done the same. Anna wouldn’t have meant a damn thing if we’d already claimed her. But Xavier always focussed on the wrong things, worrying about what our parents and the alphas thought.

I only gave a shit about Kai.

So I nodded, pretending to go along with my brother’s bullshit plans, right up until we got out of the showers. Then, without a word, I shifted into wolf form and took off out the door. Xavier called after me but I didn’t stop, trotting out onto the veranda and then jumping down onto the dirt track Jayden had taken.

“Which one of them boys you think the girl is with?” The sly tone of that voice had me stopping in my tracks. “I thought

she was with the big fucker, but then she goes off riding with the other brother.”

My muzzle peeled back in a snarl as I slunk closer. Ned and some of the other shearers were sitting outside their room, nursing beers.

“Maybe she lets all three of them go through her,” Ned cackled, and I barely managed to keep my growl down as I watched him grin.

Fucking prick.

Humans never understood the way things worked for us; I’d worked that out pretty quickly. To ‘men’ like Ned, women were possessions, holes to dump cum into. He’d never know what it was like to give his whole heart to one woman.

“Maybe it’ll be our turn next, before the shearing season is done here,” Ned continued.

That’s when I did let out a growl, all of those fuckers turning around to stare at me.

“Is that their dog?” one of the other guys asked, craning his neck to peer at me. He flicked his cigarette ash out on the veranda. “Looks a lot bigger than the last time I saw it.”

I stalked towards him, stiff legged, the threat clear in my snarls.

“And she better mind her fucking manners,” Ned said jumping to his feet and grabbing an old axe handle that was leaning against the wall, hefting it in his hands. “Or I’ll put her down just like I will that girl—”

“At...” Xavier’s voice trailed away as he walked outside, looking around for me, but then frowning at the tableau in front of him. “What’s going on?”

“Your little bitch has a really nasty attitude,” Ned said, nodding to me. “I was just going to adjust that for her.”

“Leave her the fuck alone,” Xavier said, stepping up to the other man.

“Yeah, you wanna take us on?” Ned said, nodding to the men behind him, but only a couple got to their feet. “Where’s your pretty little brothers to back you up?”

“One, I don’t need anyone to back me up against the likes of you.” My brother looked the other man up and down like he was the piece of shit he obviously was. “And two, you think my brothers are pretty? So you were trying to catch Jay’s eye, not Kai’s back in the shed.”

“You little f—!”

Whatever Ned was about to say or do, his lunge, his speech was abruptly cut off as one of his buddies grabbed the back of his singlet, stopping him from getting any further. And right then, Vicki came out of the house, stopping and frowning when she saw what was playing out.

“Dinner’s ready,” she announced warily. “I know Jayden has other plans, but will Atlas be joining us?”

I’m sure that when Xavier looked down at me, everyone else was confused, but he just shook his head.

“I’m not sure what Atlas is up to tonight, but if he doesn’t turn up for dinner, he can sort that out himself.”

For a moment I thought the tension had been defused. All of the men minded their manners and moved when the lady of the house said dinner was on. Vicki was a damn good cook, almost as good as Kai, and everyone was hungry. But Ned hung back in the group, then smirked at one of his buddies before muttering, “Probably off giving it to that girl, Kai, making her airtight for her brother.”

Of course he’d see something like what we did together as this dirty thing. There was no reverence in him, not for Kai, not for any woman. He was some mouth-breathing piece of shit and he needed to be taken down for even mentioning my girl. I stalked forward, jaws open, panting lightly as I stalked across the ground, approaching the fucker from behind, ready to jump on him, drag him down and tear out his throat when—

“Off you go,” Xavier said, turning around and spotting me with some kind of sixth sense. “Go and find Kai and look after

her.”

For once my brother had something smart to say. I wheeled around, taking one long look at Ned, watching his brows knit, first with confusion, then with a fear he didn't quite understand. Then I did as Xavier said. I took off at a run, following their thin scents.

WHEN I REACHED the paddock they were in, I found my brother in a familiar state. The wolf wanted to pin Kai down, shove his cock in her and mate her. Wolves didn't exactly engage in foreplay or worry too much about consent. But even in that heated state, the man cared for Kai, for her pleasure and to not cause her any more pain. As I trotted closer, I watched him hold her still, force his knot inside her. But rather than yelp in pain, she gasped in pleasure.

One I knew well.

I felt the ache of it, the feel of her cunt snapping tight around my knot, for every night after the moment I'd claimed her as my mate. I woke up from heated dreams, feeling the ghost of Kai's body around mine, my arms reaching out for her, as if I could claw her from my subconscious and bring her into my bed. So I shifted on my paws as I watched my brother claim her, closing the loop between all four of us that should never have been left open. I felt that remembered pleasure, that passion, that fucking need, because it rode me again.

I wanted my brother to bite Kai's neck, my tongue flicking over my muzzle, able to taste her blood in my mouth. But when they were done? I watched the tears slide down Jayden's face as he held her close, the fool finally feeling it, realising what this meant. That we would never leave our mate's side again, not for her mother, sister, father or best friend, and so I ignored Xavier's directive, trotting forward.

“COULDN'T EVEN GIVE me one night,” Jayden panted, holding Kai close, as if I'd try to tear away. I came back to skin, my need for Kai hitting me harder the moment I did so.

“You can have all the space you want,” I told him, but my eyes dropped down to Kai, always drawn back to her. “But my mate?” I dropped down to my knees before her, the shadows turning her skin blue, the moon making the highlights gleam white. “Never.”

“Atlas...”

The way she panted my name, reached for me? I loved that so fucking much and nothing any of my brothers could say would stop me from looking for it. I moved closer, leaving her tied to Jayden as I kissed her long and slow.

She made little whimpers, and by the sounds of Jay’s groans, I was getting her worked up all over again.

“I’m sore,” she complained in a low whisper. “All these knots...”

“So we’ll take things slow,” I assured her, smiling in the dark, knowing that was a lie. “We’ve claimed you now, so we don’t have to knot you all the time.”

Except we would, because of the need boiling in our nuts, but more than that, because of what burned inside her. I kissed her softly, slowly, but it was her hands that tangled in my hair, tugging me closer, her kisses growing hungry and more open mouthed by the second.

“Fuck you, Atlas,” Jay groaned as his cock popped free, a great gush of seed escaping her. At some point some of it would lodge inside her, making her round with our pups, but not now, not until she went into heat. “You’re fucking rushing things.”

“I’m not rushing anything,” I said with a grin at my mate and she just reached to pull me closer. “I’m just giving our girl what she needs and if you can’t—”

The competition between us was as strong as any three brothers pushed together like we were. As growing alphas we couldn’t have our own lives. We were bound together by a bond, to find and serve our omega. But we’d found her, claimed her, and now the fun began. I nipped at her lips, then pushed my face into her neck, finding the mark I’d left on her

and sucking it into my mouth. She squirmed, writhed, feeling an echo of the pleasure she'd felt when I gave it to her and a willingness to enjoy more.

“The fuck I can't,” Jay snarled, dragging Kai back into his arms.

I was willing to bet his caresses were a lot more considered now. That first time? It was all fangs and claws and need, but now he took his time. Tracing the shape of her breasts through her shirt, then unbuttoning it and undoing her bra clasp, until she was completely bare for us. But when he tweaked one nipple into a hard bead, I was there to lick and suck it, forcing sweet little moans from Kai. So he shifted to the other, focussing on drawing just as many sighs of pleasure. We might be fighting, but she was always going to be the one who won, so that when I kissed my way down her stomach and between her thighs, she pushed my face closer, even as her brain struggled to accept this.

“But I'm all messy...” she moaned, right as I went in for the first lick.

“Cum is never going to deter any of us,” I said, running a fingertip around the swollen entrance of her cunt, feeling it flex around me, even as it ached. For more and less, all at the same time and she wouldn't be able to decide which, not until she dragged me deeper.

This. It was all I ever wanted. I never needed to knot her again if I could just have this. Long licks of that honey and roses scented slick, the little birdlike cries spilling from her lips, growing more and more urgent as I licked faster, deeper, then the way her cunt clamped down on my tongue as I thrust it up inside her.

But it wasn't enough. I pulled her from Jay's arms and then fell backwards, so her thighs ended up either side of my head.

“But I—” she started to say. No, not her, but that stupid bitch of a mother of hers.

“Sit,” I commanded, the wolf lending his growl to the order, right before she planted her sweet, sweet wetness on my face for me to devour.

“You know, you could take two of us at the same time.” Jayden’s suggestion had her shuddering on top of me, her hips starting to move now, directing my tongue right where she wanted them. “All three of us if you had a mind to.” I heard him spit on his fingers, then felt her whole body jolt, making me guess that he’d decided to tease her arse open. “Just like this,” he told her in a low voice, his finger delving deeper, her whine shifting from one of anxiety to pleasure, her body following his thrusts, rippling over me.

I clamped my hands down on her thighs, narrowing my focus now, licking at her clit, lashing it now so she shook with little explosions of pleasure. My cock fucking ached, beyond the usual misery of every moment when I wasn’t inside her, the need ratcheting tighter until I was half mad with it. Licking her, sucking her, pressing my fingers into the spot inside her that ached from my brother’s knot and would soon be rubbed hard by mine. I waited until she shrieked, her hands digging into the mattress, shredding the fabric, her whole body going rigid before I laid her down.

She looked radiant, wild-eyed and pale in the moonlight, my body covering hers as if stopping the world from seeing her beauty. Of course other men clustered around her. They’d be mad not to, even if some of them seemed to have no clue how to act around her. I half understood Ned’s pissy bullshit, because somehow he knew. He’d never have this, have her reach for him and pull his body down on top of her, murmuring that she needed him, just like she did with me.

“I thought you were too sore,” I said with a smile.

“I will be in the fucking morning,” she cursed, then her brow smoothed out. “But right now it hurts more not to. Atlas...”

She didn’t need to ask. I already knew, so I slid deep inside her, filling her up, giving her everything she needed. And I was rewarded by the hot, slick clasp of her cunt around me,

taking away all of my self-control, forcing me to growl my desperation to the night.

“Sounds like he’s gonna blow before you’re ready to come,” Jay said, moving to take position by her head. “Don’t worry, love, I’m ready for another go when you are.”

But all his words came back to bite him as she arched her back.

I felt myself slip deeper, something in her opening up in this position, but that wasn’t why she was doing it. While I was groaning at feeling her take my whole length, she reached back and grabbed Jayden’s cock by the root. His breath hitched as she jacked it slowly, then caught in his chest when she wrapped her lips around the head.

Fuck.

I wanted to be right where I was, but also down her throat at the same time and Jay smirked at me in acknowledgement. But whatever envy I might’ve felt, it meant nothing in the face of this.

The sweet, velvety feel of her around me each time I thrust deeper, the way her clit popped up after every rub of my thumb, ready for more, and the way she convulsed around me, ripples of pleasure that trailed the whole way down my spine, ones that seemed to echo in her. I fucking couldn’t get enough of those muffled sounds of pleasure she was making.

“If you don’t want this knot, you need to make that clear,” I ground out, fangs snapping down, wanting to mark her all over again. “I can stop—”

But whatever I was about to say was silenced when her legs locked around my hips and dragged me deeper.

Fuck. Yes.

I’d never get enough of this, of her, never. I growled as I worked my knot in, letting out a long howl once I was seated deep inside her, the three of us caught up in this sensual wave that threatened to drown us.

SOMETIME LATER WE all flopped down on Jay's swag, the two of us wrapped up around her.

"So am I going to get woken up by Xavier later?" she asked, her eyelids fluttering right before she closed them.

"Nope," I said, nuzzled her neck. "If he says this is Jayden's night, then that's the way it'll be for him."

"But not you." My brother sounded grumpy, right up until Kai kissed him lazily.

"And not you either," I shot back, closing my eyes and falling into our mate's heady scent. "Nothing would keep you away if it was my night."

"Damn fucking straight," Jay said finally before turning back to Kai. "Better get used to sleeping in a big puppy pile, beautiful."

She just smiled as she drifted off to sleep.

"Couldn't think of anything better."

Chapter 42

I was starting a new day at a new job, wearing the mating marks of my mates on my neck and the others they'd left on me in a far deeper place, so everything should've been amazing, right? I felt amazing. I should've been tired, irritable. I had mosquito bites all over my skin from sleeping rough with the guys, but they'd woken me early in the morning so I had time to have a shower and get a change of clothes before reporting for breakfast. But when we went to start work, George had the guys stay behind to have a quick chat to them, leaving me to walk alone to the shed.

Well, not entirely alone.

“So which one is it?”

My eyes jerked up to see that Ned was keeping pace with me. That shit-eating grin of his was back, but his eyes now glittered with a hard light I didn't like.

“What're you on about?” I asked, not bothering to be polite.

“Jayden took you off on that bike of his, but his brother wasn't anywhere to be found either last night.” His lips twisted. “So which one was with you? Jayden or the big fucker?”

“Pretty sure it's none of your business—”

I felt myself puffing up, the wolf coming to attention and growling inside me, ready to attack. I had to hold her back. *Not here*, I told her, *not now*. But she wasn't going to listen to

me because he grabbed my arm and spun me around to face him.

“No, I don’t ’spose it is, not if I get my turn.”

“Your turn?” I gasped, then burst out laughing, going to tear my arm from his grip. “You won’t get shit from me.”

“Shouldn’t say stuff like that,” he said, eyes intent and staring, his fingers digging down deep enough to bruise. “If there’s no hope, then there’s no need to be nice.”

He thought he had me pinned, but he didn’t. I wrapped my hand around his arm and he thought he had me beaten because my fingers weren’t able to span his thicker forearm. But he didn’t have claws. I let mine spring from my fingers, digging into his flesh until I watched that glare lose its power. Sweat sprung across his brow as blood began to drip on the ground between us.

“What the—?” he started to say as he snatched his hand away.

“What the hell are you up to?” Vicki said, crossing the distance between us and the shed, then getting in Ned’s face.

“Nothing you need—”

“Don’t you start trying to pull that shit with me, Ned Harris!” she snapped. “I saw you grab the girl.”

“And she grabbed me right back. Fuck!” When he pulled his arm up, I shrank back, because there was clear evidence of my other nature in the neat punctures in his skin. “What kind of fucking nails you got.”

“Ones you don’t want to be on the business end of,” I shot back. “Steer clear of me, Ned.”

“What’s going on?” I heard Xavier’s voice from the house, then the three of them appeared beside me. Jay and Xavier got in the man’s face, but it was Atlas that shoved him several feet away from me.

“All right, all right, everyone needs to calm down,” George said, joining the fray.

“He grabbed Kai,” Vicki said, outrage vibrating in her voice. “And he didn’t have anything too nice to say to her by the look of it.” She reached over then and took my arm, twisting it gently so that the mottled bruises were apparent to everyone.

“You fuck.”

That was the only warning Ned got, as Jay smacked him straight in the jaw. But one hit wasn’t enough. Next, he and Atlas were lunging at Ned, belting the living shit out of him, not stopping even when they had the man on the ground. I sucked in noisy breaths, hearing my heart beat furiously in my ears, one half of me horrified at what was happening, the other wanting to shove them to the side as I tore off Ned’s head.

“Enough!” Xavier said, wading into the melee, stopping his brothers from kicking the other man while he was down, only to haul him upright, leaving Ned’s feet dangling in the air. “You worked it out yet? No one comes near Kai. No one but us. You look at her, breathe the same air as her, even say hello or good morning, I won’t stop my brothers next time.” He gave Ned a shake, the man’s head lolling on his neck. “Because I’ll be right there at the front, kicking the living shit out of your useless hide.”

He tossed the man aside then like a discarded doll and Ned fell in a messy heap like his limbs were made of cotton rather than flesh and bone.

“Is this finished?” George asked Xavier, not Ned, ignoring the other man’s friends as they clustered on the veranda.

“As long as he keeps the fuck away from Kai,” Xavier growled from between gritted teeth.

“Fair enough.” George nodded, then looked at the other men. “That all clear to everyone? Kai is not interested in anything you lot have to say and neither am I. Get your arses in the shed and start shearing. There’s sheep waiting.”

“You going to be all right, love?” Vicki asked me in a concerned voice. “Maybe we should put some ice on that.”

I shook my head, but shot her a smile, because I wouldn't need that. My wounds were already beginning to heal, which was more than could be said about Ned. He'd moved slightly, groaning when he did so, then reconsidered that decision, staying collapsed down on the dirt until we were inside the shed. As I cast a look back, I saw one of his mates step forward to take Ned to his bunk.

I DIDN'T SEE much of Ned that day or the next, because the prick pulled out of the job at the Hamiltons, taking his buddies with him. Vicki had fussed and George had sworn black and blue, threatening Ned on the phone to dock his wages. But I could have told them they needn't have worried. My guys stepped up and moved even faster in response. We finished up all of their sheep, then moved onto other farms around the district. People welcomed us with open arms, even if they had a full roster of shearers on deck. Vicki had sung the boys' praises and people saw she wasn't talking bullshit, paying the four of us a big chunk of money, then sending us onto the next farm, then the next, until we'd be forced to move to a different area if we wanted more work.

I thought we'd gotten clear of Ned and his cronies, that he'd learned an important lesson, but men like him rarely do.

"SO HOW'S IT GOING, KID?" Jamie asked down the phone line. "How's working as a rouseabout?"

"Good," I replied, settling on the edge of the deck and staring out at the sheep. The guys were walking in and out of the cottage, loading up everything we had on the back of the truck. We'd already sold my rust bucket of a car. "Like, it's hard work, but it pays well and it's easy to do."

"You sound happy, and not just with your change of career," she prompted.

"I am." I let out a sigh and she laughed, the sound kind of hollow and echoey over the roar of her truck's engine.

“Honest, I am. I’m just ringing to let you know that we’re moving on.”

“*We’re* moving on.” She snickered at that and I found myself flushing despite myself. “So, you are happy. Really happy.”

“Happiest I’ve been since the day you found me.” I blurted that out, only realising how tactless that sounded once the words were out. “Shit, sorry—”

“Don’t be, kid,” she said. There was a long silence. “I’ve known you were hurting since the moment I met you, and if those boys can take that away? Then I’m on board, one hundred percent. So where you off to?”

I told her: where we were headed, what we were thinking of doing, that we were going to stop at a concert being held in one of the bigger towns on the way.

“Raleigh, huh?” she asked. “I might be able to make a detour there. What day and what time? I wanna meet these boys that’ve put the smile back on your dial, properly this time.”

Chapter 43

“You know we don’t have to keep shearing.”

Xavier told me that as we all walked towards the gates of the Raleigh showgrounds. People were streaming forward, showing their tickets and being granted entrance.

“What do you mean?” I asked, but he only had half of my attention.

My steps felt extra springy, my whole body lighter. I’d never gone to a concert before. We would never allow that many humans to come into our hometown and even if we did, the population was too small. So I’d never felt the collective build of anticipation. I could smell people’s excitement on the wind, feel the energy that came from so many people being in the same place. Xavier smiled slightly, then shook his head before pulling me closer.

“We could do whatever you want.” He stopped us from moving forward, so that people were forced to walk around us to get in the gates. “We’ve got enough money to buy a house. We could settle down in a small town or go to the city. If you wanted to study—”

“What brought this on?” I asked, trying to dance out of his grip, but his hand tightened around mine. I could only go so far without fighting to get free.

“We don’t have to go to the next shearing job,” he said. “That’s what I mean. If you wanted—”

“I want to go inside,” I told him, tugging him closer. “I want to drink beer—”

“Have you had a beer before?” Jayden asked. “Because I’m not sure you’ll like it. Maybe we should get you a few rum and Cokes instead.”

“Because that’s a better choice,” Xavier said sarcastically.

“Whatever you want.” Atlas slid up behind me and I saw some of the humans stare and mutter as they passed. Because I looked like a girl holding the hand of one man, while getting a hug from another and I knew what they thought about that. I didn’t focus on them, twisting to meet his eyes.

“You mean that, don’t you?” I stared at Atlas, then Jay, then Xavier. “Don’t you want to go back to Stanthorpe, take your place as alphas?”

“Not if it means losing you,” Xavier said with a deadly intensity. Each man stepped forward then, staring into my eyes. “You’re the most important person in the world to us, more than our parents, our family, the town and the alphas. We’ve had a few calls—”

“You never told me that,” I said with a frown.

“Because it was never relevant until now,” Jayden said. “You were happy on the farm, so we stayed there until the work ran out. Now we’re on the move—”

“You decide where we go, what we do,” Atlas told me, offering me the one thing I really truly wanted. I’d been master of my own destiny since the moment I’d left home and I didn’t want that to stop. I sucked in a breath and another, right before I turned to him.

“Really?”

Part of me expected them to step into the role Mum had taken, one where they hassled and chivvied me from one place to the next, ‘acting in my best interest’. But each one of them only nodded in response to my question.

“Well, right now I want to go to the concert.”

Xavier groaned. “We need to work out where we’re going.”

“Tomorrow.” I bounced up on my tiptoes and flung my arms around his neck. “Tomorrow, I promise.”

“Tomorrow when you’ve got a hangover and all you’ll want is a bacon and egg sandwich,” he grumbled, as he swept me up into his arms and carried me through the gates, both of us laughing.

I GOT WHAT I WANTED. Atlas stood in line with me as we went to buy food, while the others promised to get me a few different drinks to see what I’d like. It was weird being on the other side of the counter. I could see the girls at the food stand moving like lightning, putting together peoples’ orders, but I didn’t feel any need to help. It was nice being waited on, rather than doing the waiting. But right as we stepped close to the counter, a familiar voice had us turning around.

“I thought that was you.” Brent was one of the other shearers we’d met at Vicki and George’s place. He’d hung around with Ned, but I couldn’t say if they were friends or not. He smiled now, as he looked the two of us over, then focussed on me. That smile twisted in a way that if he was a wolf, it’d mean he saw me as weaker, less dominant than him. “So, you made your choice, huh?”

“What’re you doing?” Atlas’ question came out in a sharp bark, loud enough that other people turned to stare at us. “Don’t talk to her.”

“Why? You’re the one that won, right? So where are your brothers?” Brent’s smile widened. “Did you ditch them for a piece of skirt?”

I was shoved behind him then, Atlas’ body forming a wall between me and Brent. It caused a ripple in the crowd though, with people thinking we were trying to push them out of the queue.

“Don’t fucking say a word to Kai,” Atlas growled. “You’ve got no fucking idea—”

“You didn’t, did ya?” From over Atlas’ shoulder, I caught sight of Brent chuckling. That just made me marvel at the balls the man had on him, especially when he continued. “All four of you are real fucking close. So, where are you mob headed?”

“That’s none of your fucking business,” Atlas shot back, but Brent just shrugged.

“Only asking so I can head the other way.” The smile faded as his eyes slid up and down Atlas. “You pricks shear too fucking fast and too neatly for me to want to share the same shed. Boss starts looking at me like why can’t I do the same.” We stepped forward in the queue then, all of the humans before us having got their orders, leaving the girls looking expectantly at us. “How about I shout you a feed?”

“We’ll get our own food,” Atlas said, turning to the girl in front of us and delivering our order. But by the time we’d paid and received our items, Brent was gone. “Stay close to me.” Atlas encircled me with one arm, balancing the food we’d bought in the crook of his other arm.

“He’s just some idiot—” I started to say.

“He’s not coming anywhere fucking near you,” was Atlas’ final word on the matter.

WE FOUND THE OTHERS, claiming a spot on the gentle slope of grass that ran down towards the stage. I took a bite of my sausage sandwich, laden with onions, sauce and mustard and then tried some of the rum and Coke can Jayden had bought. He was right, it tasted a helluva lot better than the beer. They’d laughed as I spluttered my way through a mouthful of that. But as I was sipping my drink and watching the opening band come out on stage, Atlas told them what happened.

“Someone has eyes on Kai all night,” he told them, and I rolled my eyes as the others growled. “We ran into Brent...”

His voice faded as I felt my phone begin to vibrate. I put my can down on the grass and pulled it out.

“Jamie?”

“Just inside the gates,” she replied. “Where are you?”

“I’ll come find you,” I told her, leaping to my feet.

“Hey, you don’t need to—”

But I wanted to. Once I was standing, I was scouring the crowds for sight of her, then gave up when I couldn’t, catching sight of the gates. I took off then, as the guys continued to discuss how to manage me.

I wasn’t being careful, cautious and I didn’t want to be. The crowd, the music, the rum, it all combined to make me feel I was free, free to do whatever the hell I wanted. That’s what they’d offered me, right? Choices, the freedom to make my own choices. So I wound my way through the many people streaming into the place, my heart beating so fast—

Right up until I saw him.

My feet stopped too fast, my body still moving, forcing me to stumble, because there in the crowds was a familiar face. Not the right one, though. Ned smirked from where he was sandwiched in amongst a million other people. Those eyes, they slid down my body, taking in my dress, my boots, everything that I was, and his smirk just got wider. I didn’t know why I froze on the spot, and as soon as I thought that, I moved, straightening up, staring him down, daring that stupid fuck to make a move, when I heard my name.

“Kai!”

Jayden swept forward now, pulling me into his side, but I didn’t want him right now. I fought my way free, searching for that insidious gaze, but by the time I stood on my own, Ned was gone.

“I thought we talked about this,” Xavier said as he reached my side. “You need to stick with us.”

“No, you decided that, not me,” I said with a frown.

“Hey, kid...” My head whipped around to find Jamie was standing there, watching everything that had taken place. “We all good here?”

“We’re good,” I replied, smiling now. “The guys are just being stupidly overprotective.”

“Overprotective, huh?” I watched her eye each one of my mates, before nodding. “I approve. I’m Jamie.”

She thrust her hand out for Xavier to take and when he did, he wore a smug grin.

“So you know exactly what kind of trouble our girl likes to get into?” he said. “I’m Xavier. These are my brothers, Jayden and Atlas.” Each one of them shook her hand. “We’ve heard a lot about you.”

“And I haven’t heard anywhere near enough about you three,” she said, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and giving me a squeeze. “Wanna catch me up?”

WE TALKED FOR SOME TIME, sitting on the grass and watching the opening band fight for people’s attention. They weren’t the one people were here to see, so people chatted, drank, smoked and waited instead of engaging with the performance. But not Atlas. I’d made him give up smoking a few weeks ago, and after a while of him stomping around like a bear with a sore head, he’d kicked the habit. I used the time to talk through the last month or so, bringing Jamie up to speed.

“So... fated mates, huh?” she said, sipping on her drink and then raking her eyes across each one of the guys. “Is that like a human marriage?”

“Humans can get divorced,” Atlas said, dragging me up onto his lap. “We can’t.” He brushed his lips across my mating mark, forcing me to shiver. “There’ll be no one else for us but Kai.”

“Wolves mate for life.” She nodded slowly and I found my body growing more and more tense as I waited for her judgement. “Yeah, I like that, if you look after my girl.”

“We try,” Jayden said. “We try really fucking hard, but she doesn’t make it easy. Like tonight, she keeps—”

The roar of the crowd jerked my attention away from my family and I was up and out of Atlas' grip before he could respond. I didn't know who the band was or if I liked their music but... It was the experience of it all. No Mum, no Anna, no worries about running into the guys. I'd lost so many restrictions I felt light as a feather as I drifted closer to the stage.

"You're gonna have those boys tearing their hair out before night's end," Jamie said, appearing at my side. Her words might have had a note of warning, but her grin? It gave me all the permission I needed. "But it's good to keep the fuckers on their toes. Dance?"

I didn't even know how to, but I took her hand and let her pull me deeper into the crowd.

THE SPEAKERS PUMPED out music so loud I could barely hear my own laughter as we danced, or at least I think that's what it was. Jamie grabbed my hand, spinning me around and we moved, everyone moved. Some people seemed to do so with a neat kind of precision, following the beat of the music with well-choreographed movements, each one flowing into the next. But we just flailed around.

Arms moved or legs, but not both and barely to the beat of the music. I felt like a bloody idiot but Jamie just laughed. She slung her arm around my shoulder and then showed me some simple moves, the two of us performing them in synchronisation, once I understood how that worked. In the end it didn't matter though. This was a little concert in a small town and, mostly, people just wanted to drink and have fun and despite our bad moves, others wanted to join us.

That's when my mates arrived.

They appeared in the crowd, towering over almost everyone else, moving until they formed a ring around us, keeping us safe. Guys backed right off, seeming to sense that a claim was being made and while some women sidled up to the guys, their death stares put the ladies right back into their place.

“You’ve done good!” Jamie shouted over the noise, as one song bled into another. She grabbed my hands, swinging both of us around. “These boys will do anything for you, won’t they?”

“Think so!” I shouted back before daring a sidelong look at them. Jayden smiled, his eyes narrowing, while Xavier scanned the crowd, and Atlas? He swooped in, plucking me from Jamie’s grip.

“This what you want?” he asked me, putting me back on his boots, just as he had two years ago at that party in Granville. He held me close and danced us around the small space his brothers made. “This what makes you happy?”

“Right now I need to pee,” I shouted back, laughing because the song ended suddenly and my statement came out a whole lot louder than I’d intended. “I’ll be right back.”

He’d want to come, stand in front of my stall and make sure no one messed with me, I just knew it, or he’d force Jamie to come with me. He’d tell his brothers to follow us, secure the perimeter. But I didn’t need that heavy-handed bullshit, so I launched myself forward, able to weave my way through the crowds much easier than he could, due to my smaller size and because I was a girl. Men backed off with a hopeful look, thinking that’s what it took to get my attention, but I just shot them a grateful smile before moving on, right up until I reached the edge of the crowd.

I sighed when I saw the line outside the toilets. It didn’t seem that brutal in front of the men’s but the women’s? A line snaked all the way back to the drinks tent. I regretted drinking those rums and everything else that had passed my lips, the pressure in my bladder growing by the second.

But as the wind picked up, heralding an incoming storm, I realised I had something no human woman did. I could take fur, trot off into the nearby trees and cop a squat without creating a public indecency. I smiled to myself, heading off to the other side of the toilet block, intending to switch into my wolf’s form once I was behind the building and past the trees.

Before I could get clear of the block, a voice had me stopping on the spot.

“What’re you doing here?”

Chapter 44

I went to turn around, to face him, but a hand grabbed my arm and spun me before I could.

And there he was.

Ned stood in the doorway of the toilet, the combined stench of unwashed male, the organic stink of piss and the less organic one of bleach, making my nostrils flare and my gut lurch. I went to jerk my hand away, but he held fast, grabbing my other arm and incapacitating that.

“Let me go!” I snapped.

“Don’t think I will,” he said, pushing me backwards, where I’d wanted to be moments before, but not now.

Ned put his body between me and the concert grounds, so anyone walking past would just see him. He tried to move me right where he wanted me, evidently not having learned his lesson last time. That was OK, I was up for repeating it. Claws formed on the ends of my fingers and I raked them across his skin, forcing him to snatch them back with a cry.

“You fucking little bitch!”

He had something on me though, experience I didn’t have. I was stronger, but that didn’t help me when he backhanded me across the face. He’d beaten down other women, other girls before, somehow I knew, and was methodical about it. While I rocked back on my heels, he went back for another smack, and another, until my head rang and my eyes spun, the whole world starting to sway before me.

And that's when I ran into a major problem.

We lived in a human world, not a wolf shifter one, so we were taught from a young age all the elements of control. It didn't need to come into play until we shifted for the first time, but a young shifter needed to be all the way down the road to self-discipline before his or her wolf came. So mine could only come forth when I summoned her, even as she scratched and barked and howled inside me.

I just had to let her out.

But my head was spinning, blood was trickling down my face and down the back of my throat. I was choking on that, coughing out a great splutter of it all over Ned. That earned me another smack, the pain somehow amplifying exponentially with each blow.

Something I was familiar with.

When I was much smaller, weaker, my mother had beaten me like this. Over and over, belting me before I could rally or scream out for her to stop, smacking me on and on until I had no words left. Only unholy screams, and that's what shredded my throat right now, incoherent cries for them to stop. But just like Mum, he didn't.

"Fucking little slut..." he snarled, his voice deepening and distorting as my heartbeat throbbed frantically. "Spread your legs for those fucks, but not me." I fell backwards, my balance gone, my ability to determine which way was up compromised by his smashing blows. "Think you were too good for me, but look at you now."

I clawed my way backwards, my body on high alert, my wolf bucking, scrambling to get out. Just like when Mum had beaten me, I could feel my wolf's strength but was somehow divorced from it.

Right up until things got worse.

He grabbed my arm, smacking away my hands when I tried to claw at him and then he dragged me away from the concert grounds and into the edge of the trees. Where the grass grew long and gum trees spread their white branches towards

the sky. Where the sound of the music was little other than a muffled beat. Where no one would hear me scream but the insistent, buzzing cicadas.

This was never supposed to happen again. I'd got out of Stanthorpe, run as far away as I could from that place. But the problem was that cruelty doesn't respect borders. Ned threw me down in the bushes and then fell down upon me before I could rally, pinning my body to the ground.

Fucking in the scrub, I was OK with that, with the right man, but that's not what this was. Ned didn't desire me, he just wanted to obliterate all evidence of his moment of weakness. He was cruel because he carried around inside him a great big hole that no achievement, no pleasure could fill. One that widened every time he saw someone else succeed, and the moment I recognised that, something went still inside me. He caught me staring up at him, then raised his hand to belt me again.

But I caught it.

In some ways he'd done me a favour, dragging me out into a rough area filled with scrub. There were no witnesses out here, something he'd planned on. But what he hadn't been able to anticipate was me. What made me special enough to catch the eyes of three men, which made him feel inadequate, was also what made me special enough to end him.

Thunder rolled overhead as the wolf and I moved perfectly in sync. We wrapped our legs around his waist and then threw him down on his back. A rock just happened to be under his head as we smashed him into the earth. His eyes went wide, the blow creating a sick crunch, but it didn't make him as discombobulated as me. His eyes narrowed all too soon, his lips pulling back in a snarl.

But those flat, even, square teeth were never any match for mine.

I growled then and anyone who heard me would assume there was an angry dog in the grass, the sound partially muffled by the incoming storm. Ned went still as he stared at my fangs. My eyes were blazing bright silver, I was willing to

bet, shining in the darkness as I held his gaze. And he was transfixed by them, by a girl turning from a victim to a wolf, right before I lunged forward and tore out his throat with my jaws.

She didn't stay with me for long, my wolf. She whined and pawed at her head, but whatever damage Ned had created, it was long gone. The shift from one body eradicated the weaknesses of the other one. She sat there beside him, panting slowly as he choked and gagged, trying to work lungs, a throat, that was no longer there. It didn't take long, the blood pooling on the cool earth, before he died. Then she licked her jaws and her paws clean and gave me back my body.

“Kai!”

My mates, my best friend, they stumbled onto the scene, stinking of fear and I yanked on my clothes as they gaped at the mess I'd made.

“Ned...” Xavier growled, his hands becoming claws, clutching at empty air.

“Kai, are you all right?” Jayden slid down beside me, grabbing my face and checking both sides of it for damage.

I just licked my lips.

The taste of blood was on my tongue and it was strangely sweet.

“OK, so he's dead.” Jamie's wavering voice had my eyes jerking up. She never sounded like that, ever. We'd had near pile-ups when cars had pulled something stupid just in front of the truck, dealt with some scary guys in pubs when we stopped for the night, and she'd stayed perfectly calm the whole time. “We need to get the fuck out of here, now.”

“Death by animal attack.” Atlas was the calmest of us all, his tone perfectly flat. “That's what it will look like.”

“With footprints and DNA all around the dead body?” The challenge in Jamie's voice rang out, but the thunder rumbled in answer. “I don't know how shit works in your hometown but ___”

“We need to get clear of here,” Xavier said, his voice cool and crisp. “Get away from the concert and away from this town.” His gaze landed on me. “Decide where you want to go, beautiful, and we’re out of here.” His eyes narrowed as he glanced down at what was left of Ned. “But quickly.”

“You think getting away from here will help?” Jamie said, straightening up, some of her former composure returning. “They have all sorts of scientific means to track murderers down.” She listened to a lot of podcasts while driving, many of them true crime. “You have any kind of history with this guy?” Our silence was deafening. “Fuck, you have, don’t you?”

“We’ll be fine,” Xavier said.

“They got into a fight.” I croaked that out, everyone’s eyes focussing on me. “Back at the farm.”

“Did anyone who knows Ned see you here,” Jamie asked them, not me.

“No—” Xavier said, but Atlas contradicted him.

“We saw Brent in the line for food. I told you that.”

“So you’ve been seen by people who know this Ned and who also know you had beef with him?”

Jamie’s words hung in the air between us, feeling like they got heavier and heavier like the storm clouds above, the wind now tugging insistently at our clothes. The wolf whined inside me. She’d let me come back to skin because she thought the threat was gone, but now the others were introducing even bigger ones. I felt her tense inside me, the need to run rising. We could streak out of here in fur, run and run until the roads finished and there were only trees, grass, scrub. We could live off the land, eating all the feral rabbits that bred unhindered in this country, growing fat on coney meat. We—

“We’ve gotta go home.” Jayden’s eyes flicked from me to the others, the worry plain there. “Not for long.” He blurted that out as he watched my legs coil beneath me. “Just in time for shit to blow over. The alphas will know what to do.”

The others spoke all at once, their individual voices hard to hear. They weren’t listening to anyone else but themselves, all

their thoughts, feelings, fears spilling out. They were getting louder and louder, only the steady rumble of thunder from above drowning them out enough so that no one else spotted us.

Lightning cracked as I stood up, the remains of my dress fluttering around my legs. Rain spattered on my skin, disguising my tears. I stared and stared until finally they all fell silent, looking to me.

“Take me home then,” I told Jayden, more gently than I felt. “Get me away from here, away from him.”

WE DROVE all night to get across the border and into the next state, swapping seats to either take over driving or sleep when we could. Everyone but me. I sat in the front seat, rocking back and forth with the motion of the truck, staring at the rain until my eyes ached, before we reached Granville.

“Look after yourself.” We were standing out front of the diner and Jamie had reached across, pressing her forehead to mine. “Keep your head down and stay safe, kid. It won’t be long. Just enough time for that fuck’s death to be ruled an animal attack, but remember...” She sucked in a breath and I did too. “I’m just a phone call away.”

Chapter 45

Xavier

This hadn't been the plan. My eyes strayed over to Kai far too often to be safe, checking her sitting in the passenger seat, but how could I stop? She was curled up there, staring blankly at the windscreen, following the wipers as they swept back and forth. She didn't move, didn't say a thing.

“Kai...”

I reached across to touch her, to try and break whatever spell she was under, but she just gave my hand a squeeze, without even looking my way, and then went back to staring.

“YOU'RE COMING HOME?!” The hope in Mum's voice, the excitement, fucking killed me. We'd stopped at a petrol station at some stupid hour of the morning and I'd given her a call while Jay went in to pay for fuel. “You found Kaia. You must have.”

“Mum—”

“You took her as your mate? Of course, you did. You must've done the moment you saw her.”

“Mum—”

“So you're bringing her home and you'll take your place as alphas—”

“For fuck’s sake, Mum.” I waited for silence, for her to fucking hear me and finally I got it. “We have Kai. She belongs to us, like we do her, but...” I let out a sigh, waiting for Mum to horn in, dominate the conversation again, but instead I heard the whistle of her breath between her teeth. “But something happened and we need to come home for a bit. We’ll explain when we get there.”

But the further we drove, the quieter Kai got, right up until we pulled up out the front of the house we’d grown up in.

I TURNED TO FACE HER. “Greg’s gone.” She just nodded. “Mum kicked him to the curb when it all came out. I think he lives somewhere on the outskirts of town now.” No further response from her, but as Mum and Dad rushed over, she opened the car door and slid out.

“Oh my god, Kaia!” I winced at Mum using Kai’s full name. It had become clear how much she hated that, but Mum didn’t notice. Not when she threw her arms wide, nor when she rushed over to hug our mate. Mum was in her own little world, her smile huge, her eyes shining. But when she got close to Kai, my girl’s hands went up, stopping Mum from hugging her. Kai just stared at her, then Dad.

“When did you work out Anna was Greg’s?” she said and I felt a rush of pride. Kaia had always kept her thoughts to herself, not wanting to bother people, but my mate had changed. Her eyes flashed silver as she stared at both of my parents.

“Well, Kaia—” Dad started to say.

“Kai,” she corrected. “Did you know what Mum was planning? Why was Mum with you guys first before you decided Jenny was your fated mate?”

I watched Mum’s face fall, the smile fading and replaced by a frown, one that got deeper as we stepped closer to Kai. She looked at us, as if we would jump in here and help, but we were perfectly silent as we stood behind our mate.

“You want answers.” I knew that tight smile. Mum always used it when she was pissed about something but didn’t want to say it. “Of course you do. Come in off the street and I’ll make everyone a cuppa.” She looked across at Dad, who just nodded. “Then I guess we’ll have everything out.”

GOING HOME WAS WEIRD. As we walked in the front door and down the hall I was hit by memories, so many fucking memories. When I looked at my brothers, I was pretty sure they were seeing the same things. The little table by the front door where Mum made us leave our keys and anything else we didn’t want to lose. The lounge where we threw each other round, re-enacting some of the bullshit we saw on wrestling shows, then walking into the kitchen, the hub of the house, where our parents made us talk about our day, even if we just grunted over toast or bowls of cereal.

But it’d changed, just as our family had.

No Greg, that was obvious, but also the walls were a different colour. No longer a pale peach they were a much cooler faint grey. There was a new kettle on the bench, one Mum refilled and set to boil. Then a new mug was pressed into my hand. I’d missed the gap between preparing for coffee and drinking it, spacing out as I was.

Because I was tired.

Because I felt beaten down.

Because all I could see every time I blinked was the ruined corpse of what had been Ned.

Because my girl had been attacked and I hadn’t been there to stop that fuck from laying a finger on her.

I didn’t drink the coffee, just holding it tight in my hands instead, feeling the bite of heat and treasuring that.

“So you want to know about your mum and me?” Mum said to Kai, straightening up. Our mate had barely said a word, accepting the coffee she was given without thanks, not even answering the question about whether she wanted milk or

sugar. Kai was completely and utterly focussed on our parents. “Well, back at school your mother was... the queen of the school.” Mum shrugged and then chuckled at her words. “Everyone wanted to be her or be with her.”

Dad moved closer, cradling Mum in his arms and while he stroked her hair, she told the story.

“Your mother wasn’t from around here, having moved to Stanthorpe from another pack. There’s always a bit of a mystique about newcomers, but your mum? It went further than that, not fading as people got to know her, rather it increased. Everyone seemed to fall under her spell and not just other students. Teachers, other parents, coaches, the principal. Everyone hung on Abby’s every word. And me?”

Mum smiled then, but there was as much pain as there was pleasure there.

“I was her best friend. Out of everyone she could’ve been friends with, she chose me. It made me feel special, ended up with me leaving behind all the girls I’d been friends with since kindergarten, just so I could hang out with her. I admit I was a little jealous when she snagged herself a couple of boyfriends.”

Dad’s hand stilled as she shot him a smile.

“Abby seemed like this golden figure, with the perfect life, perfect boyfriends...” The smile faded then and I didn’t think it’d be back for a while. “But then the choosing happened. The guys broke up with Abby—”

“I don’t even know why we were with her in the first place,” Dad said, shaking his head. I’d never seen him this... lost. “I always liked your mum and so had Greg, but for some reason I seemed to always forget about that when I was around Abby.” His head jerked up and he met my eyes and those of my brothers’. “But when I went through my first shift, I knew.” He pulled Mum closer then. “She was the one for me. Greg said the exact same thing, so I thought...”

“She got to him.” Kai stepped forward as Mum’s face became a mask of hatred. “She took him from me, my fated

mate. She had to get back...” My mother blinked, coming back to herself, wiping that anger away like it was never there. “But she’s gone and Greg lives all by himself in some rundown house. I rejected the bond, so now he has no mate, no job, no friends. God knows what your mother is up to.”

Mum had meant that to be reassuring, but Kai didn’t take it that way. I caught the way her body went rigid, the sharp stink of fear wafting off her. But when we moved closer, ready to comfort our mate, Kai stayed stiff and cold within our grip.

“Hopefully we’ll never find out.” Her voice was so small, contained now, but when she looked up at me, I could see the lines of exhaustion and stress clear on her face. “I’m really tired. I need somewhere I can have a sleep.”

I was going to escort her back upstairs, back to our room. I was going to wrap my body around Kai’s until she started to warm up, soften. I was going to hold her tight, breathe her scent into my nose and thank the fucking gods she was mine, but as the others did just that, Mum called out to me.

“Xavier...” I could never understand why they thought I was a potential alpha of this pack. I was brought to heel all too easily, more like a dog than a wolf. I stayed back as the others climbed the stairs and then faced my parents once I heard the door close. “What happened?” Mum asked. “Kaia looks like hell.”

“Kai, Mum,” I told her, feeling just as tired. “It’s Kai now and, yeah, she does. A guy attacked her and...” I saw my parents stiffen, the small signs of disapproval there in their body tension, their frowns. “And she killed him.”

Chapter 46

Jayden

You can never go home. I'd heard that in some whiny human song and never understood it. By the time we got up after sleeping the day away, I was starting to realise why.

"How about we go down to the milk bar for burgers," I suggested, hours after we'd gone to bed, when Kai's eyes finally flicked open. She frowned slightly and then shook her head.

"I can't eat anything. I feel sick."

But when she went to turn away from me and bury her face into her pillow, I directed her back my way so I could pull her close.

"C'mon, a burger with the lot from Elsie's kitchen?" I said.

"Milkshakes too." Atlas yawned and then rolled over to wedge our mate between us. "Ice cream, donuts..."

"OK, OK!" That tiny little smile on her face? It lifted my spirits more than anything else today. I stroked her hair back, probably freaking her out with how intently I was staring, but... I loved this woman with my whole heart and all I wanted was for her to be happy.

But she'd been forced to kill someone, when protecting her was our job. And now we were back here, which was never part of the plan. I held her closer, feeling her breath on my

neck, somehow feeling like if I just did this, everything would be OK.

“Fine.” Her voice was muffled by my shirt. “Burgers and milkshakes it is, but I need a shower first.”

“Well, I wasn’t gonna say anything, but, damn, girl...” Kai shot me a filthy look as she crawled off the bed, probably because I smacked her arse as she went. “I’ll get our bags from the car.”

But when the en suite door closed and I could hear the water from the shower running, Atlas turned to me.

“You know she’s going to go into heat soon.”

An omega always did after she accepted all of her mates’ claims. It could be instantaneous, resulting in the mated group spending many days in bed, affirming their bond, or it could happen sometime later. When the omega is ready, our biology teacher had informed us. But both Atlas and I had noted the ripening of her scent, growing particularly sweet right before... That fucking concert.

“I know,” I replied, rolling out of bed. “It’s why I suggested we come back here.”

“Not sure that was a smart move,” Atlas observed.

“No, but it’s a safe one. No one will find Kai, try to take advantage of her here. The whole pack will protect her through her heat. So let’s get her out of here, get her fed full and happy. Maybe then she can forget about what happened.”

Of course, shit didn’t work like that, but I had to hope, didn’t I? I walked out of the room only to run into Mum walking my way with a pile full of clothes.

“Kai’s gonna need these, right?” She handed me the lot of them. “She needs to get out of that blood stained dress.”

“She’s got clothes in the car,” I said, handing them back. “I’m gonna bring the bags in.”

“So we could have dinner?” She put a hand on my arm. “As a family. It’s been years—”

I cut her off with a shake of my head, cursing under my breath.

“Look, everything’s not gonna be happy families now, Mum. I know you want that, but...” I stared at her, willing to see it. Mum was like a damn perfumed steamroller when she got the wind up. “Most of the memories Kai has of this town are painful ones.”

“But we tried to provide a safe place for her.” Mum’s words came out rapidly, her tone rising. “We did our best to minimise what Abby did and —”

“Mum.” I didn’t use my alpha bark, just stared at her, waiting for her to understand. “This isn’t about you. It’s about Kai. No matter what anyone did, being here hurts her right when she’s already hurting enough.”

And with that, my input to the conversation was over. I walked away from Mum, ignoring her calling my name, because I’d brought my girl right back here. I was the one that had made her hurt more. I grabbed the keys to the truck, walking outside, but by the time I got there, Xavier was standing beside me.

“We need to be strong for Kai.”

“Well, that’s bullshit,” I said, shaking my head. “If we were strong, we would’ve never come here. We’d have holed up somewhere, then taken out any cops that might have approached us and anyone else that might try to take Kai. I never should’ve brought her here.”

When his hand landed on my shoulder, the weight was both oppressive and grounding.

“Here we’ve got the whole pack behind us,” he said.

Did we? That question was about to be answered when we walked in the door of the milk bar.

IT LOOKED SMALLER than I remembered it, the worn track in the print on the lino tiles, the old faded advertisements pinned up on the wall making it feel like some kind of

museum piece. And Elsie looked older when she came out from the kitchen, frowning slightly before recognition kicked in.

“You’re back!” Her whole face brightened as she bustled around the counter and when she grabbed my arm, I just stared. We were a pest or a necessary burden the last time we came in here, not prodigal children. “Oh, it’s so good to see you! Naughty boys.” She tapped Atlas’ shoulder, which had him watching her in confusion. “Leaving your fated mate behind like that. I know she’s a young girl still, but—”

“What?”

Kai’s voice was flat and even, but packed with authority.

“Your sister—” Elsie started to say, her smile fading.

“Is their sister,” Kai finished for her, stepping up to the older woman. I saw then what kind of omega she would make. One that was caring, loving, but also not afraid to step up to a challenge, any challenge.

“Their sister?” Elsie looked confused and I watched the gears turn inside her head, whirring, whirring until she frowned. “Oh, that can’t be—”

“It is.” Xavier was always going to be the best alpha, because he had that even, ‘be reasonable’ tone I’d heard the alphas use so many times. “Greg is Anna’s father.”

“But that...? No, that can’t...” It was as if the older woman was a robot and her brain was glitching, because she kept staring, starting to say something before stopping, until finally she fell back into her old routines. “So... what can I get the lot of you?”

I checked with Kai and then put in our orders, the four of us going and sitting at the table we always used to eat at. As I looked at the old comics littered across the tabletop, and a local newspaper that was a few days old, thin and barely filled with pack news, I wondered what the fuck I’d been thinking suggesting coming here. None of us spoke as we sat down at the same seats we’d always claimed, because this felt like trying to squeeze into clothes you’d long since grown out of.

We were home, so we were supposed to feel relaxed, comfortable, weren't we? As if to answer that question, the bells jingled noisily on the front door of the milk bar and three teenage girls walked in.

"God, Ms Masters is such a fucking bitch," one girl said. That was Teresa, I think, the sister of a guy I'd played footy with. She and her besties all had their eyes trained on their phones, making me wonder how the hell they hadn't walked into one of the aisles of food.

"Ugh, that new English assignment," another girl said, but both of them lifted their gazes to focus on the girl in the middle.

Anna.

Fuck, the last time I'd seen her, she was wide-eyed and stinking of fear.

And her sister's slick.

I jerked my eyes down, knowing then we needed to get the fuck out of here. Of the milk bar, of this town. What the fucking hell had I been thinking? I'd been focussed on safety and the alphas and...

Kai looked up at that moment and that's when my heart broke. That mix of pain and need on my mate's face. It seemed to light up for just a second, seeing her sister, but of course Kai couldn't just experience that. Anytime she saw her family, it hurt, like right now.

"Anna...?"

The girl turned around, brows creasing, then she looked down her nose at our table, as if unable to believe we'd be so terrible as to try and get her attention. But when she saw who called out her name, her response was complex. Her eyes flared bright silver, meaning her wolf was getting closer and closer to showing itself, and her nostrils flared. Her mouth was slack with surprise, but only for a second, as she quickly quirked it into a smile. But she didn't pay attention to her own fucking sister. No, instead she glided towards us.

“Wow, I didn’t know you were back.” She was sixteen years old, but this kid was standing there, playing with long blonde hair that was the same colour as mine, on the side of her neck we’d all bitten down into. She had ugly scars there now, red and raised, not like Kai’s much more subtle ones, but she seemed to want us to pay attention to them as she came closer. She fluttered her eyelids as she used a low, throaty tone. “I thought you were away for work.”

“What’re you doing?” Kai got to her feet, stepping between us and her sister with a growl and that’s when Anna’s features transformed. She was a beautiful girl, but in that moment she became ugly. Her brows jerked down as a sneer spread across her face and she shot Kai a scathing look. We all moved forward then, wanting to get between this girl, this threat and our mate, but Kai wasn’t having it. “No, don’t look at them, look at me.”

Jesus fucking Christ, my fuckups just kept on coming, as the two women came to stand almost nose to nose.

“What’re you doing back?” Anna shot back. She looked her sister up and down like she was dog shit on the road. “You were exiled.”

“What the fuck?” Kai’s question was echoed by each of us guys.

“You were always jealous of me,” Anna said with a swish of her hair. “So freaking jealous you tried to steal my mates.” When she gazed up at us, you’d have thought butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth, all that sweetness back. “I’ve been waiting ___”

“For some stupid reason.” Atlas shouldered forward and for once my brother’s blunt manner was a blessing. “You’re our half-sister.”

“No, that’s a lie that Jenny told because she was jealous,” Teresa said in a heated voice. “She just couldn’t accept that her ‘fated mates’ are actually Abby’s.”

“Is that the bullshit story Mum told you?” Kai crossed her arms and stared down her sister and I nearly fucking cheered

when the little bitch was forced to look away. My mate was more dominant than Anna. “The lies she fed you?”

“The only liar is you!”

The moment Anna launched herself at her mate, I swooped in, grabbing the kid by the waist and then swinging her around to set her down on her feet some distance away.

“I don’t know what sick shit your mum and my dad fed you, but what you think isn’t real.” I let my alpha authority tinge my words, forcing Anna to hear me. “You are our sister. You smell like family, not like our mate.”

“No...” Perfect tears beaded in the girl’s eyes. I could see why everyone was so bloody enamoured by her. She couldn’t even cry ugly. But that didn’t say anything about the person behind the facade.

“Atlas claimed Kai before we were accepted as heirs.”

“No...” Anna groaned.

“Even if we weren’t related, a bond formed before we bit you negates anything that happened on that day.” I poked my finger at her neck. “You’ve got scars, kid, and ugly ones at that.”

When I turned to face a pale Kai, her eyes burning with fury, Xavier stepped up behind her and pushed her hair away to reveal her neck.

“Kai has mating marks,” my brother told her. “Our mating marks.”

“No!” the girl screeched, all beauty gone now as she transformed into a screaming harpy. “No!” she shouted as she pulled items off the shelves and then tossed them to the floor. She stamped her feet down on chip packets, sending the food flying across the floor, crushed biscuits and loaves of bread, then stomped on a bottle of red cordial that fell to the floor.

“What the hell is going on here?” Elsie asked, bustling around the counter before looking up at us. “You’ll need to pay for this mess.”

“We need to pay for this?” Kai looked like an angry cat, fluffing up bigger and bigger by the minute. “We didn’t make a mess, Anna did.”

“But Anna wouldn’t do that, not unless she was provoked...”

The four of us watched Elsie’s expression transform, her eyes softening, a fond smile forming.

What the fuck...? What the fucking fuck...? I felt like I was watching some kind of horror movie play out in real time and all I could do was stare.

“Fuck this place,” Kai said, spinning on her heel. “I can make far better tasting burgers at home.”

Elsie started to splutter and Anna’s little buddies worked hard to get their own bit in, but Anna’s voice cut through the lot of it. She said the one thing that would stop my mate from walking out of the milk bar, the street and this town.

“Well, I’m glad you’re back.” Her hands went to her hips. “You can be the one that stays home and looks after Dad like Mum said you were supposed to, while I get my mates back.”

Chapter 47

“That fucking little bitch...” Jayden swore but I just stared at him, the milk bar’s facade and Elsie standing in the aisle, shaking her head at the mess, I knew. This was all a big shock to him, but not me.

“Don’t,” I said, not bothering to clarify what I meant by that. “She’s just saying all the shit she was taught.” I forced my lips to curve into a smile. “She’s the chosen one and I’m just the slub who’s lucky enough to serve her.”

“No,” Atlas said. “No, Kai.” I let him put his hand on my shoulders, felt the squeeze of his grip before he pulled me close. “Never.”

But it was then I saw clearly the dynamic of our relationship. There was the reality I’d been brought up in and then there was my mate’s view of me. I pressed my face into Atlas’ chest, then wrapped my arms around him, holding tight to my mate, to this version of me. We should never have come back here. Kai didn’t let sixteen-year-old girls dictate anything to her, but Anna...

“Let’s go,” I said finally. “Please.”

I’D THOUGHT we would head straight home, but instead Xavier drove us to the local fish and chip shop and grabbed us some food before taking us somewhere else. I glanced over at him when I saw our final destination, knowing then that he was mine. We parked at the old playground we used to go to

when we were kids, and it was more than memories that I found there. The moon shone on the play equipment and as we all went to sit on the roundabout and eat our food, something else settled over me.

Not everything in this town had to be traumatising. Here I felt a sense of peace. Small at first, but then welling up, growing and growing as I breathed the quiet of the night air.

“Kai, I’m—” Jayden started to say.

“Don’t.” I crunched on my potato cake, chewing, chewing, as they waited, the trees waited for me to continue. “It’s just until the thing with Ned is resolved, right?”

“When the coroner’s report is delivered and his death is ruled an animal attack, we’ll get the fuck out of here,” Atlas promised. “And never come back.”

I nodded, grabbing another chip and another. My guts rebelled at the thought of greasy food, but my body craved it. Hot, salty, fatty food, it helped fuel my body, replace some of the nutrients I’d lost in not eating all day.

“So we’ve just got to get through this then.”

I hated the resignation in my voice. Kai didn’t have to settle. If she didn’t like her boss or her co-workers, she’d jump in Jamie’s truck and fuck off to the next town, find work there. But Kai was always just a facade, a persona I put on.

And now I had to take it off.

I looked around the playground, remembering all of it. In Stanthorpe I was Kaia. A history came with that variation with my name, along with obligations, expectations, myth and lore. Here I was Anna’s sister, Mum’s daughter and my father...

“I want to stop in and see Dad,” I said when I’d finished eating, licking my fingers clean of salt and oil.

“Are you sure?” Jay’s voice sounded so much less certain. It looked like it wasn’t just me being thrust back into childhood unwillingly.

“I want...” I let out a sigh and all the tension seemed to leach out of my body. “He was never the problem, just Mum

and Anna. I want to make sure he's OK, that he's—"

"If that's what you want, then that's what we'll do," Atlas replied.

I DIDN'T FEEL SO certain as I walked up the driveway to my house. No, my parent's house. It was never home, not really, for me. When we arrived, I just stood here for a moment, staring at the dark facade. My heart beat faster and I had to force myself to clench my fists, then walk forward.

It didn't look the same and I took some solace in that. There was no way my mother would live in a place where the front yard was a little messy, the grass no longer meticulously kept short, the shrubs and flowers allowed to grow tall and straggly. But when I stepped up to the front door and pressed on the doorbell, it all came back.

My breathing stilled, went quiet, as if I could hear the muted sounds of screaming and shouting from behind the door. My lungs burned with the need to breathe, but I didn't. That sensation, of tightness, of pressure in my chest made sense to me now, getting weightier and weightier until the door swung open.

Seeing Dad was a strange thing. He'd changed and that didn't make sense in my heart, even if my heart knew it was inevitable.

"Kaia!"

He swept in and hugged me tight, but that didn't stop me from seeing the new lines in his face, the thick stubble on his chin, now feel the small swell of a pot belly. But while he might've looked older, he also looked...

"You look happy," I said in wonder.

"And you don't, love." Concern, real naked concern, was on his face, not the kind that he kept on the down low for fear of incurring my mother's wrath. Where the hell was that...? His eyes scoured my face and those of my mates before he ushered us in. "Did you want a coffee or a tea?"

He led us into the house and the wolf whined inside me. She did not understand at all why we would come back here. Dad was weak, unable to protect us, so she pushed at the boundaries between us, ready to take over and do the job he couldn't. But as he drew us further into the house, I saw the other changes.

There were jumpers left on the back of the couch, a dirty plate on the coffee table, as well as a pile of old magazines. Mum would've had a fucking fit if she'd seen it, but I just smiled. Dad took us into the kitchen, and the sight of him bustling around to make us a cup of tea was the greatest of differences. Mum would've been frothing at the mouth if she saw that, something that had me stepping forward.

"You know where everything is," I said, by way of a joke, but when he looked up at me, both of us smiled, but not because of that.

"I had to when you were gone." He shook his head and then dared to look at me. "No, I was allowed to." Dad settled back against the counter as he waited for the kettle to boil. "I can do what I bloody like in my own house now."

Up until this point, coming back to Stanthorpe had been pretty bloody horrible, but this? Dad relaxed, Dad at ease. It was worth it to see that.

"I might not be able to cook as well as you, but I make do. We make do."

And then it was back. That furtive expression, his eyes flicking up to the staircase, as if he could see up it.

"You and Anna?" I prompted. He nodded quickly. "We saw her at the milk bar."

"Did you?" He busied himself with making the tea rather than face me, the confidence leaching from him by the second, but then he stopped himself. He let out a long sigh and then twisted his head to look at me. "Was she really bloody awful?"

I let out a harsh bark of laughter then, never having heard anyone say a word against my sister in this house. I straightened up, searching his face for some clues as to why

now. The kettle whistled, ready to be turned off, but for a moment there was just this.

Anna was my sister, but I'd never really been able to feel much of a bond for her. When she was a tiny little baby she smelled like mine, pack, but the moment she got older that all faded. Mum gave her every one of my toys each time my sister reached for them and when I dared say anything about it, she told me off for being selfish.

At first my little brain had just assumed it was because she was the baby, but then Anna had become a toddler and a small child and none of that insistence that I share had stopped. Whatever Anna wanted was hers and I just needed to give way. Deep down it made me hate her just a little, the dislike growing each time Mum insisted I take Anna with me when I hung out with the guys, as she rhapsodised over how pretty my sister was, all the while wrinkling her nose at me. But while all of that was familiar to me, this wasn't.

Anna wasn't my father's child.

He'd always tried to be painstakingly patient with both of us, being much fairer in his dealings with us than Mum ever was. But he did so with a daughter that wasn't his own. Did he know? I couldn't bring myself to ask, the kettle whistle growing louder and louder, right before Xavier stepped in to turn it off. I blinked, coming back to myself and then said what I could.

"I don't think I've ever heard anyone say anything critical here," I said, and when it did, it felt like something cracked inside me, something icy. "Everyone was always—"

"Anna can be a little bitch," he said, pouring the tea and when he handed me my cup, I nearly dropped it.

"I'm sorry—"

"I know what your mother did." Dad didn't bother to clarify or expand upon that, making clear it was all of it. "And let me say, your sister has not dealt well with being deprived of her greatest champion, but..." He brought his tea to his lips,

staring into space before taking a sip. “We’ve rubbed along the best we can. She’s more dominant than I am, as you are.”

I frowned at that admission. No one in the house dared speak of my dominance, lest it give me ideas above my station.

“So I am limited in my ability to keep her under control, but...” Dad smirked. “She’s too lazy to get a job and make her own money, so she knows that I won’t give her any, not unless she behaves, so...” He looked at me. “What did she do this time?”

“She and some of the town think the guys are her mates and that I’m just a jealous bitch, trying to keep her away from them,” I replied, the sharpness in my voice feeling weird, wrong in a place like this.

“Christ, they’re still on about that, are they?” Dad paled.

“They?” Atlas stepped forward then. “What do you mean they?”

Chapter 48

Xavier

I hated this shit, this house, the weakness of Daryl, Kai's father. It wasn't his fault. The gods knew why some people were born with more dominance or less and why the hell they would make this man Abby's fated mate, but still. As soon as we'd stepped into the house, I felt like hopelessness, horror leached from the walls. I wanted to bundle Kai up and drag her out of there.

Just as I had for as long as I'd known her.

When we were kids, it was just an instinct, something simmering below the fake facade of happy families that Abby forced everyone in this house to play along with. But now?

"Kai, maybe we should—" I started to say.

"What do you mean 'they'?"

Atlas was a wolf on the hunt, his eyes bright silver, and when he stepped towards Kai's dad, it was with the stiff legged stance of an angry wolf. Daryl's eyes went to the floor, his head tilting sideways, baring his throat.

"Abby and Anna..."

Kai's father was having to force the words out, making me glare at Atlas. My brother didn't need to squeeze the information out of the other man. He'd volunteer it anyway. Because while Abby's heart had seemed to harden against Kai the moment she was born, her father's hadn't. She was his

daughter and while he was powerless to keep her safe, we weren't.

I'd fucking take control of this whole pack, expel every damn person who thought to slight my mate, if that's what it took.

"Abby was expelled from the pack, but she couldn't let it go. Couldn't let Anna go." His breath came in long, shuddering breaths, the stink of fear rising in the room. "Abby sent Anna a mobile phone and your mother calls her, calls plenty of people in the town. Abby keeps pouring poison in people's ears—"

"Until she gets what she wants." My mate's eyes became hard and flat. "Mum will never stop until she has..."

When Kai turned to look at me, there was such longing there, but also just as much pain. As if we'd fall in with Abby's plans the minute we got back to this fucking town.

"No." I grabbed Kai and held her tight. "No, never. We didn't play along with her bullshit back when we lived here and we won't now."

"Except for that day." Her voice was muffled by my chest, but I could still hear the pain there. "When she—"

"Abby won't do a fucking thing to you again," Jay promised, moving closer. "No one will. We'll leave if it worries you. I know you love Jamie but—"

"I want to offer for you to stay here," Daryl said, "but I can't. You need to stick with those boys of yours." He straightened up, our dominance no longer forcing his submission. "They have always been stronger than Abby and they can protect you..."

From what, that's what we all wanted to ask, but we couldn't, not now. I stared over my mate's heads into my brothers' eyes and made clear we'd be back here at some point, without our mate. If there was something her father knew, some threat...

"Maybe we should be getting home?" I suggested to Kai. "It's been a long day and you're tired. We can come back

anytime...”

But please don't ask me to, I wanted to say. This place was toxic, the air filled with invisible pathogens that were infecting us with their poison every second we stayed here. Her father seemed happy enough to live like this, but Kai wouldn't, not while we were with her.

“It's good to see you, Dad.” Kai pulled away from me and gave her father a hug, a sincere one this time. She relaxed into him, pressing her face into his chest, while at the door she had been stiff with tension. But when she pulled away I was glad, not able to take another breath until she was settled into my side. “But you should get the fuck out of here. Anna is another man's daughter. Let Greg take care of her. Find another pack, one where you'd be protected.”

“My place is here.”

Daryl disguised his fatalism with a weak smile, but I fought the urge to take a step back from him, as if that hopelessness was contagious.

“And yours is with us,” I told Kai the minute we got outside. I stopped beside the truck, tossing the keys to Jay. “Don't come here without one of us.”

“Why?” I saw that familiar defiant tilt of her head and shook my head. “I'm stronger than him and Anna.”

“You are.” I knew it and I loved that she was starting to see it too, but still. “You took out a grown man who was trying to kill you, and your family is nothing compared to that, but...” I rubbed my hand up and down her arm, as if to soothe her, but it seemed more for me. “I don't want you to have to exercise that strength.”

I saw Ned, Anna, Kai's father and Abby all at once then and when I did, my brothers and I stood between her and them.

“Let us take care of that shit. What's the fucking point of having alphas if it's not to use us to keep you safe?”

I meant that desperately, intently, but somehow that had her smiling. I both thanked my lucky stars and wondered how

the hell I'd made that happen. But she was happy, just for this second, and right now that was enough.

“Take me to the forest then, big strong alpha dude,” she said with a wicked gleam in her eyes. “It’s been a long time since we went for a swim in the old swimming hole.”

My brothers and I groaned. We remembered the pain of watching her dip into the water, whatever thin clothes sticking to her body, our cocks aching as we tried to deny the bond that pulsed between us. But we weren’t kids anymore. The moment I realised that, I recognised that her eyes glittered in the darkness. So I helped her into the back seat and wedged her between Atlas and me as we drove away from the house.

THE MINUTE she stepped out of the truck, all available moonlight seemed to bathe her form. Her body absorbed the cool light and seemed to reflect it back twice as bright.

“Kai,” I said, as she stripped off her shirt and left it to fall on the beds of pine needles. “Kai, maybe we should—”

“I want to feel.” Her hands went to her jeans and she undid the top button, the three of us following her every move. She smiled slightly as she kicked off her boots and then eased the jeans down. “I want to feel something other than the crunch of Ned’s throat beneath my fangs, his blood flooding my mouth. I want to feel something other than the same Stanthorpe shit. ‘Anna is your mate. She’s the precious one.’”

She did a fair imitation of Elsie’s nasal drawl as she said those words.

“I want you. I want us. I want to be Kai again—”

“Does that involve getting dunked?” Jay sprinted forward, throwing our mate over his shoulder, then jumping with her into the water.

My shout froze in my throat. The swimming hole might be shallower now. Rocks could have fallen in or tree trunks. But Jay emerged out of the water with a whoop, then Kai popped up, kicking and spluttering.

But my mate recovered quickly.

“Come in,” she ordered, as seductive as any siren luring sailors to their death, and we were helpless to do anything other than do as she bade. We stripped off and then dived into the cold water, the sting of it just what the doctor ordered. And as soon as I was in, Kai threw herself into my arms, her skin so fucking hot, it drove the chill from my bones.

“I want to feel,” she told me in a low, hungry voice, right before she kissed me. “Make me feel you.”

Chapter 49

This, this was what I needed.

When I kissed Xavier, when I felt Jay and Atlas' hands on me, stroking my body, touching my hair, it drove everything else out. Elsie, Anna, even Dad. Ned. The Campbell boys were always my escape from the shit of everyday life and that was just as true now. None of that could exist when I was kissing them, touching them, breaking away from Xavier, but feeling him hold me up, offering me to his brothers. I kissed each one of them until our lips stung, and then went back for more.

They wanted me.

I could smell the heavy scent of their arousal, hanging thick, like incense. The water didn't wash that away, just transmitted those pheromones further, driving me wild.

"Fuck, if you knew how often I dreamed of this..." Jay groaned as he pulled away.

"What did you dream of?" I asked. "What would you have done if you thought you could get away with it?"

Xavier held me up from the water, lowering me backwards, presenting me to his brothers, as my legs were locked back around his waist.

"What...?" Jayden snorted, then his eyes dropped down to where water dripped from my breasts. "Well, if you really want to know. How about we show you?"

His hands rose from the water, sliding down my sides, tracing long lines along my body until they got to his destination. I sucked in a breath as those hands cupped the undersides of my breasts. They felt curiously sensitive right now, this slow approach so different to the way he'd been on the farm.

"I'd catch sight of these sweet little swells." His fingers grew bolder, tracing big circles around my breasts. "Ones that got bigger as you got older and that killed me. You became riper." I gasped as his fingers grabbed my tits and sank them into the softness. "Swollen. And I wanted to do everything to them."

He moved closer, kissing me slowly, thoroughly, but the pace picked up as the beast took over and it felt like Jay was trying to devour me. His fangs scored my lips, making me growl and nip at his, until his fingers closed down around my nipples.

"I'd see these tight little nipples when the water was cold and I wanted to pinch them until you cried out." He did just that and I didn't scream, just moaned. That lightning stab of pleasure bordering on pain was just what I wanted. Xavier shifted me lower, so my groin was plastered over his, his length settling right where I needed it. "I wanted to suck them until you moaned."

I did just that as he sucked one nipple in, long slow swallows forcing my nerve endings to come to life. I didn't pull away from his assault, instead I leaned into it. I wanted this, wanted him, wanted all of them.

Because when I did the pain eased.

I hated everything about being back home, except this. It felt like now we were finally fulfilling a potential that had always burned there.

"You like that?" Atlas tilted my head his way, kissing me before I could answer, because he knew.

The air must've stunk with my need for them. But he didn't seem fazed by that and neither were his brothers. Xavier

ground himself against me, not pushing his cock in, but making sure I ached for it. And Atlas? His hand slid down, tugging my other nipple viciously before he took over the story.

“You would never have left this place if you’d let us know you wanted us,” he growled, kissing me between confessions, not letting me say a thing. When I started to squeak at his vicious pulls, his hand slid down, finding my clit in the water. “We’d have been on you for hours, forcing you to come over and over. We would’ve filled you with our seed.”

“Fuck, yes...” Xavier hissed. “You’d have been dripping with it.”

“And we would’ve loved you.” Everyone paused then as I stared at Atlas, seeing that emotion burning in his eyes, burning in all of them as I looked around at each one of my mates. “We would have been gentle when you needed that and rough when you didn’t, claiming you as ours. You wouldn’t have walked away from this place unmarked.”

“I love you too.” The words were hard to say. They’d told me over and over, but my voice died each time it was my turn. “I’ve always loved the three of you. When we were little kids, I cried at night because I missed the three of you, and when we were older, I was bracing myself with everything I had, assuming someone else would become your mate. I wanted, needed it to be me.”

“It was always you.” Xavier drew me back against his body. “We thought you knew. I’m fucking kicking myself that we didn’t make that clear but—”

I twisted in his arms, turning back so I could wrap mine around his neck.

“You just have to be clear about it now.”

He yanked me closer, slamming his mouth down on mine, making it very apparent what he thought. And I was right there with him, matching his ferocity, as he walked us out of the water and over to a large flat rock.

We used to lie on it all the time when we came to swim and I felt some of the sun's warmth in it as Xavier set me down. Then they came with me, settling all around my body.

"You're going to go into heat soon," he told me, rubbing his hand over my stomach where it might swell with a child, with several children, if we were successful.

"Maybe," I said with a huff, not sure why it hadn't happened before now. I was ready, I was sure of it, and the lack of heat had old doubts rising. Maybe I wasn't their real mate, not their omega, but Xavier just smiled.

"No maybes," he said. "Your skin is getting hotter."

"Your scent is changing," Atlas added.

"And you're hornier than normal." Jay winked at me. "Remember the ride to the concert?"

They were my mates, so when no one was around to watch, I touched them as much as I could, claiming them all over again. But touching always seemed to lead to something else and I'd had my hands down Jay's and Atlas' jeans as we'd driven the several hour trip to the concert site, which in turn had had Xavier groaning from the driver's seat. And they hadn't been content with just receiving pleasure. They'd pushed my hands away and then shoved theirs up my skirt, plunging their fingers into my sopping wet cunt, all the way until we'd arrived at the concert site.

"We talked about how this might go," Xavier said, drawing my focus back to him. His hand slid up my thigh. "You're going to want to take all of us when it hits. It'll blow your fucking mind, drive away all inhibitions." His thumb brushed against my aching hole at the same time as a little finger brushed against the smaller opening further down. "We've been working on opening you up down here so it won't hurt."

But I couldn't focus on what he was saying as his thumb pushed inside me, just enough to stir me, but nowhere near enough to get me off. I needed more, more, and I told them that.

“How much more?” Atlas asked his brother, before tilting my head his way and staring into my eyes. “We’ve got lube in the car...”

We’d agreed, very sensibly, to try anal before I went into heat. I’d heard horror stories of women demanding their mates give it to them in every hole before they were ready, when they were blinded by their heat. But anal fissures after the heat died down were no fun to deal with.

“Yes,” I said, without question. Yes to trying, yes to them. Yes, in fact, to doing every overheated thing our teenage minds had conjured the last time we’d been here. I wanted to rewrite history right now, change the way those last few days had gone and turn them into the way it should have gone.

AND SO, that one word of consent meant that I was now on my hands and knees with an old towel laid out on the rock underneath to stop my skin from rubbing raw. I was letting out little meaningless keening noises I’d never made before. They were right, I was getting close, some internal mechanism was kicking in, making me ready, receptive to them. And I felt it even as Jayden moved from behind me, where he’d been playing with my clit and my arse, to lie underneath me, drawing my face to his for a kiss before he reached down and started working his cock into my cunt.

Fuck.

I knew somehow that this was why our parents tried to stop us from exploring shit before the choosing, because if we’d known what pleasures awaited, we’d have never stopped. The feel of his cock shoving inside me, opening me up, making me feel impossibly weak and terribly strong, all at the same time. I needed him, needed this, needed to feel split open but he needed me just as much. Those sounds he made as he delved deeper told me that. It was as if he was almost able to get his heart’s desire, and that he wouldn’t be satisfied until I was.

“You good, princess?” Atlas tilted my head upwards and I licked my lips at the sight of him, kneeling before me. Just as

before, he was perfect, hard, golden, but back then he was someone else's. Now he was mine. I moved forward, Jayden grabbing me tight to stop me from going too far away from him, my tongue flicking out and across the head of Atlas' cock.

“Oh fuck, yes...”

Atlas' hiss felt like it slid over me, around me, a serpent of shared pleasure. He fed his cock past my teeth and I swallowed as much as I could. He tried to stop me when I started to gag, then groaned when I didn't let him. I felt it then, that feeling of fullness, but there was more to be had. Under the sky, on the rock, by the light of the moon, I heard the cap of the lube bottle pop and then felt something artificially slick coat me.

“Fuuuccck...” Jayden groaned as I flexed and tightened around him, and Xavier stroked my spine.

“Shh...” Xavier said, rubbing me back and forth, circling my opening. “Relax and open for me, just like we've practised.”

It took very real effort to do that, to open a part of myself I didn't normally have to, to open myself to him. To allow the three of them to claim every part of me. I pulled off Atlas' cock to let out a long breath, then hung my head down as I said, “Now. Take me, Xavier. I need...”

But whatever else I had to say was cut off by the first of his fingers pushing forward. He smoothed the palm of his other hand down my back and Jayden ran his hand along my hip, murmuring words of encouragement to me. Atlas stroked my face as he brought his cock back to my mouth. One finger, then two, each increase had me groaning and Atlas hissed at the vibrations going down the length of his cock. Xavier swore as he rubbed the head of his cock against me and then slowly, so very slowly, worked himself in.

I wanted this, needed them all piercing into me, because when they did? When each one of them was inside me, I didn't think, feel or see anything but them: my mates, my alphas, everything I needed. I rocked back and forth, something that

had each one of them slapping their hands down on me to keep me still.

“Just let us do this for you,” Xavier ground out, his focus fraying. “Just let us give you this.”

And he was right. The moment I surrendered the situation, pleasure blew over me, gilding my flesh, turning every nerve ending on. Right now I couldn't focus on my feelings or Jayden's cock as he thrust into me, but held back his knot, or Xavier's much more gentle strokes. Not even Atlas cupping my jaw and muttering sweet words I couldn't understand, because there was no 'me' right now, only us.

Exactly as we were always supposed to be, perfectly in tune with each other. They moved faster, delved deeper as my pleasure ratcheted higher, giving me exactly what I needed. And I gave the same to them.

“Fuck, Kai...” Atlas hissed. “Fuck, fuck, fuck...!”

The moment he erupted down my throat my whole body went rigid, a rush of white-hot ecstasy rushing over me. My mouth, my body screamed at the sensation of it, my cunt clamping down tight.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” Jayden roared, jerking up to grind his knot against me, that direct pressure helping to string out the pleasure.

“God, Kai, I can't...” Xavier sounded desperate. “I'm gonna...”

He came hard inside me and I could feel every jolt of his cum. It helped carry me up and over into another orgasm, my whole body bathing in the glow of pleasure. The moon beamed down upon us and the bliss we felt was just as silver, just as all encompassing, as its glow.

WHEN WE WERE FINISHED, we dropped down into the water, washing ourselves clean and then they clustered close around me. I couldn't seem to bear them being more than an arm's breadth away and neither could they.

“Just like this,” Atlas told me as he held me close. “It would’ve been just like this.”

And right then I could believe in the promise of a life full of pleasure. I’d go through my heat, get pregnant and have a string of babies. We’d build our own family, one where no member was treated differently to the others. Each one of our kids would know love, all of the love we had to give. But as I floated in this cloud of ecstasy, cogs were beginning to whirr inside the town.

Going back home is only good if the dynamic is a healthy one. If that’s the case, you return to love and support, and you reflect the same back, yourself. But when you grow up in raging dysfunction? Well, those deadly tentacles start to reach for you the moment you are in range, ready to drag you under.

But I wouldn’t let it, I decided, as I stared at the moon.

The gleaming orb in the sky just stared back, cold, white and utterly uninterested in my promises.

Chapter 50

Atlas

“You lot look better this morning,” Mum said when we finally stumbled back downstairs the next day. We’d slept like logs when we’d come back after being at the water hole.

Fuck.

I could still feel the phantom sensation of Kai sucking the cum out of me as we all worked to serve her, the need to knot burning in my balls. I sat down abruptly at the table, not wanting everyone to see my cock thickening. But my little minx of a mate sat down next to me and then slid her hand up my inner thigh. I was helpless to stop her, although I grabbed her hand when she went to cup my balls. There was something in Kai that delighted in seeing my reaction to her: in the car, that was fine; here, not so much.

“Can I get you some breakfast?” Mum asked, walking toward the kitchen.

“Later, thanks, Mum.” Xavier added the last bit on hastily. “We’ve just woken up and—”

“The alphas called around this morning.” Mum was trying to keep her tone light, but we knew when she was irritated. It was like the fact she barely showed it made us pay more attention, trying to work out what she was feeling without asking her what was wrong, and then silently trying to correct what had upset her. “I think they expected to hear from you before now. They’ll be at the pack house all day.”

“Good for them,” Jayden said, going to get himself a bottle of water. Mum tried to fuss, but he just waved her off. He handed each one of us a bottle too and I cracked mine, glad for something to do with my hands.

“But Jay, you need—”

“To keep Kai safe,” he told our mother bluntly. “To look after her, make sure she’s happy. The whole fucking town seems convinced that we’ve just been away for a bit, taking our time to earn some money while Anna matures and can become our true mate.”

As he frowned, Mum’s hands started to flutter.

“Yes, I know, but—”

“You didn’t say anything about that when I rang,” Xavier said with a growl.

Her hands went to her hips then and we saw the other side of Mum rise to the surface, the one that was a wolf shifter. We were alphas and we could stifle the flash of anger in her eyes with one bark, but you couldn’t resolve conflict by controlling people’s reactions.

“And would you have come home if I did?” She stared at each one of us. “Any of you? I knew you were out there looking for Kai. But when you found her? Did you call? Let me know you were all OK? This is your home and—”

“Mum.”

Xavier walked over and hugged our mother and she fought it initially. It took a lot to make her mad but once she was riled, she needed to stay there for a bit. But everything in her seemed to crumble as he held her.

“We know you were worried.”

“Something could’ve happened!” We heard the tears in her voice and all of us boys stepped up then, moving closer. “You might never have found Kai and then you’d be lone wolves for life and I’d never see any of you—”

“Being a lone wolf isn’t so bad,” Jayden said, hugging her tighter when she started to splutter. “We earn damn good

money because we're faster and can work harder than human men. Moving from place to place and sleeping in swags got old, but—"

"There's no guarantee we're staying."

I dealt the death blow to my mother's hope, but I couldn't let it live, not while Kai was here. She was the one who decided, the one we needed to look after. Mum had Dad and even Greg—if she could bring herself to forgive him. I heard Mum's little sob and held her closer, but her emotions weren't going to have me pulling my punches.

"I'll let you—" Kai said, getting to her feet, her cheeks flushing bright red but I shook my head.

"No."

I pulled away from Mum, despite feeling her hand grasp at my arm. But while my mother had been the most important person in the world to me in the past, Kai was the centre of my world, now. That was just how it went once you found your fated mate.

"What you want," I told my mate. "That's the way this works. The moment you want out of here, we're gone."

Mum had always been so supportive when we'd said we thought Kai was our mate and I felt like I was only now working out why. Mum's eyes narrowed as she stared at my girl. Kaia had always been so quiet and respectful, biddable, but her time away had changed more than just her hair colour. Kai had come into her omega nature, and I'm not sure if our mother liked that. Perhaps she'd entertained ideas of having an easy to convince daughter-in-law, of being the power behind the throne when we took control of the pack, but that would never happen.

"Did you want to go and see the alphas?" I asked my love, and she stared up at me, thinking.

"I guess we need to." I heard Mum sigh, but I ignored that. "We need to find out what the hell is going on." Kai looked past me to Mum. "Whatever we end up deciding to do."

Mum didn't pester us about making us breakfast after that, instead finding something else to do. That was fine, we made our own toast and then got ready to ride over to the pack house.

IT WAS the largest building in the town. Anyone who happened to drive through would've thought it was the council building, but it wasn't. The alpha pack lived there but the whole of Stanthorpe used it for town meetings, weddings, funerals and other significant events. When none of that was happening, it was mostly empty. It was weird just walking in like we owned the place, but in some ways we did. This was what we were the prospective heirs to. We walked through the hall, our footsteps echoing on the tiled floor, until we reached the reception desk that was the buffer between the public and private areas of the pack house. Nelly worked the front desk most of the time and she perked up when she saw us.

"I heard you lot were back!" Did everyone in this fucking town look past Kai to us? The older woman barely registered our mate, beaming up at my brothers and me. "Here to see the alphas now you're going to reclaim your mate? Anna's been very patient you know."

"Anna's not our mate." People often accused me of being blunt but, to my mind, people talked way too fucking much. When you said something, you needed to get to the point. I wrapped my arm around Kai's shoulders.

"But you and Kai are just friends..." Nelly insisted, but her voice trailed away as Jayden shifted Kai's hair, making clear our claim. "Oh, I thought—"

"We've got this." The deep voice had us all turning. Mike, one of the alphas, was standing there. He nodded in recognition of us, all of us for once and then said, "Come through. We've been expecting you."

Chapter 51

Atlas

Nelly wanted to say something else, I could just see it in the way she puffed up, small sounds of protest falling from her lips, but we passed her by, walking into a part of the pack house few ever visited.

“Good to see you, boys.”

Brock stood up and Jack followed behind, offering their hands. I just stared at Brock’s for a second, then shook it. The alpha gripped it tight, too tightly for comfort, then started to shift his wrist slightly, giving him a more overhand grip. I looked at him, seeing the deep lines around his eyes and the grey in his hair, things I’d never noticed before, then gripped his hand so hard he was forced to jerk his away, his not-so-subtle powerplay having backfired.

“So you’re back—” Jack started to say.

“For now.” I took the three of them in with a steady gaze.

“But you’ve found your omega, and what a beautiful mate she is,” he said, stepping forward to actually greet Kai. “It’s been a long time since this place had a woman’s touch.” Their omega had died in childbirth, trying to give them more sons. “I’m sure—”

“I’m not sure we’re staying.” Her voice was so fucking crisp and clear, strong in the face of their authority. I loved her a little bit more for it. She stared up at the three men, not looking away for a second, something only an alpha could do,

or a mated omega. I watched Jack's brows crease, the two other alphas shifting uncomfortably, glancing at each other.

"We're here because we had an incident out in the human world," Xavier said.

"Now see, that's why wolf shifters need to stay in packs," Brock said with a shake of his head. "So what did you do?"

He sounded like a long-suffering father, but we weren't his kids, nor even official members of this pack, so that wasn't going to fly.

"Kai—" I started to say.

"Killed the man that was going to rape her," my mate finished for me. "Not sure if that's sanctioned or not, but I admit I wasn't really thinking of the pack at the time." She blinked. "I wasn't really thinking of anything but surviving."

"But if you weren't outside the pack, this would never have happened to you. No man in this town would try to rape you." Mike's voice was gentle, but I knew it was coming across as patronising by the set of Kai's shoulder.

"Maybe not, but my mother beat me—" she shot back.

"Now, Kaia."

"Kai," she corrected sharply. "My mother was going to try and make me an indentured servant in my own fucking home."

"I know what Abby wanted, but that wasn't the plan," Mike replied.

"It wasn't just what she wanted to happen. It was what did happen—I was one my whole damn childhood." When her voice broke, I held her closer, wanting to take this burden from her, but I couldn't. Right then I felt just as powerless as I had when we were still kids, but that had nothing on Kai's pain. We couldn't save her from it, only she could endure it. "No one lifted a fucking finger but me in that house."

"Kai—"

"The family wouldn't eat unless I cooked it. They wouldn't have clean clothes to wear unless I washed them."

“Kai—!”

“I wasn’t my mother’s daughter; I wasn’t part of the family. I was there to facilitate her dreams for Anna and—”

“That’s enough!”

I think Mike was surprised when he shouted at my mate, but he wasn’t more surprised than us. We rallied a whole lot quicker, throwing ourselves in front of Kai. We hadn’t been able to beat the alphas two years ago, but we’d gotten taller, stronger, packed on the muscle of men, and I was willing to bet it wouldn’t be as close a fight anymore. Wouldn’t matter if it was. We’d take each one of these fuckers out, if that’s what it took to look after our girl.

I realised, finally, why Kai hated this place so much. It wasn’t just that the place was stained by all those shitty memories, because with Abby gone and Kai living with us, she could’ve forged her own life here, if that’s what she wanted. It was the fact that the same shit that had allowed her to be neglected, abused, kept fucking happening, and that was what killed her. Claws snicked out at the ends of my fingers and fur prickled across my skin. I was halfway gone to shifting and ready to tear these fuckers to pieces.

“OK, everyone needs to calm down,” Brock said, holding his hands out. “Let’s all take a breath.”

“Why is everyone convinced the guys are back in town for my sister?” Kai asked in a low deadly voice. “Their sister.” She stabbed her finger at us. “Why does everyone assume I’m just the friend—”

“Because if we told the pack the truth about Abby, Anna’s reputation would be ruined,” Brock said with a sigh. “She was just a kid, caught up in her mother’s bullshit—”

“Like I was,” Kai growled.

“And no one would want her if it got around that she was the product of an illicit encounter between a woman like your mother, and another woman’s fated mate. Kids who are like that, they’re seen as tarnished goods, the taint of their parents being passed on to them. She was only fourteen.”

“And I was only eight when my mother started beating the shit out of me for not cooking dinner just the way she wanted it.” She stepped back then and we followed her, always ready to stand up and protect her. We needed to be more aware of what it was we had to protect her from, because it wasn’t just individuals. It was attitudes that had let her come to harm, as well. Kai found my eyes and stared at me. “We don’t need this place.”

“You’re right,” I told her.

“We can go somewhere else, to another pack, if we need that kind of protection,” she insisted.

“No other pack is going to tolerate a new omega being introduced into it. It would’ve been a difficult process if our omega was still alive,” Mike said.

“Then we’ll just go.”

Kai’s tone was almost begging, but she needn’t have worried. I was with her one hundred percent of the way. I stroked her hair as she spoke, listened to her, heard her.

Because it was becoming clearer and clearer that being heard was a rare thing for Kai.

“Wherever you want,” I said. “Whenever you want.”

“You can’t.” Jack frowned at my words, muscling forward. “You went through the choosing. We accepted you as our heirs. You were born in this pack and you need—”

“Kai can never rule here as the omega,” Xavier said, the skin around his eyes creasing. “Abby might not be here anymore, but her poison is. The pack won’t accept Kai—”

“In time they will,” Brock said, his tone deliberately optimistic. “They’ll get to know her and—”

“It’s your fault they didn’t in the first place.” Jay was like Mum in some ways. His temper didn’t come out that often, but when it did? He smirked then, even as his eyes danced with silver fire. “You let this shit fester, when you were the only ones who could have stepped in and stopped it. You can’t

expect our mate to put up with the shit that you were responsible for.”

“We’ll never stay in a place that doesn’t respect Kai in the way she deserves,” Xavier said, his tone forbidding. “She’s all that will ever matter. Find yourselves other heirs, because we won’t be sticking around.”

“And put the fucking word around that Kai is our mate because, I’ll tell you what, if one more dickhead says a fucking thing about Anna—” I snapped.

“You’ll do what?” Brock looked frustrated, realising that their future hopes had been destroyed. “Leave? You’re going to do that anyway.”

“I’ll tell the whole pack how fucking piss weak you are,” I shot back. “You didn’t step in and do something about Abby because you were too fucking scared to.” My eyes narrowed. “Fuck knows why.”

NELLY TRIED to say something as we left, but the four of us just walked the fuck out. I was more than done with this place. All of the good things I remembered, like how hanging out at the milk bar had been our haven, had turned to shit. And all the bad things? They just seemed to have gotten worse.

“We can go to fur and live in the forest for a while,” I told Kai, grabbing her hand when we got to the car. “Go and live like ferals.”

“We can petition other packs,” Xavier added. “Just because the alphas say it isn’t possible, doesn’t mean they’re right.”

“Or we could fuck off up north, go and live somewhere in the middle of the Centre, or up to Arnhem Land.” Jayden’s grin was lazy. “They’re the last places you can run to in Australia without jumping on a ship.”

“We could do that, too. We’ve got enough money.” Xavier was warming to the topic, eyes shining. “Could piss off to New Zealand or further away. Most countries need shearers.”

“Not yet.” Kai nodded. “I’m not that desperate. Another week of people telling us you’re my sister’s mates might put me over, though.”

“Well, if that’s the problem.” Jayden held out a hand for the car keys, which Xavier slapped into his palm. “Get in. I know just what to do.”

Chapter 52

Growing up, I learned all about fated mates. From reading about them in books, to learning about the bond in sex ed, I knew the lore. Your mate was the perfect person for you, just as you were the perfect person for them. But it had never seemed as real as this moment now.

When Jayden tore through the streets, I had a feeling I knew where we were headed. He stared at me in the rearview mirror far too long, smirking and then taking a corner at speed. But when we pulled up in the town square, some of the anger and adrenaline pumping through me dissipated.

We hadn't been back here since that day. The guys had taken the long way around to get to their parents' house, avoiding this spot. But Jay seemed determined to rip the band aid off as he drove right into the middle of it.

It looked pretty empty, with only a few people sitting around and chatting on the benches, who looked up as the truck pulled up, the tyres squealing. But as I slid out of the car, I realised Jayden was about to change that. He jumped up onto the stage with the kind of athleticism that I'd always envied in him, then grabbed the silken cord of the old brass bell.

When we were kids, we used to dare each other to touch it. Getting caught ringing the bell for no reason came with severe consequences. Not only would your parents ream you out, but the alphas would get involved. I felt some of that repressive instinct now. But Jay didn't have any of those concerns as he stood there ringing the damn thing.

People came from everywhere, pouring out of the shops, from office buildings, cars pulling in off the street when the drivers saw there was a gathering, all to hear what he had to say. I knew: it was what was supposed to have happened the minute they were declared heirs, what my body had been trying to tell me when I revealed as an omega. Tears pricked my eyes because right now I could see two painful things. The moment my mother pushed my sister forward to claim what belonged to me and, superimposed over that memory...

My mate trying to right that wrong.

I had to blink and blink my eyes to clear the tears, because I wasn't about to miss a moment of this. Jay looked just like he did when we were kids, golden and perfect. Sure, he was bigger, scruffier, more worn, just like we all were, but that only made him seem more beautiful. There could be no doubt in anyone's mind that he was an alpha, because he surveyed the crowd like he had every right to this attention, with a wild grin on his face that was all him. I could hear murmurs running through the crowd as people standing in little groups tried to work out what was going on, but they fell silent the moment he spoke.

"I'm Jayden Campbell." There was a series of small titters through the crowd, because he didn't need to introduce himself. "And I thought you should be the first to know."

Fuck, I thought frantically, *fuck*.

"Me and my brothers? We're stepping down as heirs to the alphas." I scanned his face intently, looking for disappointment, frustration, but there was only relief. "Anna isn't our mate, no matter what you saw." The noise in the crowd started to build. There was something to the tone of it, something agitated. But if I had any concerns that people would accept what he said, he quickly resolved them. "She's our half-sister."

I dragged my focus away from him, my eyes scouring the crowd. I wanted to see it, some sort of validation. People's expressions showed how much they struggled with the information; none more so than Jenny.

She was on the outskirts of the crowd and I saw the pain on her face, and how it grew as people turned and stared at her. I saw the moment she flinched each time she caught a comment being made about her, the looks people gave her before turning back to the stage. I didn't want to put her through this, but the only alternative seemed to be to hurt us and we were done with that. The sins of our fathers and mothers weren't going to be ours anymore.

“Abby had Anna with Greg, one of my dads, so there's no way she can be our mate, but...”

Jay turned to look down at me and it was then I realised I was standing so still, my whole body so rigid that I was shaking slightly. This felt like karma and fate and something else all at the same time. Another chance. The day in the square when they claimed Anna had seared a wound into my heart, one that developed thick scar tissue so I could stop crying and start functioning, but it was only now that I felt like I was starting to heal. His eyes shone just as bright as mine and for a second, we just grinned at each other like idiots. Because then he said the words, those perfect words.

“The only woman who was ever going to claim my heart was Kai.”

He held out a hand for me and for a moment I felt the ghost of my former self standing there. Kaia would've hated having so many people's eyes on her. She would have been waiting for the other shoe to drop, expecting someone to leap out from somewhere, to take it all away. But I wasn't her anymore. I stepped up onto the stage and took his hand, took all of their hands as my other two mates jumped up with us and I think that was what convinced the crowd more than anything Jay had said.

How could they look at us and not see the love that burned between us? No matter what Mum or Anna or anyone said, we were mated.

“Thank you,” I whispered. “Thank—”

“You never need to thank any of us for doing what we should've in the first place.” Jayden tugged me close and held

me so tight.

“We never needed this place,” Atlas told me, tipping my face his way. “We don’t need these people. They can think whatever the fuck they like, but they won’t disrespect you, our mate.”

“Abby tried to steal something from us before,” Xavier said, casting a weary eye over the crowd, but when he looked down at me, his expression transformed. “But we’re snatching it right back. It’s gonna be good going forward, Kai. Promise.”

But fate has a tendency to make a damn liar of us. We’d just made a declaration in front of some of the pack. The members of the pack who weren’t here would find out what had gone down as the rumour mill went into overdrive. And more than just them. Before night fell, it would have made its way to my mother’s ears, making a statement, negating all of her hard work. And my mum? She was never one to let anyone else have the last word.

Chapter 53

Xavier

For a while after the day in the square, things settled down. It took a bit for me to accept that. I found myself waking up in the middle of the bloody night in a cold sweat, but then I'd see my brothers and my mate and I'd calm down again. I'd turn and press my nose to her hair, breathing in that sweet rose scent that was all Kai and then close my eyes.

But I'd hold her tight as I slept.

She half-complained about it, saying I made her all hot and sweaty. My brothers would wake up and the three of us would show her exactly how hot and sweaty we could get her, but... I couldn't say it, feeling like if I said it out loud, that somehow it might make it happen. I held Kai tight because I was terrified I'd lose her, that if I let her go, let her breathe apart from me, that somehow she'd slip away. In the cold light of day I'd push those concerns aside, dismissing them as paranoia, but...

"Who was that?" I asked, walking into the kitchen to find Mum standing there, holding the phone receiver.

"I don't know."

Things were a bit stiff and awkward with my parents. They hadn't appreciated the airing of their dirty laundry in front of the whole pack, nor that we weren't going to be the next alphas. But they'd kept quiet about it, which is about all we could ask for. I frowned now, moving closer.

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

I used way too much alpha bark in my question and Mum frowned at that, but responded immediately to the authority in my voice.

“I don’t know because every time I pick it up, no one answers. Maybe there’s something wrong with the phone line.” She shook her head. “I’ll get it checked out because it’s happened a few times.”

“How many?” My heart began to beat harder, faster in my chest, the wolf and the man coming to attention, our muscles locking down tight, ready to face down the next enemy. And it seemed there was always another one. “Mum, how many?”

“Some.” Her tone was clipped, irritated and she moved away from me to turn the kettle on. “I don’t know exactly how many.”

“So many you lost count,” I said, looming over her. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because it’s probably just some dumb kids.” She was trying to convince herself as much as she was me, but I heard the tremor in her voice as I moved closer. Mum shook her head and then looked up at me. “It’s OK to just be happy. A prank call can be just a prank call. I know what Abby did was terrible, but you can’t let that hang over you for the rest of your life.”

I’D TALKED to Kai about this, late one night. She’d been snuggled into my chest, tracing her fingers through the thin smattering of hair there as the others slept. She’d described my childhood as idyllic and I’d just snorted, regaling her with tales of the beltings I got from Greg and Jackson when I was misbehaving, of mandated car washing and yard work as punishment. But she’d just smiled wryly and looked up at me, then basically called me naive. What they’d done fell within the realm of reasonable parenting, she told me, and then proceeded to tell me about this whole other side.

Some parents ignored their children, barely meeting their basic needs. Some used them as punching bags, figuratively or physically. Some enmeshed with their kids, dumping all of the parent's pain and frustrations on a small child. She explained there was a whole other world of parenting that I had no experience with, that which was abusive. But that day at the square? It'd opened my eyes forcibly, made me watch the grossest act of abuse take place, as Kai's mother tried to steal her own daughter's happiness away. I'd felt like I'd been sleeping at the wheel, not anticipating that Abby would pull that shit and that feeling had increased the moment Kai accepted our claim.

Then that shit with Ned happened.

I felt like I was jumping at shadows, not real threats, so that when someone did come for my mate, I wasn't there. My teeth ground together. That couldn't happen again. It wouldn't. I'd—

“Yeah, I'll meet you at Melva's.” Kai walked in having a conversation on her phone. She was wearing a dressing gown, her wet hair pulled up into a towel turban. “Around twelve? Yeah, it'll be good to catch up too.” My mate ended the call and looked at me. “What?”

I forced myself to smile.

“So we're going to Melva's for lunch? One all day breakfast special coming up for me.”

“I'm going to Melva's,” she said, poking a finger into my chest. “You guys have been oppressive lately.”

Trying to keep you safe, I thought furiously. *Making sure you don't slip through my fingers*. But I smiled and told her to sit down as I made her coffee for her. I brought my own with me, but just sat there with it cradled in my hands as I watched Kai drink hers. She noted my attention with a cock of her eyebrow, those brown eyes too keen, forcing me to take a sip of my own drink lest I freak her out.

“HEARD you’re taking off without us,” Jay said later in our room, grabbing a half-dressed Kai and throwing her down on the bed. “But not yet, right? You’ve got a little time...”

He started to kiss his way down her body, but she shoved him out of the way.

“I can’t be late. I haven’t seen Jamie since...” We all went quiet then. “Well, since the last time. She doesn’t get out this way often and...” She stared into his eyes and I knew then Jay wouldn’t have anything to say. “You know Jamie’s important to me.”

“So bring her to our place.”

Atlas hated the idea of her going off on her own just as much as I did. His scowl seemed etched into his brows.

“You’re being overprotective,” she said, rolling out of bed.

“No such thing.” But as soon as she cupped her hands around my brother’s face, Atlas’ frown eased.

“I’ll be careful,” she told him as he wrapped his hands around her wrists.

“You don’t need to be if we’re with you. We’ll drive you to Granville and go and hang out at the hardware store until you’re finished,” he said.

Yeah, that, I thought. Agree to that.

“You haven’t driven the truck before,” I added. “We can save you from having to pull the seat way forward. We’ll find something to do until—”

“You’re suffocating me.”

That little admission, said in a tight tone, but not a terse one, it hit me hard, because I knew she was right. But I couldn’t fucking help it. Every time I closed my eyes I saw the blood on her dress, but sometimes Ned’s ugly mug transformed into... that fucking bitch Abby, like she was some kind of family ghost, determined to haunt us for eternity. I wanted to burn the fucking world down to make sure my mate stayed safe, but... Holding Kai too tightly outside of the bedroom? It’d just kill off her spirit, her independence. Her

mother had done her damndest to do that, so I couldn't do the same. Instead I forced myself to smile and then hand over the keys.

“Sorry, alpha prerogative. We're always going to want to protect you.” I pressed a kiss to the top of her head, then forced myself to let her go. “Just be safe.”

“I'm driving between Stanthorpe and Granville,” she said with a snort. “The worst that could happen is a kangaroo jumps out in front of the car.”

“So maybe we should drive you. We've dealt with a fuck load more roos than you have,” Atlas growled.

“Nope.” She finished getting dressed and then shoved the keys in her pocket. “Absence makes the heart grow fonder, right?” She kissed my cheek, then my brothers'. “Imagine how pleased I will be to see you when I get back.”

“Real fucking pleased,” Jayden said, once she'd run downstairs. “Her scent... She's gonna come into heat any day now.” He turned to me. “Maybe this is like those mating chases people used to do back in the day. Maybe we're supposed to follow her. Maybe she wants us to. Like this is some kind of challenge—”

“No.” I wanted to agree with him, go along with his theory, because it'd stop the aching in my heart that had started up the moment she walked out of our bedroom. “Kai's not like that. She means what she says.”

Which meant we had to find something else to do while she was out. I grabbed my phone and tapped out a message.

Love you. No reply to that, but I didn't want her to text if she was driving. *Anything feels weird, come home.*

And that was it, all I could do without crushing the love right out of Kai. I walked downstairs with my brothers and Dad looked at the three of us and started grinning.

“Look at you sappy sods. You're like a pack of lost puppies.”

“Fuck off, Dad,” Jayden mumbled.

“C’mon, gimme a hand in the garden. You know your mother. Every weekend is a backyard blitz, so if we get it done early, you’ll have all the free time in the world when your mate gets home.”

THERE’S something to be said for physical work. Humans seemed to prioritise office work much more highly, hence why we were able to make a killing as shearers: there just weren’t enough younger kids going into the job. But... I couldn’t imagine being locked up in a climate-controlled box, pushing papers around all day. Dad put us to work, pushing us hard, sensing we needed the distraction. Mum beamed as we tackled jobs the two of them had been putting off, trimming unruly hedges back, clearing weeds, putting together a new raised garden bed. But when we got to the rear of the back garden all hell broke loose.

“We must have had some foxes making their way in, though I’ll be bugged if I know why,” Dad said, standing near the back fence and scratching his head. “We don’t have chooks.”

We were all shirtless and dripping with sweat, covered in dirt and leaves. But as we looked along the fence, we saw something had gnawed a hole in it.

But that wasn’t all.

I caught a faint scent on the breeze, frowning because it didn’t make sense. I stepped closer, pushing aside the hydrangeas to look more clearly at the hole. Couldn’t have been a fox. I held out a hand, measuring the distance between the bite marks. The jaw of whatever this was, it was far bigger. A dog maybe or...

A wolf.

I jerked my head up, looking for my brothers, but they were already close. Jayden’s eyes burned silver as he squatted down beside me, coming to the same conclusion, though it was Atlas that got our attention. He dug around in the bushes,

searching, searching, his wolf pushing to the surface until he found what he had scented.

“What the hell is that?” Dad asked, coming closer but none of us could answer. It was a filthy length of fabric, stained and dirty. But the marks weren’t a recent thing. As we all peered at it, we could see that dirt and grime had built up over time, as if the piece of fabric had been left out in the weather for some time.

But that didn’t explain the scent.

Kai, that’s what we got, the rose perfume rich and much more intense than her usual more muted scent. My fangs snapped down and my cock lurched in my shorts.

“What’s tha...?” Mum had joined us, wondering why we were all clustered at the bottom of the garden, but when she saw the piece of fabric, her eyes flashed silver. “That’s from one of my old sheet sets,” she said with a frown. “How the hell did that get there?”

Chapter 54

My phone buzzed as I pulled into Granville, but I just glanced at it as it sat on the passenger side seat and then focussed back on the road. The radio was playing just the right music, and I'd rolled down the windows to feel the wind in my hair, because I was feeling good.

I hadn't realised how much I'd needed Jayden to make that statement in the town square. The way people reacted afterwards? No more conversations about Anna being my guys' mate. No more people ignoring me. All of a sudden, everyone wanted to talk to me about my sister, my mum and my dad, but I just brushed them off. They hadn't asked the right questions before, so I wasn't about to start answering them now. But people knew.

Not all of it, obviously, and from what I'd heard, the alphas were desperately trying to manage the situation. People, of course, wanted to know if this was the reason why Mum was kicked out of the pack. And then came the more awkward questions. How long had they known about this? What had they done about the situation? And what the hell was Mum trying that day? But I drove away from all of it with a smile.

I was meeting Jamie for lunch. I'd have something healthy and then a massive sundae, probably making myself sick, but it'd be worth it. The phone buzzed again and again, but I just shook my head as I pulled into the truck stop and shoved it into my pocket. As I strode into Melva's, I caught sight of

Jamie's massive truck around the back where the extended car parks were and smiled.

"HOW YA DOING, KID?" Jamie strode towards me, holding her arms out and I hugged her hard, but not too hard. She couldn't take a full wolf hug, but this was good, so good. For a long while we just stood there, then I felt her hand rub up and down my back. "You OK?" She pulled back. "You said you had some news? Let's take a seat."

"There's our girl!" Melva walked over with a smile. "So what can I get you two?"

We put in our orders and the other two women's eyebrows shot up as they heard mine.

"Damn girl," Jamie said. "Where you gonna put all of that?"

"As if you aren't the same?" Melva flicked a tea towel at Jamie. "Sitting on your arse all day and eating junk food at every pit stop and still a skinny minnie. I'll be right back with your drinks."

"So what the hell is going on?" Jamie leaned in and spoke in a low hiss. "Last time I saw you, you were covered in blood and now..." She waved her hand around. "You've got this glow."

"Glow?" I touched my cheeks with my fingertips and they felt a little clammy. We weren't into summer yet, but I'd felt a little too hot on the drive over. That's why I'd rolled the window down, needing the blast of cold air. "I dunno about any glow, but..."

I told her about it all, keeping my voice down. We were seated far away from anyone else, but it didn't hurt to be careful. But despite the low tone, I couldn't keep the jubilation, the excitement out of my voice. Jamie's eyes went wider and wider as I spoke and then she settled back against the booth seat.

“Damn... I knew I liked those boys, but...” She shook her head. “So what’s the plan? Like you’ve got your whole life ahead of you. I’ve checked in about our ‘dear old friend’ and... Thanks, Melva.” I looked up to see the woman was setting our coffees down before us.

“Lunch should be ready soon,” the woman said, winking before moving off to serve other people.

“...And I think you were damn lucky. Putting ‘an end’ to him while fluffy, and the storm that hit that night? Pretty sure it destroyed most of the DNA evidence and footprints. I’ve read the local papers and they said the police weren’t treating the death as suspicious.”

I let out a long breath. I hadn’t realised how much I’d needed to hear that until I did. But just as I was about to reply, my phone buzzed again. Jamie’s eyebrows shot up and she smiled at me.

“Lover boys getting anxious that their girl’s flown the coop?” she said.

“They are totally overprotective—” I started to say.

“And good on them for that. Knowing there’s someone out there looking out for you helps me sleep at night. Well, someones. So, how’s the fam taking all of this? How about your mother?”

Both our smiles faded then. I told her the rest of it, about Anna and Dad, and that Mum still had her fingers in the pie of Stanthorpe, despite being exiled.

“It’s why we’re going to move on after this shit blows over,” I said. “I can’t stay there. I can’t.”

“No arguments from me,” she said with a sigh, resting her elbows on the table and leaning forward to prop her chin on her folded hands. “I barely go home as it is. Not for anywhere near as colourful a reason. Just garden variety familial dysfunction. Contrary to what the greeting card industry wants us to think, you don’t have to get along with your family. If the relationship is poison to you, there’s no shame in protecting

yourself from it. So, tell me.” Her eyes began to twinkle. “Where’re you thinking of heading to next?”

I sucked in a breath then and it all came out.

WE’D LOOKED ENDLESSLY at different towns, cities, states, even other countries, using the time we had, while we waited for Ned’s coroner report to go through, to dream about possibilities. We’d get super excited about one place, but then someone would find somewhere else and we’d all get on board with that idea.

It’d been hard to break the news to Jenny, Jackson and Dad. Jenny invited my father over not long after the big announcement, and I think she thought she could rely on both of our dads to step in and stop us. But Dad just smiled and squeezed my hand and made me promise to call him.

“I think our only solution is to just get in the truck and go.” I shook my head, smiling as Melva returned with plates piled with food. “I didn’t do that before. I had one eye on the road, sure the guys would catch up with me or, worse, Mum, but now...” We thanked Melva as she deposited our meals before us, then we grabbed our cutlery to start tucking in. “Now I guess we’ve got the whole world out there to explore.”

“Good.” Jamie was being unexpectedly taciturn, and when I looked up, I worked out why. Her eyes shone with unshed tears and when I dropped my fork and grabbed her hand, she squeezed it tight. “It’s all I ever wanted...” She pulled away to scrub at her eyes with a serviette and then left it crumpled on the tabletop. “This is what I wanted for you. To get out from under whatever it was that was chasing you and...” She shrugged. “Live. Live your fucking life, kid, because you’ve only got one. You’re young and gorgeous and have excellent taste in friends...” We both laughed at that. “But if you’re not gonna have a wedding like a civilised person, then I want an invite to the birth.”

“The birth of what?” I asked, being deliberately obtuse. People asked me all the time now when I was going to give the guys sons, but it was different with Jamie. She actually cared.

“Those fat babies the boys are dying to give you.” She poked the air with her knife. “I know they want them and I think you do too.”

I did and I could admit it. Maybe not yet, but... It was tempting, to see if I could do it differently, being a mother. Not how my mother treated me, obviously, but also not how she'd treated Anna.

My sister had gone missing, once word got around. When she found out about the official declaration the guys had made, she hadn't taken it well, and had stormed out on my dad. Apparently she'd barely tolerated him before, but when he wasn't her actual father... Obviously ignoring the fact that he was the only father she'd known up until this point. People had assumed she'd gone to Greg's, but when they checked on him, he'd gone as well. I just shook my head at the whole thing.

Maybe they'd decided to go out into the world to find a place where they fit, as well. In another town, in another state, maybe Mum, Greg and Anna could be a happy family. I didn't hate them, which had been a shock to realise. I just didn't want them anywhere near me or anyone else that they could hurt. If they were off living their best life, well good for them.

“So: a new life, a new family, a new future...” Jamie shook her head slowly. “Well, kid, you did good.”

And I felt like I had. We'd cleared the board of almost every obstacle to our happiness. I could breathe easy.

“NOW, I know you had a big dessert ordered,” Melva said, when we finished our meals, “but I've got something special in the back.”

“It's one of her special concoctions,” Jamie said with a smile. “The last one was enough to put me in a diabetic coma.” She winked at me. “I asked her to make something nice for you. The first time I met you, you were eating ice cream, so I thought you deserved something a bit better now.”

My phone began to ring incessantly, the steady pulse of the silent alarm vibrating in my pocket. I pulled it out and saw it was Xavier, but then just shoved it back in my pocket. The three of them were bloody insufferable really. Total OTT alphas around their mate. Mate, I loved the sound of that word, rolling it around and around in my head. Then, as we pushed the swinging doors of the kitchen open, I began to see why they might be trying to reach me.

“Don’t mind Fluffy,” Melva said, nodding to a massive wolf sitting in her kitchen, two golden yellow eyes watching me enter the room. It was a powerful one too: I could feel the steady pulse of its will as its eyes bored into mine.

“But Melva, that’s not—”

“I made a special cake,” she said, cutting me off before handing me a slice she’d already plated up.

“Holy shit...” Jamie eyed her serve, seemingly transfixed by the pile of chocolate cake, cream, ganache and cherries on the plate. “You’ve outdone yourself. Have a taste,” she told me. “This shit is the fucking bomb. Melva only makes it on my birthday.”

My head rang and the phone in my pocket seemed to follow the same pulsing beat. There was a bloody wolf shifter in the kitchen and neither of them seemed to notice.

“So when did you get Fluffy?” I asked Melva, cutting off a bite-sized piece of cake with my spoon, while her eyes followed my every movement.

“What?” The woman looked slightly dazed. Someone out at the front counter tapped on the bell to get her attention. “Oh, she’s just a stray. She turned up here a while ago. Now, have some cake.”

“Melva did make it specially for you,” Jamie prompted.

My nose worked as I sucked in scents. I got chocolate and sugar and some kind of liquor and... I brought the bit of cake to my nose and sniffed. Underneath all of that sickly sweetness there was something else. The wolf jumped to its feet, growling slightly, its eyes turning silver.

Dominance is always a hard thing to explain to humans. Sometimes it's like that vibe you get from someone, making you think that they are not to be messed with. Sometimes it's a kind of quiet strength. At its most brutal, it can enable an alpha to overrule and take control of members of the pack, all of the members theoretically, with just one shout. It's both an appearance of confidence and the ability to force someone to submit to your will.

And the wolf was trying that shit on now.

"Melva, how long ago did you get this dog?" I asked. But my voice sounded weird, echoey and distorted as my phone buzzed, the bell rang and my heartbeat pulsed in my ears.

"Fluffy?" She turned towards the dog reluctantly. "Oh, about two years ago."

"I've never seen her before."

Making any comment right now made my guts twist and my eyes throb.

"She comes and goes as she pleases," Melva said in an offhand way. "I hadn't seen her for a while and then a few weeks ago she just turned up again."

A couple of weeks. It had been several weeks since we'd made the announcement, revealed the truth to the town. Several weeks since we'd left our families' bullshit behind and started looking to our own future. A couple of weeks since—

"This isn't the way I raised you." Mum's growl was all too familiar, sending a shiver down my spine, and where Fluffy had been sitting a moment ago, she now stood, tall, strong, naked. "The woman spent a considerable amount of time making that treat, and for someone like you. The least you can do is eat."

Her smile was as sharp as a knife blade, her silver eyes blazing as she stared me down.

"Eat the damn cake, Kaia."

And just like that, all of my illusions that I'd moved on from my mother's control were stripped away. A thin thread of

blood trickled out of her nose as she made me, through the sheer force of her will, put the spoon to my mouth.

Chapter 55

Atlas

“Something’s wrong,” Xavier said, striding back and forth across the kitchen as he tried and tried to ring our mate.

“We can’t keep ringing her.” Jay frowned, though I could smell the stink of fear on him. “She told us we’re being overly protective.”

“That...” Mum pointed her finger at the piece of cotton sheet now sitting on the kitchen table. “Your grandmother gave that to me when I was first mated to your fathers. I never liked the pattern. Too floral, too fussy.” She poked at the scrap. “I always put them on the spare room bed.”

The one that my parents had forced Kai to sleep in the night I’d claimed her. I’d hung around the doorway, pacing back and forth until Greg had forced me to go to bed.

“Keys,” I said, holding out my hand to my dad.

“What? Where are you—?”

But I just clicked my fingers, staring him down until he handed them over.

“Where are you going?” Mum asked, following me down the hall. “What’s going on?”

“The calls...” Xavier was hot on my heels but he stopped just then, turning to face our mother. “When did they start?”

“What calls?” Dad asked Mum.

“We’ve had a few prank calls...” But then she went pale. “You don’t think...”

“A hole in the garden fence made by a wolf,” I said in a deadly flat tone. “A piece of the sheets that Abigail used to put Kai’s scent on Anna. Weird prank calls where they don’t say anything, just hang up?”

“We should have seen this coming.” Xavier looked stricken right then, like he did every time he missed something. Not sure where he got the idea he was supposed to be Superman, but here we were. “It’s Abigail. It’s gotta be Abigail.”

I held up the keys, because I was already two steps ahead of him.

“I’ll come with you, boys,” Dad said, but I shook my head.

“Look for Greg.”

“Why would—?” Mum said with a frown.

“Find Anna. Find anyone in this town who Abigail might give a shit about,” I ordered.

“What about Kai’s dad?” my father said.

Silence stretched on for several seconds, because while Abigail had a connection to him, it was not a positive one. She’d always hated her fated mate, as was made perfectly clear when she somehow seduced Greg.

“Find him too. Alert the alphas.”

Jayden made a rude noise.

“If they can do anything about this.” My brother sported the same scathing expression he used whenever we talked about this town and all the shit in it. “How’d Abigail pull this shit in the first place? She’s just a beta.”

“Is she?” Women weren’t alphas as a rule. Feminism hadn’t really come to wolf shifter communities in the way it had human ones, because so few women had the required abilities. They were almost always betas or omegas, but... “Let’s find out.”

I didn't want my hunch to be right, but somehow this felt inevitable. Abigail had torn through so many lives and she wouldn't stop on her own. My fingers tightened around the key ring as I strode outside and it took conscious effort not to squash the keys into a ball of soft metal.

"Let me drive," Jay said, appearing at my shoulder. "I can get us there faster."

"I'll break land speeds to get to Kai," I told him flatly and that had him stepping away. "Maybe she's in the toilet. Maybe her phone's on silent. It doesn't matter; I won't stop for anything, not even human police, to find her."

"She's going to be sitting in a booth feeding her face with Jamie." I wasn't sure who Xavier was trying to convince, him or us. "She'll be pissed with us—"

"Get in and find out, or stay here," I snapped, jumping into Dad's sedan.

The minute Jay and Xavier were in the car and the doors were shut I planted my foot, going roaring out the driveway and fishtailing it, the back of the car swinging out as we hit the road. I pushed the car harder when we got to an intersection, not even bothering to look as we ploughed through. People hit their horns and cursed us as we passed by, but all that fell away as we reached the main road out of town. Paddocks whizzed by, sheep and cattle just a blur as we drove.

"She's not picking up," Xavier cursed. "She's not fucking picking up. I told her to take us with her. We were supposed to protect her."

"We still will."

I dunno why I was so fucking calm. I'd reached a state of panic so pure I couldn't feel a thing, except one thing: get Kai, find Kai, protect Kai. So that's what I focused on. The engine hummed and the car tore forward, eating up the miles between the towns.

BUT WHATEVER COMPOSURE I'd held onto, it broke the moment we got to the truck stop. People were cued up out the front, waiting to be served, but Melva wasn't behind the counter, she was sitting at the table in the kitchen.

"Fluffy took her..." she said, tears streaming down her cheeks, the woman's mind half broken by another wolf shifter. "Fluffy took her..."

And I was about to break it further. I yanked off my t-shirt and shoved down my shorts before taking fur, the wolf's nose ten times more sensitive than my human one. I sniffed around, detecting tantalising food smells, metal, dish soap and Kai. The floral scent still hung in the air. I sucked that in, selfishly wanting to gulp in every bit, but as I did, I caught the nuances. Fear, anger, frustration, it turned that rose scent sour, but along with that was a strange chemical base note.

"Don't eat that cake..." The back doors were shoved open and Jamie staggered in, clutching at her arm. A great raking slash cut her from cheek to chin, and blood seeped out under her hand from the wound on her arm. "Is Kai's mother a fucking bitch with long dark hair and a face like a smacked arse?"

"Shit," Xavier said, rushing over, grabbing a tea towel to wind tight around Jamie's bleeding arm. Someone had slashed into her with their claws extended.

"Sounds about right," Jayden said stepping forward.

I came closer, sniffing her boots, jeans and then her hand as she stared at me, fighting to reconcile the big grey wolf in front of her with the man she knew. I let out a low chuff, communicating with my brothers what I'd scented.

Kai always smelled like roses. Sometimes sweet, sometimes tart, sometimes heady. But Abigail? She smelled woody, which was usually a masculine scent, but hers was the dank stink of rotting wood, the smell of old bark peeled back to reveal a cluster of insects. She was the smell of wood borers reducing a log down to saw dust and Jamie stank of that scent.

“Get to the hospital,” Xavier said, “and take Melva with you. The truck stop needs to be closed down and—”

“You’re gonna ride to the rescue.” Jamie tried to smile, but the wound on her face made her wince. “I wanna say I’d join you, but I’m no match for that bitch. She’s fast as a cat and her claws just tore into me.” Her eyes widened as she pleaded for us to intercede. “She drugged Kai. She’d made Melva pump some shit into the cake I got Melva to make for her. It was the only thing that stopped Abigail from tearing my fucking head off: The fact that she was dragging along her unconscious daughter as well.”

Why, that’s what I needed to know. I didn’t wait for the others. I went charging out of the swinging doors at the back of the kitchen and then put my nose to the ground, trailing my mate’s scent. It was richer, riper, making clear exactly why we should have disregarded Kai’s valid protests, because... I snuffled at the gravel on the road that led to a nearby pine plantation and then took off. Kai was going into heat and we were nowhere near her to help her through it.

Chapter 56

The first thing I did was throw up. The sound of disgust that followed was all too familiar, but I couldn't see properly. Then, as I blinked, blinked, blinked, she came into view. Hazy at first, just a tall dark blob, but it was her words that identified her.

“Look at the mess you've made!” A hand grabbed me by the scruff of my neck, the feeling of all of my hair being pulled. “You'll need to clean that up.”

The command in her voice had me moving, but it was too soon. My arms were bound behind my back and whatever had been in that cake, it had me swaying, then falling straight for the floor.

“Whoa, whoa, there you go.”

His voice was softer, gentler, familiar as he caught me.

“Greg?”

“It's all right, love,” he replied.

He was trying to lay me back down on something, but Mum wasn't having that. I heard her footsteps across the floor and then bang! She slapped me so damn hard my head spun. Pain, so much fucking pain, clouded my senses, drowning out everything else. The wolf shifted inside me, moving, moving, wanting out, but then she snapped.

“You will not shift without my permission!” Suddenly I was right back in childhood. There was no rebelling against

her order. She hadn't had to be this heavy handed before because she'd raised me to be afraid of her. When I'd been a kid, Mum's power had seemed unassailable, absolute, but now it appeared that it really was. She grabbed my hair again and then dragged my face up to meet hers. "Clean. Up. Your. Mess."

A fresh trickle of blood ran from her nose, the twin for mine. I licked away my blood as I fought to focus on her.

"N—"

I got one syllable out before she raised her hand again, all the anger she'd been sitting on for the last few years powering that blow. But before she could smack me again, Greg jumped in. He looked a lot wilder than he had when he'd been with Jenny. His cheeks were hollowed, his chin now sported a scraggly beard and his hair was long and ratty looking. But his eyes went wide as he seemed to realise just what he'd done.

"You dare—" Mum raged.

"If you wanted to kill Kaia, you would have poisoned that cake, not drugged it," he stammered out and that stopped Mum. "She'd be dead and so would all of the witnesses."

Shit, Jamie and Melva. I had to find out what the master plan was.

"Anna," Mum said, and when her focus shifted, I saw my sister sitting there with a look of disgust on her face.

"I'm not cleaning it up!" she snapped. "That's Kaia's job."

I smiled then, despite how my head throbbed and my gut swirled, readying to vomit some more, because, no matter how I'd grown and changed, apparently my mother and sister were just the same.

No, make that worse.

Anna stared at me with a sullen scowl on her face.

"Show Greg where the mop and bucket are," Mum ordered.

When they disappeared to do as they were told, I looked around. This was a cottage of sorts, though one in a far worse state than mine on the farm. The stained-glass windows were cracked, and plaster had flaked away in places on the stone walls. There were holes in the floor and in the roof, letting the wind in. I shivered as Mum came closer.

“Do you want to be set free?” Looks like someone was switching from bad bitch to mad bitch. Mum pushed her finger under my chin, forcing me to meet her gaze. Just like when she was in wolf form, her eyes burned into mine like phosphorescent flames, but somehow she just didn’t seem to notice the blood trickling from her nose. “We don’t have to engage in this kind of ugliness.”

“Pretty sure you crossed that line when you mind-raped Melva.” My voice was little other than a ragged rasp, but she jerked back anyway. “So what the fuck do you want?”

“Reject your mates.”

“What...?”

I stared at her, waiting for her to laugh, or caper around. I’d even have gone for an evil monologue, but not this. That hungry look. Mum’s mask was completely off and the naked greed was plain now.

Because it was possible. A bit like divorce in some human Christian sects, you could do it, but the community viewed it as a very bad business. Whatever fates were involved, your mate(s) were the people you shared your life with. Some who couldn’t make it work might slope off with a side piece sometimes, but that was strictly done on the down low. But if you really, really couldn’t make it work, you and your mates could go before the alphas and reject the bond.

But there was no coming back from it.

I laughed then, and Greg flinched as he walked back inside, toting the full mop bucket. He shot me a warning look, but he and I were obviously in different mindsets. He thought he could placate Mum, but me? If she had me this vulnerable,

there was no coming back. I'd run and run from the guys, but the real enemy was her.

“You know I'm never—”

My words were cut off by another brutal slap. My ears rang and my headache started throbbing anew, but I refused to be cowed. I shook my head, snickering when blood splattered all over Mum, something that had her recoiling in disgust. But when she stepped back, Anna took her place, staring at me as she bristled with indignation.

“You were always jealous of me.”

My smile widened then.

“You wanted everything that was mine. My toys, my friends, my dresses.”

I just laughed at that. We were four years apart in age and when we were much younger, I'd carried her everywhere.

My baby sister.

It was only when she got older, when she learned this poison at our mother's knee, that our relationship had taken a turn for the worse. She'd demanded I share everything of mine, calling out to Mum, who'd descend on me in fury when I didn't comply. But when I'd asked to share Anna's stuff, or even get my stuff back, my sister had just smiled. Dad would try and step in when Mum wasn't around, but then Anna would snitch on him and the existing world order would be restored. If I wanted something, I was selfish and if Anna wanted it, it was her right.

“Is that what you think...?” I gasped out. My eye was starting to close up, the blood rushing to the contusion site, trying to protect it from further damage.

But there was no point.

There were only two ways out of here. I did as Mum said or I would be dragged out of here, wrapped in plastic, to be buried, once she'd killed me.

“You took my mates from me!” my sister shouted, vibrating with rage.

“If they were yours, why did Mum have to insist I take you with me everywhere?” I said, smiling when I saw the small flash of doubt in Anna’s eyes. “Why didn’t they ring you, talk to you, invite you to come with them? If they belonged to you, they wouldn’t want me around.”

“But...” Anna’s eyes flicked to Mum, looking for an explanation, but I had one for her already.

“A friend told me something not that long ago, something that helped me understand you and me, Anna. My best friend always listens to podcasts on well, bloody anything, so she told me about narcissistic parents.” Anna’s perfect brows creased slightly as she stared at me. “A narcissist doesn’t see people as living, feeling human beings. They’re just props, things, to be moved around and manipulated. They can’t feel real love for anyone or anything, because they emotionally split people into different categories. The golden child.”

I nodded to Anna.

“The one that’s given everything, as long as she’s perfect in the narcissist’s eyes. She isn’t an actual person either, just somehow a symbol of the narcissist’s greatness. Her beauty is the mother’s beauty. Her intelligence is the mother’s intelligence.” My lips quirked, even as they stung from the split. “It’s all a fucking lie though.”

“And what does that make you?”

Anna was probably feeling real good right now, standing over me. She was puffing up, just like Mum did, but without the same power. She couldn’t command me to do shit, but I’d give her this for free.

“I’m the scapegoat.”

I was supposed to feel shame about that, but I didn’t. I wouldn’t. I’d been forced into this role and it gave me some kind of insight. I had quite a bit of time on my hands, working in a bunch of places in tiny little towns, and I had the internet. I’d done a lot of research after I left home, finding out more and more about this phenomenon.

“In Biblical times, it was one of two goats. One had all the sins of the community heaped upon it in some kind of ceremony.” I shrugged. “Then it was sent out into the desert to die, taking those sins with it. Of course, that doesn’t fucking work in real life. The people who did the shit things are still there, and putting the blame on someone else doesn’t help you to do the fucking work to stop being such a raging bitch.”

Mum smiled but the expression filled me with dread. That was OK, I’d faced her wrath more times than I could count, and this would be the final time.

“I didn’t raise you to have such a smart mouth,” she said.

“You didn’t raise me at all,” I replied mildly. “You trained a domestic servant.”

“Well, we’ll see how smart you are now,” she replied, holding up a hypodermic needle.

“What the fuck is that?” I asked. Mum finally got what she wanted, my smile fading.

“I did some research in my time away from my home too,” she replied. “Humans are such ingenious creatures. It’s a drug that induces a heat in dogs for breeding purposes.”

Sweat prickled all across my skin and I tried to wriggle away, but she clamped her hand down on my shoulder.

“Coercing someone takes a lot of effort, the alphas don’t admit that. It’s only easy for them to step in and stop someone considerably weaker than them.” She straightened up then. “It’s why I was removed from my birth pack and placed in Stanthorpe. Those idiots knew. I was more dominant than every single one of them. And the alphas you know? They kept clear of me, knowing that they’d just embarrass themselves trying to control me. But with this?”

She jabbed the needle into my thigh, making me grunt with the sudden pain. When I tried to thrash around, to get it out, her thumb pressed down the plunger, injecting me with the dose.

“Ignore your idiot sister,” Mum said, stroking Anna’s hair. “You’re actually lucky you’re not an omega. Pathetic

creatures, they lose themselves into animal states like this.” Then she turned to me. “You’ll give me everything I want before I’m done. You’ll be begging for that privilege.”

Ned had tried to assault me, but that was nothing compared to what this felt like. The drug pumped through my veins, transported by my pulse that was already beating too fast. My nipples hardened against my bra, then Anna jerked back as slick splattered my thighs.

“Ew!” she said, leaning into Mum.

“She’s little more than a mindless beast, or she will be as her heat rides her,” Mum said. “It won’t take long for her to do anything I tell her as she seeks relief. Let’s go now.”

“Where the hell too?” Greg snapped, then seemed to think better of it. He dropped his gaze, kept his eyes trained on the floor. “People will be looking for Kaia.”

“Will they?” Mum sauntered towards the door with my sister in tow. “Who looked for Kaia when she left Stanthorpe? Her own father didn’t. When I get her to reject the bond, even the young alphas won’t care about her anymore. All of the love they think they feel for her will evaporate, leaving them ready, willing and able to claim their true mate. One who already wears their marks. Come on, darling. Let’s get you something to eat.”

GREG CREPT FORWARD once the door was shut and I jerked back as best I could when I saw a glint of a knife. “Shh... shh...” he said, cutting the bindings around my arms and legs. Blood rushed back into my hands and feet too fast and too hard, but it was doing the same throughout my whole body. I cringed away from his touch. It felt wrong, bad, and yet my body throbbed with need for my mates. The wolf howled, scratched and paced inside me, wanting to come out, but my mother’s order pressed down on me, even in her absence. I would stay in skin and I would suffer.

“I’m sorry, Kaia,” he told me over and over, as he led me towards the door.

Chapter 57

I was in hell.

My feet trailed along the ground, my hands grabbing for Greg's arm, his shoulder, but everything about me felt like it was three times the size it should be. I had paddles, not hands, and each time they slipped over his skin, I whined. This was wrong. He was wrong. This wasn't where I was supposed to be.

"Shh... shh... shh," he said, right before he opened the door of a cage.

I blinked, my vision swimming, but when I saw it, I stiffened.

"No," I said, shaking my head furiously. "No!" I tried to slap at him, summon my claws, but all I had were these rubbery fingers, soft and useless.

Greg grabbed my shoulders and gave me a shake.

"You'll be safer in there. She can't hit you, can't make you do anything else. It'll be OK, Kaia."

"Kai..." I ground out, throwing my head back and baring my shitty blunt human teeth. "And if it's that good, you get in."

Get in with me, that was a stray thought that made my gut turn. Being in a small space, a soft space, with other men, my men. Yes, that was exactly what I needed. But I was standing here with a man who smelled wrong, felt wrong, just as he

stared at me with a kind of desperation that simply amplified mine.

“I can’t protect you out here,” he told me.

“Why?”

“Your mother is like a fucking sledgehammer. I never wanted her, not even in high school.” His brows creased. “I only wanted Jenny, but... Then I’d be talking to Abby, not paying any attention to what was being said, nodding along the whole time, wanting to get closer.” Greg shook his head. “You can’t resist her, so there’s no point in trying.”

It was his fatalism that had him dragging me over to the cage, but I hadn’t been cowed yet. I fought his grip because his touch burned my skin and not in the good way. Wrong, wrong, wrong, my instincts screamed, forcing me to try and get away. And I knew. As soon as I saw the cage, made of old steel mesh spotted with rust, I knew. Nothing good would come from this. I twisted, jerked, scrabbled at the floor and then sank my teeth into his arm, tasting hot, coppery blood, all to no avail as he shoved me inside. The door closed with a clang and then a padlock was pushed through the hasp, one I tested the strength of immediately as I shoved my feet against the door.

“Greg...” I ground out as I watched him shrink back. “Greg...!”

“I can’t help you,” he said, tears filling his eyes but that just made me so fucking angry, I was burning up. “I can’t even help my fucking self. Here.” He shoved an old drink bottle full of water towards me, opening a hatch in the fucking cage to push it towards me. “This is about all I can do.”

I refused to accept that giving up was the only option.

The bottle was now clasped to my chest, the slight chill of the water helping me momentarily, but not for long. My body radiated heat, turning the water to a terrible lukewarm temperature when I took a sip. But my hands shook when I tried to put the cap back on, tears spilling down my cheeks. This wasn’t what I needed. Tears dripped down my nose, splattering on the ground at my feet along with the water that

spilled as I battled to finally get the lid screwed on. And then I settled back against the wall of the cage.

“Tell them I’m here,” I commanded, trying to summon some kind of alpha bark, but failing utterly. When had I ever been able to force someone to do anything? My mother had neutered me, taken away all of my strength. All I could do was hope that someone, anyone would be able to find me, rescue me.

Yes, that, my mind said, grabbing at that idea, seeing the three of my mates walking in the door and then...

“Tell your sons and it’ll help you with Jenny.”

“No, it won’t!” Greg lunged at the cage and I found myself clawing back to get away from him. I’d said the wrong thing. Tears slid down his hollow cheeks. “Where do you think your mother got the idea of rejecting your mates from? Jenny rejected me, cast me out and I didn’t even want...”

I wondered for just a second about what had happened to him, because his eyes flicked to the door in an all too familiar way. He was terrified that my mother could have heard him. Greg got to his feet now and while I wanted nothing to do with the weak fuck, fear rose in my chest as he began to walk away.

“There’s no fighting Abigail,” he said, his voice perfectly flat now. “So don’t even try. Give her what she wants. It’s your only chance of getting out of here.”

But as he moved, I saw something on his neck. A reddish bite mark that looked fairly new.

“Who claimed you?” I asked, throwing myself forward, my hands gripping the bars of the cage. “Who claimed you!”

But Greg didn’t answer, walking out like a robot.

And that’s when the real hell began.

The drug Mum had injected into me? I’d been able to avoid its silken pull while I was fighting with Greg, but when I heard the door click shut, there was nothing else to distract me. Just the whine of the wind through a broken pane of glass, and this...

A feeling of terrible wrongness washing over me. The feel of the rough surface of the corroded metal through the t-shirt I was wearing, the stink of rust. This was not where I was supposed to ride out my first heat. I needed softness, quiet, low lights and nesting materials. My fingers plucked at my clothes instead, hearing the seams groan, then snap. The free fall of the now torn fabric on my skin was somewhat satisfying, but still not enough.

If I was with my mates, I'd be burrowing into piles of fabric that felt good on my skin. If I was home, I'd have my own room for my nest, something no one else would touch. I'd only smell them and me, coming together as we were always destined. Instead, I was stuck with the odours of dust and mould and dank stone. My fingers raked along the oversensitive skin of my thighs, leaving red marks in their wake, the psychological pain made flesh.

Just like I had when I was a kid, I went down, down, down inside my head. I blocked out everything, stopped thinking, feeling, seeing as I sank into the darkness. The wolf came forth then, whining at her inability to save me, her back cowed, but I gestured her forward. Here we could be together. I didn't feel the heat or any of its alien passion down here, just her. I dug my fingers into the fur of the other half of myself and held on, just held onto her and to the thought that they'd find me, they had to.

Chapter 58

Jayden

“I can’t find her,” Atlas said.

My brother’s pain was the same as mine. I could hear it, raw and throbbing in his voice. And this from Mr Roboto, Atlas, who always kept shit locked down. But there was no fucking chill to be had here. We stood in a clearing in the forest, where the scent had tapered off. There were recent car tracks in the soil and that meant we were fucked.

“Abigail’s taken Kai,” Xavier said.

“No shit, Sherlock.” I rolled my eyes at him. “Of course she fucking has. That stupid bitch won’t stop until we do.” I glared at each one of them. “I said we needed to find Abigail first. I said that. Wring her fucking neck and leave her dead in a ditch first, then find Kai. We brought this shit down on our mate’s head.”

I swallowed then, my eyes going wide, seeing that moment on the stage in the town square again. It was supposed to have been a do-over, the start of something amazing, but of course Abigail couldn’t let us have that. Of course...

“I brought this shit down on her head.”

“Jay, no—” Xavier started to say.

“I made a big thing out of it all and we knew people were still talking to Abigail. It got back to her and she—”

“Jay, we had no way of knowing that.”

“Are we gonna stand around and work out who’s to blame?” Atlas growled. “Or are we going to find our mate? Fall on your fucking swords all you like *after* we’ve got her home safe.”

“So what’s your big plan then?” I snapped back at him.

“Go to fur. Follow the tracks,” he said.

Fuck, that wasn’t a bad idea.

Tearing our clothes off felt like we were doing something for once and the wolf came gladly, almost shoving me out of the way in his eagerness. He understood the assignment and took off down a side track the loggers had used to fell trees. The car had gone that way.

THIS WAS when we ran for several hours, found where they were hidden and then kicked the doors in and rescued our mate, right? This was when we saved Kai. But the trail ended as soon as we got to the road. There was some dust on the road, indicating they’d probably gone east, but... My brothers’ wolves came to stand beside me, whining.

The wolves knew. Their animal brains saw things much more clearly. We needed to find Kai, to protect Kai and they didn’t care about what was said or done before that. Every second that ticked by while she was in danger was unacceptable, and that was all that mattered. We took a few steps up the road, but there were no scents to detect, no track to follow, so the wolf turned around, trotting back to the clearing. I came back into skin, pulling on my clothes silently as my brothers did the same.

“We have to find her,” I said.

“How? I’m open to any ideas right now.” Xavier shook his head.

“Maybe we could go and see Kai’s dad. Abigail is his true mate, so he might have some clues,” I said, but I felt no hope at that. Daryl was always weak.

“Or ours.”

We all stared at Atlas and then realised he didn't mean Jackson. Greg had fallen under Abigail's spell. Greg was Anna's father and he was living in some shit-hole place on the edge of town. I shook my head slowly. If my fucking father had something to do with this, Mum's rage would be nothing compared to mine. I grabbed my phone and rang Mum.

"What's happened?" she said instead of hello. "Did you find Kai?"

"Where's Dad... Greg living now?" I asked in response.

"Greg...? You think he's involved in this?" she said.

"Address, Mum, and I don't know. We're ruling this out first. We have to find her."

For once Mum was silent. I could hear the sound of her swallowing, her breathing noisy.

"Of course. God, you need to get her the hell away from that woman. Abigail's mad, fucking mad."

Mum didn't swear too often, so I blinked at that, but then she rattled off Greg's address. We ran back to the truck stop and then got in the car, speeding back to Stanthorpe before pulling up outside the house Mum had said was Greg's.

"FUCK, Mum wouldn't have put up with this..." I hissed as we got out. The place was rundown as hell and the garden was more weeds and vines than grass. Our feet crunched on the gravel driveway as we walked closer. Our noses worked, and we all got the scent of Dad clearly, but... Anna was here too, and Abigail.

Every wolf shifter experienced another person's scent differently, but to me, Abigail smelled bad, kinda like petrol. Something harsh and chemical that assaulted your nose, but for some reason you breathed it in deeper. It was harsh, driving out everything else as we got closer, like she'd taken fur and pissed all over the driveway, marking her turf.

Like an alpha wolf might.

"Abigail—" I started to say.

“I know,” Xavier replied. “I can smell her.”

“Not that, dipshit,” I said, knowing we wouldn’t find them here. The house was quiet, still, in the way empty houses were, as if passively awaiting a new tenant. “The way she acts. The shit she got away with. Like when the alphas went ham on the arse of that guy... Ken’s dad.”

“The one who was beating up his mate?” Atlas said. “Yeah, I remember.”

“They stepped in then. And when Mrs Harris was getting too heavy-handed with her kids and...?” I stopped short of the house. “Do you think...?”

“Do I think what, Jay?” Xavier snapped. “We’re going into Dad’s house to see if we can find evidence he’s helping our mate’s mother kidnap her, steal her from us.”

“Is Abigail an alpha?”

While it wasn’t widely known, we couldn’t just psychically control every fucker in the town if we’d decided to take the role of alpha. Betas, humans, had told me we gave off bad motherfucker vibes, which made some blokes want to fight us, while most just gave us a wide berth. We couldn’t afford, in skin or in fur, to be fighting dominance fights the whole damn time. Actual wolves didn’t. Fighting, exerting your dominance, took energy that could be best suited to surviving. It happened sometimes, to maintain order, to calm down those unruly pack members or give the strongest of the new blood a chance to take control of the pack, but mostly people just accepted the alpha’s rule, if he was doing things right. Abigail had always maintained a sweet, soccer mum exterior, but...

“What does that matter?” Xavier asked, but Atlas went still.

“It does is if that’s why this happened,” my brother said. “If that’s how she thought this would work. Tricking us at first, rubbing Kai’s scent on Anna, because she was still trying to play by pack rules. If she wasn’t strong enough to dominate

all three of the alphas, she'd have to, if she wanted to stay in Stanthorpe."

"But when they exiled her..." I said.

"Is that how she seduced Greg?" Xavier asked, then glanced at the house before stepping forward, as if he could demand answers from it. We all spilled inside once he kicked the door open, breaking the lock. "She... what? Coerced him?"

I didn't want to accept that. I been fucking pissed when I'd found out about Greg's betrayal of Mum, but she'd pulled herself together pretty quickly. Greg seemed broken by the severing of the bond, but Mum just clung to Jackson and moved on with her life.

"If Abigail can do that, she's an alpha all right," I said, and that made me swallow hard. In the pack, she'd be someone the alphas would need to work with, make sure they didn't alienate, lest she come at them and destabilise their power base, but outside of it? With no pack to moderate her worst impulses, what she could get up to frankly terrified me.

I strode forward, glancing around the house, looking at the shit that was lying about, and then walking into the kitchen. There were piles of paperwork on the benches. Some was just junk mail and advertising from months ago, some were unpaid bills. I pulled out a phone bill, scanning the numbers that were called most. I pulled out my own phone, looking through my contacts to try to match them up.

None to Mum, a few to Jackson and a smattering of other numbers, but one came up over and over. I tapped the number into my phone.

"What's that?" Xavier asked as the two of them got closer. "Whose number is that?"

"Let's find out."

I hit video call, making sure the audio was coming through the speakers. We all stared at the screen as we heard the buzzing sound of the phone ringing. My muscles locked down when the call went through and then I heard her voice.

“Hello?” Abigail was always unfailingly polite to us, bordering on obsequiousness, so hearing her feline purr right now was a shock. She was in some kind of restaurant or cafe, because we caught sight of a booth, heard people around her. Her eyelids dropped to half-mast and fluttered when she saw who it was.

“Abigail.”

“Jayden! How lovely to hear from you.” The phone moved, panning too fast around the restaurant before the screen showed us Kai’s sister. “Anna, it’s Jayden on the phone.”

“I don’t want to talk to him,” she said, glaring at us.

“But darling, you must! I’ll put it on speakerphone—”

“You might not want to do that,” I growled.

“Oh?” She was now staring at the screen again and I caught the moment her smile faltered. “And why is that?”

“Anna isn’t our mate, as we’ve fucking told you more times than I can count,” I snapped. “If you want that blaring through the speakers at whatever cafe you’re at...” I looked at the others and they nodded, scanning the screen for details, any details of where they were. “That’s fine, but you might want to spare your daughter that.”

“Like you spared Anna that embarrassment in the town square?”

Yep, Abigail was getting pissed. The muscles around her mouth tightened until they did a fair approximation of a cat’s bum.

“What embarrassment?” Atlas said, leaning forward. “We just did the day over, made sure everyone knows the truth.”

“Truth?” Abigail drew herself up, some of the imperious bitch she’d been with Kai finally showing itself. “And what truth would that be? This ridiculous farce you’ve all been indulging in?”

“We chose Kai,” Atlas said.

“Well, you chose wrong.” Her eyes blazed bright silver as she stared at the screen. “You’ll choose Anna before this is over.”

And if I needed any proof of my theory, I had it now. Alphas had many different means to influence, manipulate or outright coerce people. Their voice was only one way, but we all heard an alpha’s command in hers.

But she couldn’t pull that shit on us, otherwise she would’ve done it years ago.

“No, we won’t.” Xavier pushed all of the certainty, all of the need we felt for Kai into his tone. “There is only Kai—”

“And what will you do if there’s no Kaia?” She was talking faster, taking less time to formulate her responses. Her brows twitched and her mouth had flattened to become a thin line. Abigail was getting heated and that made her reckless. “Alphas need a mate. You’ll want to grieve for... her, but at some point, those urges will rise and you’ll turn—”

“Not to Anna,” I said with all certainty. She might be able to dictate shit to other people, but not us. “Never to Anna.” I was pushing her hard, wanting to force her to crack, to spill all of her evil plans, but Atlas burst in.

“Are you fucking talking about killing Kai?”

Atlas stared at the phone screen so hard it was amazing it didn’t crack and that’s when his and Abigail’s eyes locked. He’d just given her what she needed, because she smiled then.

“I’ll do whatever I have to ensure my daughter gets the future she deserves.”

And that’s when the call ended. I stared at the blank screen, my eyes flicking, as if I could summon Abigail back.

“Fuck!” I shouted. “Fuck!”

“Fucking calm down,” Xavier snapped.

“While Abigail kills our mate?” Atlas looked at my brother in horror right now. “Are you fucking serious right now?”

“We have to think,” Xavier insisted. “We need to be smart about this.”

“While that fucking bitch threatens to kill Kai,” I said, shaking my head slowly.

Xavier was always the one who stayed in control, but right now I hated that he could. He needed to be shouting, tearing this place apart, the whole fucking town, to find her. He stared right back, meeting my gaze.

“We have to be smart precisely because she’s threatening to kill Kai.” And his voice broke. “So we need to work out where the fuck they’ve got our mate, outwit Abigail and find Kai before that happens.”

Chapter 59

Xavier

“I’ll do whatever I have to ensure my daughter gets the future she deserves.”

Abigail’s words rang in my ears as I scanned the phone bill. My pulse rate had ratcheted up with each one of her vicious words. Kai’s mother was a fucking monster, but one we needed to outwit to get our girl. So I had to shove aside the thoughts that kept bubbling up of what Abigail might be doing right now, and focus on hunting down some clues.

“This is Dad’s number,” I said, stabbing a finger at the front of the bill. “I’ll call him while you call Kai’s dad.”

“You think he’s in on this?” Jayden asked with a frown.

“No, but he’s one of the few people we can ask questions, so let’s just make sure there’s nothing there before we proceed further.”

“After you call Dad,” Atlas said, staring at me. “Do another video call. The olds never know the difference between a phone one and a video one. It might show us something.”

“I reckon I know where Abigail is.” Jayden’s finger stabbed the air. “There was something familiar about that restaurant.”

“It’s that cafe Mum and the dads took us to in Granville,” Atlas said and we both blinked. He shrugged. “I was focussed

on the background, not that bitch. I remember the booths. They have material on them with that weird swirly pattern, not vinyl like Melva's."

"Right. OK."

I put what we thought was Greg's number into the phone and then hit video call.

"Boys?"

Our fathers had seemed so big and strong when we were growing up, but I got none of that now. The view on the screen was blurry because Greg was holding the phone up to his ears.

"Dad, hold the phone down near your face."

The view didn't improve. This wasn't my father. His face was gaunt and his hair was wild, the white of his eyes clear as he stared.

"How'd you get this number? What're you doing?" He glanced around, as if someone might walk in at any moment.

"Where's Kai?" I commanded.

I didn't want him to answer. I didn't want my father to be involved in this. But his lips parted, his throat convulsed, ready to spill something out. I watched his mouth move like a fish flopping on a bank, sucking in air when it needed water. But Dad didn't say a thing. His expression grew even more frenzied as he clawed at his throat. Red lines were partially hidden by his beard as he let out a gusty sigh.

"I can't."

"You can't tell us?" Jay demanded, injecting his alpha bark into it. Our father's throat worked again, wanting to answer, but something stopped him. Then blood trickled out of his nose, his hand blocking the nostril in an instant.

Something that looked well practised.

"Abigail's put some kind of... alpha block on him?" I said to the others.

Dad nodded slowly; his eyes haunted. It was the kind of bullshit that used to be used in packs, back in the bad old days.

Despotic alphas would conquer other packs, bring people to heel with what equated to psychic scars. Commands that were seared into the soul of a beta.

Alphas had stopped using them, not so much because of a sense of the common good, but from the famous examples of when it all went pear-shaped. The alpha pack that commanded their betas to protect them. The betas did so, even after the alpha pack had split and the two sides were warring against each other. The alphas on both sides couldn't direct their betas to attack the other side, only other alphas who weren't included in the command. And then there was the pack who commanded their betas to protect their omega.

They did, valiantly. No other alphas made it far when they tried to raid the pack and steal the omega away, many laying down their lives to look after her, but the betas took things further than expected. They protected the omega against every threat, including her own alphas. She wasn't happy about the mating or their treatment of her, and that resulted in a pack uprising. The alphas were each assassinated quickly, quietly, for the omega. She went on to become one of the first omega rulers of a pack.

So now most alphas relied on pack satisfaction to get what they needed, only using a block when absolutely needed. When a parent was found to have sexually abused a child, or where domestic abuse raged, unchecked by conversations with the pack leaders. If the behaviour wouldn't stop, the alphas could force it to, just as they should've done to Abigail.

But something had given our alphas pause.

Because they didn't think the situation was too bad? Maybe. Abigail kept shit on the down low really well. Because they didn't think they were strong enough? Maybe that's what it was. Abigail and the alphas were deadlocked, neither one strong enough to break the other.

I focussed back on the screen.

“You can't tell us,” I said, “but can you show us?”

A small note of hope rose in his eyes and then he nodded. The problem with blocks was they were so damn imprecise. Fables about plucky wolf shifters working their way around a block were read to us as children. The view on the screen abruptly changed.

Jay clicked his fingers, wanting Atlas' phone and it was slapped into his hand. He turned on the camera, recording what we saw. A run down cottage, it looked like, and an old one. The stained glass windows, the plastered stone walls, all made it look like it was at least one hundred years old. It looked like they might be at a location that wasn't too far away, the first attempt colonisers had made to take this land. The area had been gifted to humans unprepared for the wilds of Australia and they'd made their way down here, thinking they'd just clear it and take it over.

But the place belonged to the local First Nations people, and while the settlers were allowed to make homes here, the trouble came when they decided to take everything that the Crown had gifted them, driving off people who had lived in this area undisturbed for many thousands of years. The Aboriginal people fought back and what was left became Ghost Town.

No actual ghosts were ever sighted there, but teenage wolf shifters loved to hang out there to get drunk. They were away from parental supervision and could freak each other out when they were drinking. We'd gone there a few times, Kai in tow, but not like this.

"Show us more, Dad." It felt weird, wrong to use that title, but I kept my tone gentle, trying to preserve the illusion that we still had a relationship. Tears pricked at my eyes because now we didn't. He was still my father, he'd been with me through most of the important moments of my life, but now? It was like he was a different person. The camera lurched as he walked through the cottage.

"Ghost Town," Jay whispered as Dad went outside, swinging the phone around to show us the remains of two other buildings. Not really a town, obviously, but Ghost Cottages didn't have the same ring to it.

“Now, show us Kai,” I prompted and was met by an uneasy whine. “Show us Kai, Dad.”

The camera hovered, the blurry view of the abandoned cottages making my guts swirl, even as my claws dug into his kitchen bench. He needed to show us she was OK. But just as he was about to move, we heard a car roar up.

Fuck.

Jay said the exact same thing, but I peered at the screen, now giving us a view of the grass.

“Show us Kai, Dad!” I shouted.

If I was a better son, I’d have been worried for him first, and I would, once I got my mate home safe. I didn’t want him to get hurt, but I had to know: Where the hell was Kai? There was only one building that was still standing and it wouldn’t be enough to hold her if she wanted out. They had to have done something to her. They—

“And who are you talking to?” Abigail’s voice seemed even more menacing.

“No one,” he stammered out, backing away. “I can’t.”

“No? So who’s on the line?”

He tried to shove the phone away, if the frantic blur was anything to go by, but then everything came into clear focus.

Abigail looked different now, the wolf obviously fighting for control. Her scarlet lips were pulled back from wolfish fangs, fur starting to ripple across a narrowing face.

“You think you can use some amateurish detective skills to ruin my plan?” she snarled at the phone, then shifted our view to Dad. “Kneel.”

“Abigail...” he pleaded as he obeyed her. “Don’t. I didn’t... I can’t...”

“Shut up.” Her voice was completely scathing, reducing my dad down to nothing.

“Mum?” Anna’s voice was disembodied, faint in the background. “What’re you doing? Greg’s my dad, isn’t he?”

“Someone as worthless as this, who can’t even do one simple thing? Darling, he was never going to be good enough for you,” Abigail said and we watched in horror as a puddle of piss formed under my dad. Was this what Kai had gone through? Was this the horror she’d had to endure? We were about to get a masterclass in abusive behaviour.

“Raise your chin, just this once,” she told Dad.

“We’ve gotta go!” Jayden shouted. “We need to find him.”

“Too late...”

Atlas sounded like a ghost, because somehow he knew. Dad raised his chin up, his eyes finally turning silver, the wolf looking out at this fucking monster of a woman as well as the man. They knew they were beaten, but they wouldn’t be cowed by her, not in this last moment. I saw the man he had been, the one who’d taught me how to kick a footy and shave without cutting yourself and what to do if you did. I saw my father, right before Abigail’s claws struck out and ended him.

We jerked back from the phone, not able to watch our dad bleed out, but we heard the sounds. People die so slowly, it seemed, when their throats are ripped out. The spurts of blood, the strangled cries, then gurgles. The sorts of noises that stay with you, that haunt you at night when you close your eyes.

“Now you see what happens if people don’t do as I tell them,” Abigail said, but I barely saw her, my vision layered over with a thick red haze. “Kaia will reject you. She’ll have to, and then you will become my Anna’s mates.”

She hugged Anna closer, and so she didn’t get to see the fear in the girl’s eyes. It was one thing to be built up as something precious by her mother all the time, but it seemed like it was only now she really understood what her mother was like. Blood stained the girl’s top as Abigail wrapped her arm around her daughter. Anna looked down at the blood stains there, getting paler by the moment.

“Doesn’t fucking matter if she does,” I growled, fixing her with my stare. She might be able to sway everyone else around

her, but not us. “We will come for Kai and we won’t stop until she’s safe.”

“Then come and find what’s left of her.” Abigail smirked. “She’s going through her first heat locked up in a cage and I don’t think it’ll take her long to break. She’ll reject you to escape the pain and then I’ll get rid of the little bitch, like I should’ve done when she was born.”

I stared at Anna, not Abigail, willing her, begging her mentally to see me, hear what her mother was saying and see the insanity in it.

“Whatever you do to our mate, we’ll do three-fold to you. You’ll die long after you’ve screamed that you want to.”

I ended the call then, not wanting to indulge the fucking bitch one more moment.

“I’m driving,” Jay said, snapping his fingers. “You guys are pussies.”

Chapter 60

I could only hide down in the dark for so long. This wasn't like when I was a kid. I couldn't crawl into my cupboard, away from my mother's burning eyes, and avoid her wrath. She wasn't standing over me, berating me for being a piece of shit now. No, she'd made sure there was no escape.

The guys had said I was close to being in heat, hence their over the top protectiveness, but the tide that was now swelling in my blood was unnaturally strong, because it had been forced to rise. It came in waves, of sweat saturating my skin, of slick seeping between my legs, my womb contracting so hard I went to scream, but no sound came out. The wolf growled, then jumped to her feet, howling.

To be let out, though what the hell she'd do in the cage, I didn't know. To be free. To fight back, rend my mother's flesh from my bones, my mind grabbed on that for a second, but quickly lost it. I couldn't hold onto anger here. Lust sizzled in my blood, setting me alight more as every second passed. My nipples felt like they were being rubbed raw by my bra until I ripped it off, the lips of my cunt swollen and rubbing against each other.

But not enough.

I felt like I was teetering on the edge of orgasm, ready to jump off, but rather than being a perfect swan dive, I was being shoved towards the edge with sharp spears.

I didn't want this.

This wasn't the way it was supposed to go, but when it turned out this way, I wasn't surprised. Mum had always tried to take every fucking thing from me, and even when I'd made myself small and docile and obedient, that wasn't enough.

So why bother?

My eyes flicked open.

I couldn't see the world, see the room or this cage, even as my hands wrapped around the bars and shook them. A terrible growl built up in my lungs, getting louder, bigger, right as Mum opened the door.

“What a mess you are, Kaia.”

When I was a little kid, I'd blithely moved around the world, moved by my own instincts, just enjoying the sights and the smells and sensations, like most kids. And Mum's disgust would catch me off guard every time. The narrowing of her eyes when she saw a stain on my dress. The way her fingers would shrink back from hair made stringy by sweat as I played wild with the other kids. Her terse words would recast what was the innate sense I had of myself as something else, something repellent. I'd cry often, back then, and people would turn to see what the fuss was. That would make Mum even more angry, to be forced to put Anna down and make a show of comforting me, when she never wanted to do that.

And then at home she'd show me the error of my ways.

But, right now, I saw that same disgust, that same revulsion and while the learned responses she'd ingrained into me made me want to answer that with shame, I didn't. The bars shook with my rage, not just the one she inspired now, but all of it that I had kept locked away. I snarled at her, the wolf coming closer and closer to the surface, the lock creaking as my animal lent me her strength.

But Mum didn't look cowed for a second.

“Always making such a fuss, Kaia.” The way she looked at me made me feel like I was less than a pile of shit she'd accidentally stepped in. “Anna?”

“No, Mum,” my sister said, her voice clogged with tears. “Please.”

What the fuck had happened? Usually, precious baby Anna was pandered to in all things.

“God almighty, you girls are so weak.” Mum rolled her eyes and then stormed out of the room, only to return with a grisly burden.

My growl faltered the moment I saw Greg, or what was left of him. Blood was clotting along a wound across his throat, his shirt was matted with it and so was his beard. Those eyes that had watched me grow up, crinkled when he smiled, now stared blankly, filmed over and cloudy with death. Mum tossed the body before me, smiling when I jerked back.

“You want to snarl at me, young lady? You want to disobey me?” Her voice always took on a different tone when she was berating me. It wasn’t just the abject loathing that broke my heart, but this. I couldn’t question what she was saying, or dispute it, which is why when I rebelled, I slipped out the back door without a word. I couldn’t stand up to her. Not when she was pummeling me over and over with every bad thing she had to say about me. She’d knock me down over and over until I lost the will to get up.

Like right now.

No one was coming. She’d deliberately brought me out to some place far from everywhere else. There would be no passersby that stumbled upon me, no accidental saviour. And the guys would find my decomposing body in one of the many old, abandoned cottages around the district.

If they even bothered.

Why would they? The heat in my blood called out to them, but each moment it went unanswered, something died in me. The wolf whined, nosed at me, tried to keep me upright, but I collapsed down onto the floor, just staring into Greg’s empty eyes.

I’d be the same, she’d made that clear. Whatever life I tried to build, she’d be there to rise up from somewhere and take it

away. Mum would always have the last word. And what she wanted was the future she'd always dreamed of for her golden child, because even now she held my sister to her chest, stroking her back as Anna cried.

Mum had never done that for me. This little tableau, it was a perfect illustration of the hidden dynamics of our relationship. Anna being comforted and me shoved in a cage, drugged in order to make me hurt all the more. It was hard to understand, how a parent could feel one way about one child, demonstrate that they could be a good and decent parent, and then utterly fail with me.

And that's when I started to let in the thoughts I'd fought so hard to keep out.

The only common denominator, here, was me.

I was the one that inspired this kind of antipathy. I was the one she couldn't love. She treated Anna perfectly well, but couldn't even muster up a kind word for me. I worked harder, tried harder, did more, but even that somehow made me more unlovable. That hungry beast that lived in my heart only made her laugh. It was tempting to tar and feather her, to make her the bad guy, but when the whole town seemed to be still in contact with her, still thinking she was worth talking to, what did that say about me?

Every person who had looked me over when we returned to town, had expressed rampant disbelief on their faces when the guys said I was their mate. I searched the guys' faces in my mind, wondering if I had missed it. Were they with me because they liked me, or were we bonded just because I was their omega? Maybe without that instinctual chemistry we would have had nothing.

These were the thoughts I had tormented myself with every night over the two years before I found my mates again.

Because when so many bad things happen to a person, especially a child, it's hard not to assume you're the cause of it. That you're the bad seed, contaminating everyone else. I stared at Greg's dead face, as if it would give me the answers I needed, as the tide in my blood rose higher.

“What do you want?” I barely ground that out. “What will it take for you to leave me the fuck alone? I did what you wanted. I ran out of town, rather than stay and fight you and Anna for the guys. I moved on month after month, never staying in the one place for long, just to try and avoid them.” I shifted then, moving towards the bars. “You won.”

“But just like before, you only did what was right for a while.” Her eyes narrowed and her grip on Anna tightened to the point that my sister started to squeak. “You had to disobey, over and over—”

“Mum?” Anna’s voice made clear she was in pain. “Mummy, please—”

But whatever else she had to say, it was cut off by the roar of several cars and the sounds of doors slamming.

“Stay here,” Mum commanded Anna, pushing her to one side. “I’ll sort this out.”

Anna shrank back against the wall as Mum swept out of the room, then we heard the sound of the front door slamming, the muffled sound of her voices and then those of my mates making my whole body quiver with tension. But what I hadn’t expected was for Anna to slide over to my cage and start working on the lock.

“What’re you doing?” I asked, shrinking back.

“Mum’s bug fucking nuts,” she said, gritting her teeth when the lock refused to budge, then looking around. “Like it made sense beforehand. You were always such a bitch, so Mum had to discipline you.” My teeth sank into my bottom lip as I bit back my response to that. “But this?” Anna paused then, looking at Greg’s body, her brows knotting. “He was my dad...” My fingers wrapped around the bars closest to her. “I didn’t even know it. I thought we had the same dad, but...”

Her head whipped around, her eyes meeting mine.

“...They’re my brothers.”

I nodded slowly, not sure how it’d taken her this long to put two and two together, but encouraging her to make that leap. “She wants me mated to my brothers...?”

“It’s not about you,” I said with a sigh. “This is her getting what she wants. If she could’ve seen herself mating the three of them, I’m sure she would’ve, but that was a step too far for her. So she focussed on you, despite what you might want.” We both flinched as we heard a crash outside. “If you help me out of here, you can work out what that is, without her interference.”

Time seemed to come to a standstill as I watched her mind tick over. I could see that she was weighing it up, trying to work out what she would get out of the situation, but when she met my eyes, I somehow knew she’d decided I was her ally now.

“The keys, Anna. I need the keys.”

My fingers gripped the bars of the cage, tightening to the point of pain as I watched her look around aimlessly, while the sounds from outside made my teeth grind together. But I forced myself to speak in an even, polite tone as I said, “I think they’re in his pockets.”

People stop calling corpses by their names, probably because all that was Greg was gone. Anna froze at that, revulsion on her face.

“No, ew—”

“Anna, I need you to do this. In his left pocket.” It was the hip that was tilted upwards, thankfully. “If you don’t, you know what will happen.” She stared fixedly at her father, then her hand crept forward. “I can do this.” My voice broke then. “I can be the big sister you need, just this once.”

And save her while saving myself.

“Stay inside the cottage until I tell you to come out,” I said, as soon as the gate of the cage swung open. When I stood up, I felt it. Mum had tried to bring me down, grind me into the dirt, reminding me of all the wounds she’d left in me, trying to keep me down.

But as I stood up, I realised that the negative voice I’d been listening to was wrong. Because here was the thing.

Why did she have to try so hard? If I actually was such a lowly piece of shit, then she wouldn't need to say anything about it. It'd be clear to the whole world. But when I left Stanthorpe, that wasn't the impression of myself that I got from others. Kai is competent, I was told. Kai works hard. She cares about others, is a little wary, but friendly once you crack her shell. Kai is strong and can take everything life throws at her and stand tall while it happens. And that's just what I did.

“Baby...”

Jayden stopped mid-fight at my appearance, eyes wide, and Mum took advantage of that, launching herself at him, claws outstretched and that's what it took to break the hold she had over me. I might have let her hurt me, but I wasn't going to let her hurt him.

My mother's control over me snapped. And when I realised that I knew how to break her control, I revelled in the fact that she'd never pull that shit on me again.

The wolf sprang from my skin, sailing through the air, snarling her outrage, right before we shoved my mother down to the ground with our entire body weight. I heard the thump and the click of my mother's jaw as she landed. That was all the encouragement I needed as I unloaded.

My childhood was like a fucking boil that needed to be lanced, an infection inside me, swelling with pus, and it was only now it burst. There would be no reconciliation with my mother, because I didn't give her a chance. I bit and clawed in a terrible frenzy, shredding her back as she screamed and when she rolled over, trying to attack me back, I lunged. First at her wrists, biting down on them until blood flowed freely, then when she screamed, I went for her throat. She'd slashed Greg's with her claws, but I went in for a much more personal kill.

My jaws snapped around her throat, tasting blood, hearing her muffled screams. She shouted at me, trying to order me, force me to let her go, but I wouldn't. Her alpha bark slid off my skin and was whisked away with the breeze. Her hands

raked my face, her thumbs trying to find my eyes, and that's when my jaws clamped shut.

When Anna appeared, it was obvious this wasn't what she wanted. She burst into tears at the horror of it, and then rushed into my father's arms. She'd been rude and cruel to him before, but now he was Daddy as she sobbed into his chest. I felt sorry for her, hadn't wanted her to see this, but she didn't understand.

She'd never had to fight to exist in the face of our mother's wrath. There was only one way out of this. Sending a scapegoat out into the desert is fine if the goat dies, but you're fucked if it comes back.

“Fuck... Kai.”

I felt their bodies as each one of my mates slammed into me, as I came back to skin. They held me so tight I could barely take a breath. I must've looked a sight, my mouth dripping with blood, my clothes torn. I opened my eyes and looked up to see Jamie, injured but undaunted, her butt perched on the bonnet of a sedan parked far enough away to have kept her safe from the action. She nodded slowly before shooting me a smile. A light one that lit me right up. Because if I was anyone's daughter, I was hers and all I needed was her approval, not anyone else's.

Chapter 61

Atlas

The alphas arrived right as the fight was over. Convenient that. They quizzed everyone there, getting the whole story out from everyone else, but not us. I'd just looked at Mike, daring him to ask when he approached us, then nodded at him when he stopped in his tracks, then turned around. When Jamie came over, we pulled back, watching our mate throw herself into the other woman's arms.

"You know, wherever we end up, you've got a place with us," Xavier told Jamie. "You took on Kai's mother—"

"I did what I had to." She winced as she adjusted the arm that was now in a sling then wrapped her other arm around Kai's shoulders. "It wasn't very effective—"

"Call us next time. Let us do the fighting," Jay told her.

I didn't want to pull Kai away from the one woman who seemed to look out for her, but I was unable to stop myself from moving closer to my mate. Kai gave Jamie another hug and then came to my side. It was only then I could let out the breath I'd been holding.

Mine.

"Let's go," she said in a low voice. "Away from Stanthorpe. Away from all of it. I don't want to stay anymore. I'll go to jail if I have to—"

I pressed a kiss to her lips, smelling the artificial stink of her heat on her, my cock stiffening in my pants in response, but I ignored that in favour of answering her.

“Wherever you want, that’s where we’ll go.”

And when she smiled at me, nothing else mattered. I wanted to store that bright expression away forever, despite the blood that stained her teeth. Shit, maybe because of it. Kai was always going to be the only woman I would love and that feeling would always endure, even more when she wore the blood of her enemies.

WE DIDN'T GET to leave right away. We were stuck at Mum's house for a while.

That pissed me right off, until Mum snapped and asked when we were going, because she was getting sick of how I kept pacing the floor. But that's because doctors were sent around to the house to check Kai over. And while blood tests were taken, and the drug her mother had given her was identified, there wasn't much to do but wait. She was in heat. But not the kind that she was due for.

We held her tight, stroked her through the pangs that wracked her body, but we couldn't do anything more. She rearranged the bedding twenty times a night, never quite satisfied, but when Jay suggested getting her off to help, she burst into tears. Holding her seemed to make a difference. That deep pressure got her settled for a while, long enough to snatch a little rest, before the sweat would prickle across her skin and she'd start thrashing.

I fucking hated her bitch of a mother, even in death.

Abigail's body was disposed of and news of what happened circulated. Half the pack turned up at Mum's doorstep with casseroles and quiches, but they were there mostly to catch sight of us. To confirm the stories they'd been told, to stare at the victims of such a tragedy. I made clear to Mum the moment anyone came near us we'd be gone, and so

she palmed them off with some vague news about our current state.

She had her own news to share with the pack. The man she'd rejected as her mate had been murdered, and it hit her hard when she realised that he'd been Abigail's victim as much as anyone had. But she had Dad to cling to, so we left them to it.

Then, one night Kai slept all the way through. Nightmares still made her twitch in our arms, but that sweet, heady scent that had kinda soured? It faded, leaving just the scent of Kai. I buried my nose in her neck and breathed that fainter rose scent in, before going back to sleep myself.

"YOU CAN'T GO," Mum said, some weeks later, as we sat around the dining room table. "What if you have babies, Kaia?"

"Kai," we all corrected.

"What if you have babies, Kai?" she asked my mate, very deliberately. "You'll be all on your own, god knows where, and—"

"And we'll find a way." Kai had been building her confidence in the time she'd spent away from us, but now it was rock solid. Especially when Mum might try and put pressure on her, but she wasn't about to lock our girl in a cage and brutalise her, so my mate just met my mother's stare. "It's what every parent does, isn't it?"

"Of course it is," Dad said. "Love, can you pass me the mashed potatoes."

I felt bad when Mum burst into tears on the day we left. We all gave her a quick hug, not wanting to delay things anymore with long goodbyes.

"You'll come to visit us, right?" she said hopefully, but we made no promises.

"So, are we out of here?" Jamie asked, meeting us down the end of my parents' driveway. Our car was about to be

loaded up on the back of her massive truck.

“Are we?” I asked my mate.

“One last place,” she said with a grimace, making clear where we were about to go.

“KAI—” Her father breathed out her name, then stopped himself from adding the last syllable. “I didn’t expect to see you.”

“No,” she said, following him inside. “Hey, Anna.”

“Hey.”

By the look of the girl, you’d have thought she was the one terrorised by her mother, not Kai. Her eyes were red rimmed and her face blotchy and Anna made no attempt to mask her sad expression.

“I just came by to let you know we’re going,” Kai said.

“Forever?” There was both sadness and hope in her sister’s voice and when she got to her feet, Kai’s dad wrapped an arm around his step-daughter’s shoulders.

“Forever,” Kai replied. “So, you moved back in with Dad?”

Anna flushed as she looked at him, then back to Kai.

“I was mad after... you know, and I stormed out, but... Greg wasn’t my dad.” She looked past Kai to us, though not with the same acquisitive eye as before. “He was yours. Dad... Daryl is the only Dad I’ve known.”

“You can still call me Dad if you want to,” he told her. “In my heart, you’re still my daughter.”

But what about his actual blood daughter? I wanted to shout, my whole body tensing. What about Kai? The man seemed to sense that, flushing when he looked at her.

“And I wasn’t much of a father to you. I tried.” He let out a long sigh. “Your mother rejected the bond she and I had, before Anna was born, so she could...” His voice trailed away. “But I stuck around to try and keep you safe.” His brows

creased and I watched his eyes get suspiciously shiny, right before he caught my frown. “I didn’t do a very good job of it, but I tried.”

Kai moved forward and hugged him, and Daryl let out a long sigh. He wrapped his arms around her and for a moment I was worried. Was she going to let herself be pulled back into this shit again? I knew the man was weak, that he had little ability to stand up against a monster like Abigail, but... Part of me could never forgive him for that, for not finding someone else stronger to step in if he couldn’t.

And neither could Kai.

I knew her like I did my own heart. I could see that there was a discomfort there, a reluctance. He was her father, but he was also a witness to all the worst that had happened to her and that made being around him tough. So she just nodded as she stepped back, and rubbed his arm.

“I know and I appreciate it, but I won’t be back. If you want to make contact, find me, otherwise...” She looked around the room, and I wondered what she was seeing, the present or the past. “Look after yourselves. Be happy, because that’s what I’m going to be.”

And then, finally, after an interminable amount of time exchanging pleasantries, we made it to the door.

For all the times I’d come through the front door, invited, and snuck in the back door without permission, in order to spend time with my mate, it was only now that I felt good about this place. Saying goodbye to this house, the pain that was part of it, was a good thing. And I asked Kai if she felt the same way when we drove off.

“Part of me will always be trapped inside that house,” she said, her hand scratching at her breastbone. “It’s why I can’t stay here, why I’m not going to come back, but...” Jamie looked across at her from the driver’s seat. “But that’s only a small part of who I am. There’s a whole world out there and a whole other me, one that’s stepped out from under Mum’s shadow. I can’t wait to meet her.”

“Damn straight, kid,” Jamie said with a nod of her head and then she pulled the horn, scattering some poor unsuspecting crows as we hit the road. “Damn fucking straight.”

Chapter 62

Three months later

You know when you wake up feeling twice as tired as you did when you went to sleep? Yeah, that was me this morning. Waking up was like swimming up, up to the surface, but something kept pushing me back down. I'd have happily slept the day away but for this.

Somehow I could feel every single tiny little piled up bit of fabric rubbing against my skin. The guys had tried to tell me we should buy some one hundred percent pure cotton sheets, but the expense seemed insane. Right now I couldn't have regretted that decision more. I shifted in the bed, the covers feeling too heavy, pressing me against the bed, against those damn little beads of fabric, until I shoved my head up and off the pillow and looked around.

My eyes closed down to slits. There were blackout curtains on the windows, but the tiny shafts of light that seeped around the edges had me squinting. No, worse, pulling back, shrinking away from it. The light was too harsh, too bright and it hurt. I let out a small sound of distress, but didn't expect an answer. I hadn't been feeling well for the last few days, so the guys left me in bed when they went to work, but when the door snicked open, I jumped.

"What're you...?" I said as I stared at Xavier. "Why are you not at work?"

"Day off," he said, coming slowly closer. He held out a cup of tea, steam curling off it. "Thought you might like a

drink?”

I took it gratefully. He knew exactly how I liked it, having mastered the art of drink maker faster than meals. But when my fingers touched the cup, I had to fight the urge to pull back. It was too hot, the smell too astringent, the bergamot notes I usually liked assaulting my nose.

“No,” I said, trying to put it on the bedside table as quickly as possible. “No!”

“OK, I’ve got it.” Xavier rescued the cup from my hands, going and putting it on a tallboy we had on the other side of our room. “I thought you might be thirsty. You were thrashing around a lot in bed.”

Another disgusted whine from me. I pulled away from the bed, fought the covers like a petulant child until he swooped in to pull them away.

“Better?”

“No.”

Where the hell had that answer come from? Actually where the hell had all of this come from? I liked tea and would’ve at least thanked Xavier for bringing it to me in bed, even if I didn’t want it. I stared at him then, another damn whine building in my throat.

“Xavier...?”

“You’re not feeling right,” he said, calmly and confidently. He pressed the back of his hand to my forehead and then nodded.

“I’m sick? I can’t be sick. I need—”

I had work. We had work. I’d had to take a few days off because my energy levels were so low and I was just tired all the time. I’d been super apologetic to the farm manager we were currently working for, but he’d just smiled and clapped a hand on my shoulder, saying I was a good worker and that I should take some time off.

And that felt wrong.

Don't touch me, that's what I wanted to snap, even though Barry was a good guy. He was always nice and respectful and made sure the other guys were around me. But right then I hated it, hated him for daring to touch me, even though it had just been for half a second, but Jayden stepped in before I could say anything. He steered me away, drove me back to the cottage we were currently renting and... I'd spent the last few days in bed, wondering if I had PTSD or something, when this happened.

No more. I sprang off the bed, the feel of those sheets on my skin too much to bear. I tore the blankets and the quilts off, then the sheets, throwing them into the corner to go in the bin later. I even got to the mattress protector, then paused.

Why would I want to pull that off?

"Something wrong with the bed?" Jayden asked, appearing in the doorway.

"Yes...!" As I whirled around I saw he had a pile of fabric in his hands. "What...? What're those?"

"Cotton sheets," he replied and then smiled as I threw myself at him with a kiss. "You said they were too expensive but—"

"Those ones scratch at my skin," I said, pointing an imperious finger at the pile in the corner.

"OK, so try these."

He handed me way more than one set of sheets. The fabric felt heavy in my arms, but somehow that was comforting. They'd been washed too. I could smell the lemon scent in my nose and the sun and somehow that made everything better. I tossed through the pile, picking some and discarding others, just throwing them on the floor as a small voice shouted inside my head that I'd have to pick them up afterwards, before I came to this set.

Soft sage green, the cotton felt well broken in, as if it was a linen blend. I held it against my chest, then buried my face in it. Something settled straight away as soon as I felt them.

"These ones."

“Figured they might be the ones.”

Atlas walked into the room and my brows creased when I saw him, saw all of them. They were here, in my room, with me, and while that had happened every day since I defeated my mother, somehow it hit harder right now.

“You knew?” I asked in a thin voice.

“They’re softer,” he said, taking the sheets from me. “Thinner and while they might not last long—”

“They won’t?” What the fuck was wrong with me? Tears filled my eyes then.

“Good one, numbnuts,” Jay said, moving closer and focussing on me. “Don’t worry about that, OK? Just focus on this. You need the bed to be comfortable, to feel good when you lie on it, right?”

“Right.”

I nodded then, turning my attention back to the bed.

The cottage was lovely. As soon as we’d walked in I’d seen the white painted walls and the airy interior and said we’d take it, but right now my whole world was reduced down to this mattress. I thumbed the mattress protector speculatively, then moved to start spreading the sheets over the mattress. My fingers felt too thick and rubbery, and I struggled and that’s when the three of them stepped forward.

“Need some help?” Xavier asked.

I wanted to say no, some strange heat in my blood firing up the moment he got closer, but when he bent down to grab one corner, I could see it. If they listened to me, did exactly as I said, we could make this bed perfect.

We worked for far too long to create a perfectly smooth surface on the bed, every wrinkle smoothed away and consciously I knew that was stupid. It creased as soon as I crawled onto the bed, but somehow I couldn’t put my knee on it until I had. But while the fabric felt so much better on my skin, it wasn’t right. I started fucking whining again, like a

beaten dog and that's when Jayden picked up the discarded sheets off the floor.

"Maybe this will help," he said.

I snatched them away. Why was I being such a raging fucking bitch? The thought was there and gone again, blown away by the swirl of emotion inside me.

Because something else was kicking in.

I could feel then, a link to my ancestresses, that they too had fussed over their beds, their nests, just like I was, perfecting them until—

Nests?

I blinked, and it was as if the red haze in my head cleared for a second, making me see the room, the guys clearly.

"I'm going into heat."

It was so completely different to what Mum had tried to put me through, I hadn't put two and two together.

"Yeah, you are."

Jay tried to make that a light-hearted thing, but the heat in his eyes, in all of their eyes changed the intent. I moved them much more quickly, arranging the fabric then rearranging it. Somehow there was a clock ticking off every second as I moved. Probably because they were stripping down, then moving towards the bed.

"I'm not finished!" I yelped, the wolf and me in complete agreement. We couldn't do anything until this was done right. The fabrics were a vast improvement on the ones on the bed before, but still—

"It's OK." Xavier's hand slid down my back and my spine arched in response. My head dipped lower and my naked hips were thrust up. "We'll wait. We'll always wait for you, Kai."

But at the feel of his hand, I couldn't. A low whine escaped my throat, feeling like it vibrated all over me, right as I felt the leak of slick down my thighs.

Fuck.

Something happened, as they drew closer, a terrible kind of hunger far more powerful than what Mum had tried to chemically induce, but also far gentler. I was simmering rather than being roasted until the flesh fell off my bones.

I felt good.

My hips worked back and forth, moving in time with the slow strokes of Xavier's hand, which made the other two groan.

"Jesus, look how fucking swollen and wet she is..." Jayden hissed. "Kai baby, I need to know if you're done making your nest, because I'm gonna die if I don't taste you soon."

"Please," I moaned, pressing my hips backwards.

I'd never been so aware of my own body, feeling the petals of my cunt part at this angle, right before Jayden dropped down before me. A hot mobile tongue slid far too easily through me, a messy slurp making clear to the room what he was doing, but I didn't care. I needed this, that flick against my clit, the slow circle of the point of his tongue around my entrance, right before it pushed in. Too soft, too mobile, too short, it made me whine all the more, before Atlas got closer.

Jay flopped down on his back and then moved under me to suck on my clit, the slow, gentle tugs driving me fucking insane. But Atlas was far more brutal, an electric pleasure rippling down my spine as he speared two fingers, then three, then four into me. The combination of soft and hard, of gentle and brutal had my teeth clenching down, burying my face in the soft fabric and moaning like a cat in heat with every pulse. And while they did that, Xavier spoke.

"Look at you, beautiful girl. You're taking my brothers so fucking well. They're making you feel so good, aren't they?" I couldn't answer with words, my grunts barely human. "They're going to make you come so many fucking times, but they're not going to stop." My whine shifted in tone, becoming somewhat uncertain. "Not until we've given you fucking everything you need, because that's what this is about, right? What you need, Kai. So what do you want?"

I couldn't answer him, because the pleasure wasn't building but flaring to life like flames, ready to eat me up.

And I was going to let it.

I rubbed my cunt against Jayden, pushed back against Atlas, until they forced me to stop. To just take a breath and another and just feel.

I grabbed at my orgasm with greedy fingers, wanting, needing that pleasure as it roared through me. It felt like it was going to eat me all up and I was going to let it. What'd happened back in Ghost Town was an attempt to break me, but this put me right back together.

They would do this for me forever if I wanted. If I needed to be woken up by all three of them drowning me in pleasure, they would. Whatever I needed, whatever I wanted, they would deliver and as I panted, that's when I felt it.

Love.

Pure and simple and yet the most complex emotion in the world. The one that built cities, civilisations and also brought them crashing down. The feeling that transcends rules and social norms, going where it willed and I was swept up in it right then. My pleasure spiked, right as my heart did.

"Love..." I gasped out.

"What?" Xavier asked, dropping his head lower. He stared into my feverish eyes, his brows creasing as if what I said caused him real pain.

"I love you," I forced out.

And it was then that it slammed into me, physical pleasure, but one that was multiplied exponentially by the emotional one. Every barrier was brought down, every defence dismantled. It was this, just this I needed.

"I love you," I sobbed and he dropped down on the bed, wrapping his hand around my neck and stroking the mark he'd left on me.

"Gods, Kai, all I've ever been able to do is love you, beautiful. It's all I will do."

And then we kissed, something that took my breath away literally, leaving us panting when we drew apart, but then I reached over with a shaking hand and pushed his head to the side. He was an alpha. He didn't need to submit to anyone ever, but right now he did, baring his neck to me and then making a strangled sound as I sank my teeth into him.

I'd torn out the throats of two people who tried to kill me, but whatever memory I held of that, it was washed away by this. Not biting Xavier to hurt him, but to claim him. Whatever I'd been feeling before it seemed to grow and grow, until my chest ached with it, but I couldn't seem to want to stop. Not even when I pulled away and licked his skin clean of blood.

"WE GET YOU OFF, but you claim him?" Jayden smiled but I saw the hunger in his eyes, the wariness. "That's bullshit."

"Yeah?"

I rose from the bed, not feeling like a whiny, vulnerable omega anymore, but one filled with her own power. I shoved him down on the bed, his head hanging off the end as I straddled his hips and then angled his cock up as I slammed down on it.

Chapter 63

Atlas

I felt like we'd been through a lot as a pack, but somehow this was the biggest moment. I slipped from the room to get some water and some snacks. A heat was a marathon, not a sprint, and everyone would need to stay at least hydrated. But something had me slowing my steps as I walked back.

The way my brothers and my mate looked together like that? There was a kind of peace about the three of them that had me pausing in the door. Part of me didn't want to disturb it. Kai had settled back down once we left Stanthorpe, loving travelling with Jamie and us, but at night? I woke up from nightmares myself often enough, so I had a front row seat to hers.

The way she twitched, curled her fingers, said no, no, over and over again. As she fought the demons that had plagued her in the past one more time. I pulled her close and sometimes that made me the enemy she fought under the sheets and sometimes I was the hero that saved her. I always did it either way. But this? When we were teenagers, the boys had all joked and talked shit about omegas going into heat, making out like we were big men who could tackle a sexually rapacious mate.

But like most men's bullshit, it had nothing to do with the reality.

My mate was inside our bedroom, resting, but she'd need me, need us soon. I was tempted to tease her, force Jayden's knot out of her, but right now I couldn't. She'd need this

break, before the heat started to rage again, so I padded quietly in the room and set the water bottles and snacks down.

Which was when her eyes flicked open.

Kai could look at me from now to the end of time and I'd stay there until she looked away. I'd spent the worst two years of my life looking for her, but now? Now her eyes shone perfectly silver in the darkened room, the wolf and the woman watching my every move. But she wasn't content to just lie there for long.

"Atlas..."

I was moving towards her the moment her lips moved and when she reached out, I laced my fingers with her. But that wasn't what she needed. Her fingers brushed featherlight down my aching dick, then she wrapped her hand around my fucking knot.

I could've come just from that, just from her touch, spilling pearly seed all over her that I'd rub into her skin, claiming her again as mine. But she didn't want that, the others shifting sluggishly as she tilted her head back and opened her mouth.

An omega would want to be filled everywhere she could be at the height of her heat, so I moved forward on automatic, seeing her perfect mouth and wanting to plunge my cock into it. But she drew me closer with a burning look and a lick of her lips.

"Atlas..."

The way she breathed my voice, I wanted to record it, play it over and over when I was on long boring drives, to recapture that feeling of connection.

"Whatever you want, Princess," I told her. "You know that."

"Fuck, she's wringing my knot dry," Jay moaned, writhing as Kai drew me closer, stroking his hand down her body, then sliding them down her front to work her clit. So she gasped around me, licking the head of my cock in a devastating sweep, making me feel fucking crazy for more. Her fingers

formed an open ring around the base of it, barely even squeezing me. She was teasing me, driving me fucking nuts, my cock lurching in her mouth and splattering precum into it, which seemed to trigger something.

“Mmm...”

The drawn out moan, I felt it all the way down into my toes.

“You keep doing that and I’m gonna blow all the way down your pretty throat,” I told her.

She pulled free and I resisted the urge to put her mouth back right where it was.

“Do it,” she urged, then parted her lips.

I eased my cock back in again, but didn’t give her what she wanted, just slow, shallow thrusts. Kai tried to up the ante, closing her lips around me and sucking.

I wanted to surrender, just give in to the impulse to thrust deeper, harder, until her eyes ran with tears and she moaned in pleasure. She’d look so fucking beautiful but I pulled away, a deeper, more primal instinct ruling me.

I needed to breed my girl.

She wanted to have our children. I think she’d only just started to get her head around that. Everything had been a giant no before, from being with us, to dealing with her mother. But with Abigail dead now, Kai could rise, letting all the feelings that she stifled come to the surface. Ones where she was the mother, a caring, loving one.

“Fuck, you keep doing that, and I’ll come again,” Jay groaned, as our girl strangled his dick.

“Yes...” She pulled away from me to kiss my brother, while Xavier rolled over to grab a lube bottle from the side drawer and then used it to slick his fingers. She was already drenched, but silicon lube lasted longer and didn’t dry out, so Kai just panted as Xavier pressed his fingers into her arse. “Oh god, yes!”

“Jesus... fuck...!”

Jayden roared, his eyes blazing silver, as he thrust back into her, much more easily now, riding her ripples of pleasure until he unloaded into her again, only to pull free.

“Now?” Xavier asked me.

He knew my need for Kai was riding me hard and it was her too. As soon as Jay pulled away, she dragged me back down. My brother might be done, but she wasn't, her swollen wet cunt flexing on air as I looked down. I rubbed my fingers in the mess Jayden made and then pushed the seed back in.

“You need to keep that inside you.” Her eyes flicked open to meet mine. “Tilt your hips, tighten up and hold it in deep.” Her breathing started to pick up and I watched the hypnotic rise and fall of her breasts. “That's it. You're gonna keep every damn thing we give you inside, like a good girl.” She nodded quickly as I smiled.

Because it wasn't hard to see it, that flat stomach swollen with our children, her breasts heavy. She wouldn't be our girl then, swelling to become a woman. And what a fucking woman. There was no one I wanted more to bear my children than her.

“You could get pregnant, Kai,” I said, fighting the fever inside me. I had to make sure she knew. “You're ovulating. I can fucking smell it and you're so damn ripe.”

She grabbed my shoulder and dragged me closer.

“So what're you going to do about it?”

“Now,” I finally agreed with Xavier, shooting my brother a look over her shoulder as we both moved. I pushed inside her first, feeling that hot, hot little pussy scalding my dick, sucking me deeper. “Oh fuck... Fuck...”

Men liked to think they were so fucking powerful, but if I ever needed evidence of how weak I was, it was this. I couldn't fight this, fight her anymore. We talked about this, knowing Kai was about to go into heat any time soon and while we quietly thanked the fucking gods that it was about to happen, we'd tried to pre-plan shit.

“The last time Kai was in heat, her mother was abusing her,” Xavier had said with a dark look at us. “She was locked up in a fucking cage.”

“We know, Xave,” Jay said, his hands becoming fists. He’d looked around, seeing the other shearers taking a break and forced himself to relax.

“She might not want us,” I said bluntly, even as my heart ached at that thought.

“And if she does?” Xavier was so like Dad right then, staring the two of us down. “We need to go slow, be careful...”

But I couldn’t seem to remember any of that, because the sounds of her moans had me stabbing deeper, giving her everything she begged for.

“Yess...” Kai flung her head back on the pillow, even as Xavier plastered himself against her back. He’d slicked up his dick with lube and we were supposed to slowly introduce our knots to her. But her cunt felt like it flexed open, sucking me in and my knot had wedged in easier than ever before and when I rocked back, her fingers went to her clit. I knocked them away, taking over that privilege, rubbing her little clit, watching it pop up after each stroke.

“Jesus, Atlas,” Xavier swore. “We talked about—”

But Kai reached behind her, wrapping her arm around his neck and then pulled him down with a kiss.

She liked that. Kai clamped down tight, that long, slow squeeze forcing my fangs down to dig into my bottom lip.

“Mmm...” she moaned into my brother’s mouth. “Mmm... Xavier...”

“What, Kai?” He stopped paying attention to me and focussed on our girl now, stroking her face and staring into her eyes. “What do you need? I’ll give it to you, but you have to —”

“You.” She panted that out. “You, please, Xavier, I need it.” He moved quickly, but not quickly enough. We were all

laying on our sides, Kai wedged between us, so he hooked her leg back over his as he pushed into her.

“This what you need?” he asked in a low growl.

“Yes!” she shouted and I felt everything grow tighter then. “More!”

“Fuck, Kai, I don’t want to hurt you—” Xavier said, watching her face closely for any signs of pain. But I said what I had to.

“So don’t.” His eyes darted to me and it was only then I saw my brother’s vulnerability. “Give our girl what she needs and don’t hurt her.”

My advice worked for both of us, all of our attention on our mate now. Watching the way her body shifted and her breath was sucked in. The little frown that quickly smoothed away to a blind smile. The little pants turning into long, slow moans, right before Xavier forced his knot in.

“Fuck!” She nearly leapt off the bed, but we held her close, soothed her. But we’d mistaken her reaction. Her body jolted, tore at our knots, driving us nuts as she got just what she wanted. “Your knots...” she mumbled. “Pressing hard... Making me...” But she couldn’t tell us what was going on, our concern rising as our desire faltered, right before this.

It was as if the room was filled with roses, her scent bursting and showering all over us like rain. There were no more worries, no concerns, just this. Each one of us moving to tease out the pleasure of the other, stringing out the pleasure like it was a note of music, the tension rising as it went on, wondering when it would finally break. But then Jay shouldered forward.

“Look at you, baby.” His voice broke as he gazed down at Kai and we did the same, pushing harder, faster, plunging towards our future and never looking back.

Then her whole body went stiff, completely rigid, her breath puffing in and out of her lungs as she tumbled over the edge, and dragged us with her.

I'd never felt anything like this before and it created a high watermark on my soul that was rarely replicated. I was completely and utterly caught up in my girl. And so were Xavier and Jay, watching and listening to her screams of pleasure, right as we experienced ours. I said I wanted to breed her, but she was not a passive receptacle. She dragged the cum from my balls, ejecting into her over until finally there was nothing left.

I could hear the rapid skitter of her heart beat and mine as we all began to settle again, everyone collapsing on the bed. I pressed my mouth to her lips, felt her sluggish kiss, before Jayden shoved me.

“Don't go stirring her up again,” he told me before lying down on the bed. “Let her rest. I hope you're not feeling sore, love, because this is gonna happen over and over again.”

Chapter 64

Xavier

And we did. Over and over for days until the fever broke and our senses came back to us. I realised this because Kai rolled towards me, groaning.

“You OK?” I croaked out, my mouth bone dry. I coughed and then tried again. “Kai?”

“Sticky...” she mumbled, pressing her face into my chest and trying to go back to sleep, but then shifting again, unable to get comfortable.

She was. We were. Atlas’ words, about trying to get her pregnant? I dunno if it was that or just her heat, but we’d all come and kept on coming until we got to here. Skin stuck to skin, the sheets damp or sticky.

“Xavier...” she grumbled.

I was out of bed, my legs shaky, but I locked them down tight and carried her into the bathroom. She blinked, then flinched against the light shining in the windows. I set her down in the bath and then pulled the curtain across as I set it to run. I tossed around the idea of adding some bubble bath to the mix, but if she was as tender as I was, it’d just hurt.

“You’re just going to stand there?”

She looked so fucking tired, lines on her face that had never been there before, her eyes slits.

“You’re tired—” I started to say.

“And I need you to wash me.” She smiled when I took a step forward, then another, sitting forward so I could sit behind her, then settling back against my chest.

Would this ever get old? I wondered, tracing small circles along her arms, balling her hair up at her neck so it wasn't caught between us. Then watching the curve of her back, the small swell of her arse as it shifted so she could turn off the water. Then feeling that deep satisfaction that came from feeling her back in my arms.

Yeah, that.

Human men always bitched about their girlfriends or settled into some kind of oblivious states with the wives, bonded through a mixture of habit and affection, but I never heard them talk of this. Of your heart rate picking up or slowing down in time with hers, your chests rising and falling at the same time. Of loving someone so fucking deeply that you'd burn the world down for her, but hoped you wouldn't have to because you loved to see her delight in it. The way she spun in the sun the moment we had a fine day, or laughed as we smacked her on the arse as she passed by. How her eyelids fluttered when she breathed in the scent of the flowers we'd brought her. The way she smacked with the spatula if I wasn't listening to her orders when cooking dinner, too caught up in her and right then I hugged her closer, wanting the imprint of her body pressed into mine.

“You OK?” she asked, that terrible sensitivity her mother had thrashed into her, now directed at us. She detected our shifts in moods, knew as soon as we walked in the door whether we'd had a bad day or a good one and then moved towards us to settle us back down again and right now I wanted to do that for her. I pressed my lips to the top of her head and said my truth.

“Always with you. I'll love you forever.”

“I know—” she said.

“And I want you to be pregnant.” Silence filled the bathroom, because I'd revealed something I'd kept locked

down for far too long and now it was coming spilling out. “It’s OK if you’re not or if you never want to have kids...”

Kai rose up out of the water then, turning around to face me and I met her stare, unable to look away. I smiled, but it was a terrible thing. I had fucking tears in my eyes, for fuck’s sake. But my mate moved closer with a question in her eyes. I covered her hands with mine and met her gaze head on.

“I want us to be a family, Kai, just to see if we’re any better. Maybe we wouldn’t fuck it up. Maybe it won’t be so fucking awful. Maybe—”

She cut me off with a kiss, but I was glad for it. No more fucking shit spilling from my lips, just this. Kai, her, her taste and her feel, making my head spin when she finally pulled away.

“I hope I am too, Xavier.” She settled back on her heels and her hands shook as she touched her stomach. “But if I’m not, we’ll never stop trying, right? We’ll always be a family, no matter whether we have children or not.”

I smiled then, really smiled, feeling the light that came from being around her fill me up. I grinned and then laughed, feeling like we shed something in that moment.

“Promise?”

Chapter 65

Several years later.

“Mummy! Mummy!”

I jerked my head up off the pillow and then blinked, seeing my twin daughters come rushing into the room. Jayden groaned and then pulled me closer, but that didn't protect me. Two little squirming bodies came and jumped on both of us, forcing the breath out of their father.

“God, how do they manage to get my—”

“Hello, beautiful girl!” I said, picking up Harper and putting her in my lap as Amelia climbed over to her dad.

“Did they...?” Atlas burst into the room, looking flustered. “You little rabbits. I told you to let your mother sleep in. Your daddy could get his butt out of bed though.”

Harper went rigid, a wicked grin spreading across her face. As I stroked her bright blonde hair back from her face, her eyes danced as she pointed at Atlas.

“Daddy said butt.”

“You just said butt too,” Jayden said, putting Amelia between us and then snuggling into all of us. “And you two are gonna get a smack on your butt for waking us up.”

The girls just cackled at that.

“Mummy, it's our birthday!” Amelia looked up at me with a face completely alight with joy.

It was weird, but sometimes that was a hard thing to see with her. If Harper was the guys' daughter through and through, Amelia was mine. Long dark hair and flashing brown eyes, but there was no fear in her. That was the bit that made my heart skip a beat and my lungs seize. I never let her see it though. She giggled wholeheartedly as Jayden tickled her, the sound only getting louder as Harper leapt off my lap to join in.

When you saw the two of them together, the twins differed in colouring only. They rampaged like little monsters, getting into everything and laughing, crying, screaming and talking their whole way through it.

And I loved them so much my heart ached.

"Happy birthday, my baby girls," I said, smiling down at them, catching the way their cheeks flushed and their eyes shone, the giggles barely suppressed, so I threw myself down amongst them, tickling my daughters, my mates, everyone until they turned on me.

"GRANDPA'S HERE!"

When we got up and got showered and dressed, we all worked together on the party preparations. I'd already cooked the cake and most of the treats, but there were some foods for the adults that needed finishing touches. The guys were ferrying stuff outside, getting everything set up before the guests arrived, but then my daughters came rushing back in. They were in pretty new party dresses for the day, but I saw grass stains on their knees and mud on their hands already.

"Is he?" I picked them up and set them up on the kitchen bench, then kissed each one of their noses. "Then you little monsters need to wash up, again." They giggled as I shot them a fake grumpy look. "Grandpa doesn't want grubby hands all over him."

"Oh, I don't think he minds."

Dad came in with way too many presents in tow, the girls squealing when they saw them and then threw themselves off the bench without cleaning their hands, rushing towards him.

It'd taken awhile, but I'd come to appreciate Dad. He was never going to be my rock and expecting that would always lead to heartbreak, but... With the girls he was kind, gentle, attentive, listening to their weird little stories for hours, just glad to be around them and it was then I could see it. In a relationship with Mum, he was always going to be weak, but here? He could love them and get their love in return, be the kind of grandfather they needed and that helped heal a lot of the pain between us.

Then Anna walked in.

She caught the mess and the fuss with a slight frown, then walked over to me.

“Don't you want to clean them up first?” she said, eyeing the kids.

“And hello to you, Anna,” I said, cocking one eyebrow.

She met my gaze, flushing when she realised what she was doing. She was still the girl I grew up with, but without Mum constantly puffing her up, she'd had to learn a little humility if she wanted family and friends. But her focus shifted back to the girls.

“Oh, Harper looks lovely in the dress I bought her,” my sister said, clasping her hands to her heart. “She's such a pretty girl.”

A dress she'd bought for Harper only.

I wasn't sure if it was deliberate or not, but she tended to look over Amelia, sending her instead a gift card. I'd opened the presents, knowing my sister, and when I'd talked to the guys about it, we'd tossed around whether or not we let her come to the party.

“I'D CHEERFULLY DROP KICK that bitch over the back fence,” Jay said with customary bluntness and Atlas had just stared at the card fixedly, as if willing it to become a dress.

“But you want to try and have a relationship with your family,” Xavier said, and I nodded. “So make shit clear to her.

She sees us, sees the girls, as long as she can behave in an appropriate manner.”

I’d rung my sister sometime after that and explained the problems with the gift. She got defensive, huffy, sulky and then dismissive, right up until I laid it out for her. Treat the girls equally, or don’t have anything to do with either of them or us. She shut up right after that. I then used the gift card to buy Amelia a dress too, rewrapping them so they’d never know about their aunt’s thoughtlessness.

“HARPER, come and say hello to your Auntie Anna,” she said, crouching down and holding her arms out wide, and I was just about to give her a very firm nudge in the ribs, right as Jenny and Jackson walked in.

“Nanna and Pop!”

The girls pulled away from Dad and rushed towards their other grandparents. They at least treated the girls equally. Jenny had pleaded with us to come home, but when it became clear we weren’t, buying this place on the NSW coast, she and Jackson got used to flying up. They were perfect grandparents, spoiling the girls rotten and feeding them too much junk food as they took them on adventures.

Loving them.

Which reminded me of this issue.

“Anna.”

My sister looked back over her shoulder at me, ready to join the party, but something in my expression made her pause.

“God, Kai, you’re not gonna go on about that shit again, are you? The past is the past, so leave it there.”

Anna was an adult now, I had to remind myself, because when she looked at me, there was some of that childish petulance.

“What shit?” Jayden had walked over, caught the mood in the kitchen and moved closer. “What shit?”

“Anna, you need to treat the girls equally,” I said in a quiet but firm voice.

“Kai, you’re such a fucking buzzkill,” my sister sighed. “Amelia’s a little cutie for sure, but I really vibe with Harper. She’s a spunky little thing.” She winked. “Reminds me of me. It’s not that I don’t love Amelia—”

Did she love anyone? I wasn’t sure. It was hard to tell with Anna. How much of Mum’s poison did she take on? But I had an easy solution to that. I didn’t need to psychoanalyse her or watch her closely. I didn’t have to have anything to do with her. I just needed to remind her of my boundaries.

“I don’t care about vibes or whatever. I care about my daughters.”

Anna watched my eyes bleed silver. She was over eighteen, had gone through the choosing, but hadn’t found her wolf yet. A small percentage didn’t. So she swallowed hard now, seeing not Kai or Kaia, but the mumma wolf.

“We’re not going to argue about this, because it has nothing to do with how you feel or I do. The girls need us to treat them equally, love them equally, see the amazing little people they are, or you can get the fuck out that door.”

My finger stabbed at the exit and Anna just blinked at it, finally silent.

“And I’ll be the one escorting you,” Jayden said with a grin. He held his arm out to me, ready to take me outside. “No second chances, Anna. Get this right, or get the fuck out.”

“Hey, kid,” Jamie said, walking in the door, toting two massive teddy bears on each hip. She looked at Anna, eyes narrowing slightly, but my sister just ignored her, walking past in a huff.

I DIDN’T PAY much attention to my sister for the rest of the party. The girls didn’t really vibe with her at all, naturally drawn to the people who actually cared about them. They splashed in the pool, played games with their school friends

who'd been invited over, ate way too much sugar and didn't drink enough water, until the day ended.

"I have two very special girls who are asking for their Mum," Jamie said, carrying both girls over to me on her hips. I got to my feet to tell them to give her a break. They'd been climbing all over their auntie Jamie all day, dunking her in the pool, then holding onto her neck as she swam them back and forth.

"Did you have a good day, babies?" I asked, collecting one girl, then the other, feeling the press of their bodies into mine and the satisfaction that came from it. I rocked them back and forth, just like I had when they were tiny.

"Ready for a sleep, I reckon," Jamie said with a smile. "Buuuut..."

"Jamie said we could have ice cream." Amelia looked up at me from where she clung to my side. She tried for big puppy dog eyes, but soon started giggling.

"It's our birthday and we haven't had any ice cream at all," Harper said very earnestly.

"But you've had cake, lollies, chocolate and chips," I said.

"Please..."

We always laughed when they did this, clasping their hands together and fluttering their eyelids awkwardly, doing their best impersonation of begging.

"They're only five once," Jamie said with a shrug. "I remember a girl who loved her ice cream back in the day."

I shook my head as I stared at my girls, smiling as I tried to memorise every curve of their faces. They would only be five once. The years already felt like they were moving too fast, slipping through my fingers, but this would always be true. There would be no scapegoats in my house, nor golden children, just ones that were loved completely and utterly and I would never allow anyone to hurt them, no matter how they were related to us.

“C’mon,” I said with a smile. “Let’s see what’s in the freezer.”

What's next?

Want more Scapegoat books? Let me know!

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<https://www.facebook.com/steph.tashkoff>

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