

SKYE WILSON

LINDSEY DEVIN



DOMINATING
ALPHA
WOLF

DOMINATING ALPHA WOLF

DEMON HOLLOWERS MOTORCYCLE CLUB: BOOK 2

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MORGAN

“See you tonight, Pep,” I murmured, running my hand along the fluffy white fur of my Persian cat’s spine. She arched into my touch and looked up at me with big green eyes from where she was perched in my apartment window, letting out a quiet mew of protest. If Peppermint had it her way, I’d stay cuddled up on the couch with her all day every day.

“A new book is coming in today, so I promise we’ll curl up together when I get home from work.”

She purred in contentment, almost as if she understood me, and I slipped out the front door, pulling my wool coat tightly around me. Autumn had finally arrived in Brightenville.

As I strolled down treelined Main Street, I breathed in the fresh air and smiled. Brightenville was a classic small town with an old-fashioned downtown built back in the 1800s, and every brick building had been well cared for over the centuries. Moving here a few years ago after college had been one of the best decisions I’d ever made. It had been a fresh start. A new place where no one knew me or my past. Where I wasn’t so harshly judged. And I soaked up every moment of it.

“Morning, Morgan,” old Mrs. Foster said as I passed her on the cobblestone sidewalk. “You’re looking lovely this morning.”

“Thank you,” I said softly as I hastily dropped my gaze, instinctively letting my dark red hair hide my face. Old habits died hard. Forcing myself to look back up, I gave her a smile and pushed my glasses up from where they’d slid down my nose. “Good morning to you, too.”

No fewer than three other people greeted me as I made my way to

Brenda's Bakery on the corner—my favorite place to grab breakfast on my way into the library—and I made a point of keeping my head up and making eye contact. It was still unnerving, even though I'd lived here for more than two years. I wasn't used to such outgoing friendliness. Maybe in time I'd eventually adjust.

"Morgan," Brenda said warmly as I opened the bakery door, the chime jingling as I stepped through. "How are you on this beautiful fall morning?"

I smiled. Brenda was one of the nicest people I knew, always offering a kind smile and sweet treat to brighten her customers' days.

"I'm great, thank you. Oh, are those pumpkin scones?"

"Sure are, sweetie," she replied, already grabbing one from the bakery case. "Fresh from the oven. Would you like your usual tea as well?"

"You know it." I came here practically every day, as the library was just across the street. Plus Brenda's delicacies simply couldn't be beat.

She packaged up my scone, poured my tea, then handed it to me across the counter. "I'll just put it on your account."

That was another thing that had taken me by surprise when I first moved here. Not only was everyone unbelievably friendly—not a bully in sight that I'd come across yet—but it was almost like having stepped back in time where trust was given freely.

"Thanks, Brenda." I took a sniff of the scone. "Smells delicious. Could I get another one for Ronnie?"

"Sure thing! You have a good day now, okay?"

"I sure will. You too."

With my goodies in hand, I left the bakery and crossed to the library, using the side employee entrance. Making my way to the small break room, I hummed happily, ready to get my day started. A huge delivery of new releases was waiting to be unboxed, and the newest installment of my favorite romance author's bestselling series would be in there. I'd be taking that one home with me tonight since it didn't officially come out until tomorrow. One of the perks of being a librarian.

"Morning." My coworker Veronica, the children's librarian, greeted me with a smile as I stepped into the break room. Her eyes went straight to the bakery bags in my hand. "What do you have there?"

"A couple of Brenda's pumpkin scones." I handed her one of them.

"Oh my god, you're the best, Morgan," she gushed, her bright green eyes closing as she smelled the floury goodness.

I laughed as we sat down at the tiny table. Brightenville's library wasn't the largest by a long shot, but at least we had a private place to eat. "So, how was your weekend, Ronnie? Do anything exciting?"

She grinned mischievously. "Well, I told you about the guy I met on the Sparks app, right?"

I nodded, my mouth full of the scone. It tasted heavenly.

"We finally got together in person—he only lives two towns over," she gushed, tossing her dark waves over her shoulder. "And girl, let me tell you, this man is *fine*."

I smiled and shook my head. Veronica and I were like night and day. She was outgoing and carefree, where I was a typical librarian—shy, quiet, and reserved. It was something I was working on, but I didn't know if I'd ever be as bold as Ronnie.

"You should sign up on Sparks, Morgan. You just might find the man of your dreams..." This wasn't the first time she'd suggested it.

"I'm glad it's working out for you." I genuinely meant it. "But I just don't know if I could ever put myself out there like that. App dating is just so... impersonal. If I were ever to find true love, I'd want someone to love me at first sight—not first picture."

Ronnie let out a peal of laughter. "Earth to Morgan. You're living in the last century. Love at first sight belongs in your books."

I gave her a small smile and took a sip of my tea. While she busied herself with polishing off the scone, I thought about what she'd said. She wasn't too far off. In my limited experience, epic love *had* remained relegated to the pages of my romances. Maybe it was naive, but I was still holding out hope that I'd find The One, that I'd be swept off my feet in my very own love story. Deep down, I wanted a love like that more than anything else. But the way things were going, I was more likely to turn into a cat lady.

"Okay, that was delicious," Ronnie said, standing up from the table and dusting crumbs off her fingers. "Thank you so much. I need to get ready for the kindergarten class to arrive soon, though. Serene is coming in today to visit with her old students. I haven't seen her since she had the baby, and I can't wait to catch up with her."

I nodded. "I'll start checking in the returns as soon as I'm finished here."

Ronnie flashed a smile, then skipped out of the room in her typical energetic fashion. Serene was one of Ronnie's closest friends—she'd been

the kindergarten teacher at Brightenville Elementary up until she'd met her husband. Now, she lived somewhere north of here.

I had to admit, I was a little envious of their friendship. I'd never had a truly close relationship with another female. Not as a child and not as an adult, but it didn't stop me from wishing I could have a friend like that. Not that Ronnie hadn't invited me out with her at least a hundred times over the past couple years. But I didn't know how to put myself out there, how to open up to someone. And if I were being honest with myself, I was simply too scared. Years of bullying had taught me to shore up my defenses. It was safer to keep to myself.

The clock on the break room wall chimed, and I glanced up, surprised it was already nine o'clock. Time to open the doors. I threw out my trash, adjusted my black slacks and white blouse, and got to work.

Other employees trickled in as I began processing last night's book returns. While I was chomping at the bit to open up the new delivery, to run my hands over the untouched covers and smell the soothing scent of freshly printed books, the returns were a priority.

"Morning, Morgan," Sarah said, waving as she passed me by on the way to the computer lab. She was the technology expert at the library.

I waved back and smiled, steadily scanning barcodes until the very last book was checked in and on the cart, ready to be shelved. Grabbing a bottle of water, I pushed the cart toward the stacks. My morning routine was repetitive, but there was something soothing in the tasks. Books had always been my haven, my escape from the torturous reality around me as I grew up. I'd known since I was a child that I wanted to work with books, and there was nothing better than walking among the stacks, the weight of hardcovers in my hands as I returned them to their proper place.

The sound of Ronnie's voice as she walked toward the front of the library wafted through the stacks, and I heard her squeal. Smiling, I peeked around the corner to see a line of kindergartners following their teacher through the doors. Ronnie greeted the teacher and the children, but then kept walking to the back of the line, where a beautiful blonde woman trailed behind the class, a huge smile on her face. Serene. She looked as if she couldn't be happier as Ronnie threw her arms around her neck.

As they all made their way into the library, a large, dark shadow loomed just behind Serene—a giant of a man who couldn't have looked more out of place accompanying a class of five-year-olds. I frowned as I watched, taking

a sip of my water and wondering who he was and what he was doing here.

He was massive, well over six feet tall with bulging muscles and short-cropped hair. He looked menacing as hell in his leather motorcycle vest, and I started to leave my place in the stacks when I saw Serene turn and look up at him with an adoring smile, her eyes so full of love that I could see just how much she cared for him even from across the library.

Then I noticed the baby and nearly spit out my water. The contrast was so sharp it took me a minute to process what I was seeing. This hulking beast of a man held a tiny bundle in a sling across his chest, his large, beefy hand resting on the baby's back in a manner that was beyond gentle.

I watched from where I stood, trying to figure out the dynamic. Clearly, this man was Serene's husband, and that was their child. But never in a million years would I have pictured a guy like that being paired with sweet, gentle Serene.

Not that there was anything wrong with the guy. It would be wrong of me to pass judgment based on his looks alone. But I couldn't help but think he seemed like bad news. Definitely not someone I'd ever go out of my way to talk to. Honestly, he looked downright scary.

I watched the man's eyes soften as he looked down at Serene, a small smile making his face look only slightly less harsh. It was obvious that he adored her, and I marveled over the juxtaposition.

Shaking my head, I turned away with a sigh, my chest tightening. I fought off the familiar wave of longing as best I could. I didn't want to be envious, but I couldn't quite ignore my emotions. It just didn't seem fair that a couple like that, seemingly different in every way, had found true love, while I was still searching.

Would I ever find someone to love me like that? It certainly didn't seem like it. With another sigh, I pushed the thought away and went back to my books, resuming my steady, familiar work in an effort to soothe my lonely heart.

BEN

Serene's little cottage stood out like a sore thumb.

Surrounded by renovated beach houses on both sides, all with manicured gardens and soccer-mom SUVs in the driveway, the cottage still clung to Brightenville's ancient history like an old nail someone had hammered into a tree—bark kept on growing around it, but the damn thing refused to go away. Sure, Tevin had given the flat sawn boards a fresh coat of paint, trimmed the hedges that led into the backyard, and even tried to straighten out the rickety staircase and crooked shutters, but that quaint fisherman's charm was still there.

With a snarl, I reminded myself I hadn't come to Brightenville to enjoy the sights or appraise the local real estate scene. I'd come to deal with Tevin, the current bane of my existence and permanent thorn in my side. As the Alpha of the pack and president of the Demon Hollowers Motorcycle Club, I was responsible for keeping my wolves in line, and Tevin in particular. I'd partially raised the guy, bringing him into the pack as an older teenager. I wasn't big on attachments, but I did have a bit of a soft spot when it came to him, a big brotherly sense of responsibility. I needed to bring him home.

I killed the engine of my custom Harley, waited for the fumes to clear, and took a deep breath. I'd figured Tevin would bring Serene and Pax here and, while I was right, it didn't help much—their scent was already a few hours old.

"Damn it." I scratched my chin, the light stubble pricking my fingers, and tried to think. Maybe they'd gone to visit Serene's parents. That would make sense and would have been the first place I checked—except Tevin always let

me know when they did that, knowing I got edgy when humans were involved. But if not there, then what else would they have left the packlands for? Were they taking a walk on the beach? Eating brunch in one of those gluten-free, sugar-free, fun-free cafés that plagued the entirety of California?

I snorted at the thought. None of that seemed like Tevin, but what did I know? Tevin was also the last person I'd ever expected to find a mate, but he'd done it...and his mate was a *human*, no less. I was the one to blame for this, I really was. The moment I first welcomed Tevin into both the MC and the pack, I knew he was going to be trouble. Thing was, I thought I could direct that troublesome personality of his and use it to our benefit.

For a time, that's exactly what happened. Tevin settled into the role of an enforcer for the MC, did his job without asking too many questions, and kept his wolf's violent streak under control. And then *it* happened. Serene was supposed to be a job—and a quick one at that—but Tevin had fallen in love with the woman he was supposed to kill. Not happy with that, he then showed up to the packlands, proudly announcing to the world he'd gotten her pregnant.

I didn't blame him for it, not exactly. He'd found his mate, and no wolf could resist such a pull. What I blamed him for was his damn stupidity. He knew better than anyone that it wasn't safe to be here among the humans. His son had the blood of a shifter running in his veins, and it was essential the young boy remained safely ensconced in the packlands until he understood and controlled his own wolf.

But did Tevin care about that?

Fuck, no. The idiot was hellbent on making sure his family had a *normal life*, whatever the hell that meant. He'd loaded up the car, flipped the finger to the security cameras outside his cabin on the packlands, and vanished into the night. And now here I was, riding around Brightenville like a frantic babysitter who just found out the kids slipped out through the window. I just hoped Tevin hadn't decided to move here permanently. But if all the shit he'd loaded into his car was an indicator...

"Seriously, Tevin," I muttered under my breath. I pressed the start button on my bike, waited for the engine to fire with a growl, and revved it hard. Five seconds later and I was zooming through Brightenville, heads turning as the Harley's roar broke through the morning quietness.

Part of me hoped luck would be on my side and I'd eventually come across Tevin on the road, but that didn't happen. After twenty minutes of

riding around aimlessly, I resigned myself to the idea that my forceful search and rescue operation would take longer than expected. I didn't want to be away from the packlands for too long, but it couldn't be helped. Tevin had to be brought in. As the Alpha, I had the best shot of getting him to listen to reason—I was the only one whose authority Tevin would acknowledge—but even I might not hold enough sway over him now that he'd claimed his mate and fathered a child. The guy was a wild card.

I parked the bike next to a quaint little motel on the west side of town, where the beach funneled up into a finger of sand squeezed between the Pacific and cliffs as jagged as a serrated knife. The motel looked more like a bed & breakfast operation than anything else, with its brightly colored walls—pink, yellow, and blue—but it would have to do. It was only a few minutes' walk to the center of town, which meant I could ditch the Harley and explore the surroundings on foot. Tevin could hear the Harley coming from a good distance away, and I didn't want him to know I was tracking him.

“Ben Sage,” I told the petite brunette hiding behind the counter as her fingers clattered over the keyboard.

She cleared her throat and looked up at me, her expression as flat as a wooden plank. “How long will you be staying for?”

Her voice was steady, but it did little to mask her fear. I could *smell* it. With my faded leather jacket, steel-toed boots, and an inked-up wolf that crept all the way up to my neck, I wasn't exactly the kind of customer she was used to. Adrenaline and cortisol flooded her bloodstream, and my wolf growled in response.

“I'm not entirely sure.” I shrugged my shoulders. “Let's make this an open-ended booking.”

“Right.” She tapped the keyboard a couple more times, then opened a drawer and grabbed a set of keys. She slid them across the counter then jerked her hand back fast, as if afraid I'd bite it off. “Your room is on the second floor, 24C. Just go up those stairs outside. I can show you to it, if you'd like.”

“Don't worry,” I said, knowing how terrified she was I'd take her up on that. “I think I can find my way.” I turned my back to her, and the receptionist slumped in her chair, the leather giving out a barely audible sigh. Fear quickly gave way to relief.

During my teenage years, I struggled with that. Whenever I walked into a

room, fear and anxiety flared up, a primal response most humans couldn't help. It was easy to blame that on my rough biker's look, but it went beyond that. Sometimes, people didn't even know why they were afraid of me. They just *knew* they didn't want to be on my bad side.

And they were right about it. It was something that served me well now as the Alpha, and I wasn't afraid to use it to my advantage if needed.

Room 24C overlooked the parking lot, and it was as quaint as the motel's colorful facade. There was a wicker chair in the corner, a wooden anchor hanging on the wall over the bed, and there was white and blue all over. The room was airy and relaxed, ideal for a couple who wanted a quick weekend getaway. I sure as hell wasn't part of a couple, nor was it the weekend yet, but I hoped my stay here wouldn't be a long one. All I had to do was find Tevin and drag his ass back to the packlands.

After throwing my worn canvas bag on top of the bed, I went back outside. I made sure no one had parked near the Harley—the last thing I wanted was for some idiot to knock it over—then walked across the street and into the heart of Brightenville.

Every second in this damn town just made me want to haul ass back to the packlands myself, but I suffered the sideways glances and distrustful expressions without complaint. As president of the Demon Hollowers MC, I'd lived through worse, and a leisurely stroll through a storybook coastal town wasn't something I was afraid of.

But I was still on edge.

There was something about this place that made me feel jittery, as if thin-legged spiders were crawling under my skin. That was happening more and more these days, especially whenever I left the packlands, but I still had no idea why. All I knew was that my wolf was getting rowdier by the day, and being outside his usual territory only fueled that. Maybe he was getting tired of the packlands, afflicted by that primal urge to dominate and conquer more territory...or maybe he was just an asshole. There was really no telling it when it came to my wolf.

I'm not the problem here, he snapped, his thoughts invading my mind. *And you know that too damn well.*

“Oh, shut the fuck up,” I muttered. Not only was my wolf an asshole, lately he'd decided to take on the role of armchair psychologist. The worst of it was that I could feel my grip on him loosening, and that was something I never thought I'd have to deal with. Tevin had always been the pack's loose

cannon, not me. Only now, I was the one putting myself through the gauntlet just so I could put a muzzle on my wolf. I was going on extra runs, working myself to the bone, and punishing myself in the gym twice a day...and yet, none of that shit was working.

Let go and trust me, my wolf said, his tone that of a creature who hadn't learned the distinction between a request and a demand.

"As if you could be trusted." The wild, uncontrollable nature of my wolf had led to devastation and destruction in my early years, and I'd learned the hard way how tight of a leash he had to be kept on.

I ignored my wolf the best I could and slipped through the streets of Brightenville at a brisk pace. I wasn't exactly expecting to find Tevin on a leisurely stroll with his family, but if I could catch a whiff of his scent...it would be enough.

Unfortunately for me, neither Tevin nor his family had left a trace of their passage. I couldn't find their scent anywhere, which forced me to second-guess myself. What if they'd already left Brightenville and gone someplace else? After all, Tevin had to know I'd come and look for him.

"I need a fucking coffee," I growled, drawn to a little bakery by the scent of dark roast coffee beans. I grabbed a black coffee and a donut, and now with a little caffeine and sugar coursing through my veins, I sucked in a deep breath and turned my attention to the task at hand. Tevin had been at Serene's house a couple of hours ago, so he had to—

There, my wolf snarled all of a sudden, reacting faster than my human brain ever could. I only registered Tevin's unique scent a heartbeat later. I spun around and faced the building where his scent was coming from, just across the street.

"You gotta be fucking kidding me." With an arched eyebrow, I looked up at Brightenville's Public Library. I had to resist the urge to laugh. Tevin Novak in a library? The man was as smart as a whip, that much I had to give him, but I couldn't exactly picture him with his nose inside a dusty paperback. Curious as to what I'd find inside, I crossed the street and ventured into the building.

One step in and I immediately recognized Serene's and Pax's scents. They were here as well, but that shed no light on the situation. Had Tevin bolted out of the packlands to borrow some picture books for his kid? Unlikely.

That's unimportant, my wolf chimed in, and I realized why just a split-

second later. I'd caught the scent of the Novak family as well as a thousand different scents at the same time, but there was one in particular that now demanded my full attention. It was subtly sweet, like that of fresh honey with a hint of something floral beneath it.

Forgetting all about Tevin, I followed after that scent like a wolf stalking its prey. In a daze, I ambled through the shadowy corridors, flanked by ancient shelves of carefully arranged books, and it didn't take long to find what I was looking for. Or rather, *who* I was looking for.

She had her back turned to me, locks of deep red hair spilling over a porcelain neck. There was a library cart in front of her, and she seemed to be returning a pile of hardcovers to their proper places on the shelves. A librarian then—one with a perfect ass and legs. Yes, she was wearing pants and flat shoes, but they did little to hide the maddening contour of her body.

Yes, my wolf rumbled, need surging.

No. I shut that kind of thinking down instantly. Humans were off limits to me, regardless of how they affected my wolf or my body.

But neither seemed to get the message, and my heart skipped a beat as the woman slid a hardcover back onto the shelf, her long fingers grabbing its spine as if it was something precious. She turned slightly, enough for me to catch a glimpse of the profile of her full lips and black-framed eyeglasses.

My wolf stirred, tugging at that invisible leash, and every single hormone my body was capable of producing spilled into my bloodstream. My nerve endings turned into firecrackers; my heartbeat drowned out my thoughts. I hadn't even seen her face and I already wanted her. And, fuck, I wanted her *bad*.

Before I even knew what I was doing, I cleared my throat to draw her attention. The woman spun around fast, her red hair whipping around her neck, and the four hardcovers she'd been balancing in her arms tumbled to the floor. She gasped and bent down to pick them up.

Acting on nothing but instinct, I rushed forward and went down on one knee. We reached for an ancient world atlas at the same time, and her fingers grazed the inside of my wrist. The feeling was instant and disorienting, and it hit with the force and violence of lightning.

Oh, fuck, I thought. This can't be happening.

I instantly regretted coming into this library, Tevin be damned. Because this was the last thing I wanted or needed.

The woman looked up at me and yelped, her brown doe eyes widening in

a blend of surprise and fear. I returned her gaze, and that's the moment my wolf truly lost it. He was no longer stirring but convulsing, overwhelmed by her scent, figure, and innocent expression. He howled inside my head, a maddening scream of lust and need. And it hit me, a stunning and terrifying realization that upended my entire world: this woman, whoever she was...

She was my mate.

MORGAN

Electricity zinged up my arm, igniting my body in a blaze of warmth and awareness. My heart pounded and my breath caught in my throat as I jerked my hand back like I'd been burned. And for a moment, I wondered if I had.

Instinct screamed for me to back away from this stranger, but I couldn't even manage to tear my gaze away from his mesmerizing baby blue eyes. My stomach did a full somersault as we stayed there, bent down between the stacks staring at each other.

I swallowed, the sound audible in the quiet library, and licked my parched lips as I fought to find something—anything—to say.

The tall, scruffy man followed the movement of my tongue with those crystal-clear eyes, and heat flooded my veins. My chest felt too tight, and the instinctive need to run and hide clawed at my consciousness, but still, I couldn't move, like a deer caught in headlights.

Everything about him said danger, from the sharp jawline and massively broad shoulders, to the way he moved with predatory grace as he gathered the books I'd dropped and rose to his feet.

Breathe, Morgan. Just breathe.

Hard as it was, I forced myself to suck in some oxygen, hoping to clear my head. Because the thoughts going through my mind now were absolutely crazy. This guy looked like trouble, and I should have been running in the opposite direction. Instead, wild images flashed in my mind as I wondered what those biceps must look like beneath his shirt and worn leather vest.

And images that involved me in a lot less clothing than I was in now. In

fact, this gorgeous stranger reminded me an awful lot of my favorite hero from the romance series I was currently reading. Brooding. Dangerous. Sexy as hell.

When he reached his hand down to help me to my feet, I blinked and stared, not sure I could withstand a repeat experience of the wild force a single touch had awakened inside me.

Clearing my throat, realizing I was acting incredibly awkward—no surprise there—I placed my hand in his again. As his warm, strong fingers, rough to the touch, wrapped around mine, there was no fighting the blush that crept over my chest, up my neck, and blossomed on my cheeks as I rose to my feet.

This would typically be the time I tucked tail and ran, but I couldn't seem to move, trapped in place by my handsome stranger's captivating gaze. He shifted his weight, and I caught a whiff of his scent—piney like the woods, with a hint of smoky bonfire.

Delicious.

Then I realized I was still staring at him wordlessly, my small hand dwarfed in his grip. *Pull it together, girl.* Could I be any more awkward?

I pulled my hand back quickly, dropping my gaze and letting my curtain of hair fall over my face. Hiding as usual.

"I'm Ben," he said as he set the books back on the cart, and the sound of his voice, deep and rumbling, sent my heartbeat skittering once more.

"Morgan," I breathed, surprising myself again when I looked back up at him once more. The smart thing would have been to thank the man for his help and get back to work. But I couldn't stop drinking him in. It was like my dream guy had stepped right out of the pages of my books.

My gaze caught on the leather vest he was wearing, and I narrowed my eyes. It was the same kind Serene's husband was wearing. Were they friends? I couldn't imagine why else a guy like this would be in my library.

I glanced back up, my knees feeling wobbly as the stranger—Ben—gave me a slow, cocky grin.

"You ever been taken on a ride?"

I blinked, images flashing in my mind again of just what a ride he might be... But no, that couldn't be right. I furrowed my brow. Surely, he wasn't suggesting—

"On a motorcycle?" Ben clarified, his grin growing wider as my blush deepened. He tapped a patch on his vest that read *Pres*. "It's a motorcycle

club.”

Oh, god. Was it obvious where my thoughts had gone? And why was I more concerned with that than the fact that this guy was clearly trouble—and someone I should stay far, far away from?

“Oh, um, well...” I began, immediately wanting to kick myself for being so inarticulate. But this was literally the most interaction I’d had with a guy this hot in, well...ever. I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. “I saw this other guy in here wearing the same vest. Are you here with him?”

Ben’s jaw twitched, and he glanced over his shoulder, but then his attention was right back on me. “That was the plan. Originally. But now he’s the last thing on my mind.”

“Oh!” It came out as a little yelp as I registered his meaning. Was he *flirting* with me? Maybe? Not that I’d know, having pretty much zero experience in that department. I had a hard enough time socializing with normal people, and Ben was far from average.

He chuckled, the deep sound seeming to ricochet through my body. It sent a tingle up my spine, and for a moment I forgot to breathe again. This was crazy. Why would a guy who looked like Ben be interested in an awkward, shy, very plain librarian? I would have dismissed it as my overactive imagination if Ben weren’t staring at me like a delectable dessert he wanted a taste of.

“What time do you get off work, Morgan?”

I liked the way he said my name, soft and slow like he was trying out the way it felt.

“Um, five o’clock?” I wanted to kick myself for being so uncertain right now, so hesitant.

“I’d love to take you out for coffee,” Ben said, smooth as silk and full of confidence. The exact opposite of me.

My heart jackhammered in my chest, and my mouth dropped open as my eyes widened. My first instinct was to say hell yes. My second was to run away. And for a long, breathless moment, we simply stared at each other as I fought an internal battle. On the one hand, it definitely wasn’t the smart or safe option to go anywhere with someone who looked as dangerous as Ben. But on the other... I’d been judged on my appearance all my life, often unfairly. I didn’t want to pass such harsh judgment on a man I didn’t even know.

Then there was the strange dichotomy in the way he looked and the way

he made me feel. Not just the nervous, *how can I speak when you're so damn hot* feeling. There was another vibe he was giving off, one that told me he would never let anything bad happen to me.

That was crazy, of course. I didn't know this man at all. He could be a serial killer for all I knew. And yet—

“Coffee?” I squeaked, wishing for once I could be more like Veronica, who never had any trouble staying cool around the opposite sex.

“Yeah, there's this great place around the corner. I don't come to Brightenville that often, but when I do, I make sure to hit up the best cafe in a hundred miles.”

Okay, be cool. He really was asking me out. This wasn't something I had much experience with, but I did know that if I didn't pull myself together quickly, the opportunity would be gone. It was only coffee, after all. What did I have to lose?

Besides, hadn't Veronica just told me that I'd never find what I was looking for if I didn't put myself out there more? And I'd met this guy in person, too, just like I wanted. No dating apps required. The universe was basically handing me everything I'd requested—who was I to turn up my nose at it?

“Okay, yeah,” I found myself saying, a smile slowly tilting my lips upward. “Coffee sounds great.”

Ben smiled and gave me a wink, and my stomach did another crazy flip. It was wild—a guy like this asking a girl like me on a date, spur of the moment and obviously driven by attraction.

“Perfect. I have some things to—” Ben stopped and went perfectly still, then turned around slowly. I frowned, peering around him, but there was nothing there. A second later, though, Serene's husband strolled casually around the corner of the stacks.

“Ben.” His voice was cold and clipped, totally at odds with the gentle way he held the tiny baby still strapped to his broad chest.

“Tevin,” Ben replied, his voice just as icy.

Clearly, there was something going on here, and the very air around us seemed to thicken with the intensity now swirling around us. The two men stared at each other for what felt like an eternity—but was actually probably only a few seconds—before Ben turned his attention back to me.

“This is Tevin,” he said, his voice softer than it had been when he spoke to the other man. “Part of the MC, as you likely guessed.”

MC...as in motorcycle club? I'd read books and watched shows about hot guys on bikes, but I'd never encountered the real deal. Honestly, I'd thought bikers were all old dudes with long beards. I'd been blessedly wrong on that count since standing before me was a man whose looks could put Charlie Hunnam to shame.

Tevin gave me a tight smile, like he'd rather be anywhere but here. Offering him a small smile, I glanced down at the tiny bundle cradled against his chest. "Your baby is beautiful."

Tevin merely grunted in response, and Ben rolled his eyes.

"I'll pick you up here at five, then?" He gave me that smile again, and I lost the ability to speak once more. At least I managed to nod, though.

"See you then." With one last lingering look, Ben walked backward for a few steps before turning around and gripping Tevin's arm, hauling him out of the library.

I stood there for at least a minute, willing my pulse to calm down and reminding myself to breathe. Not an easy feat when my body was still reeling from the brief interaction with the hottest man I'd ever seen. Lifting a hand to my forehead, I found my skin burning hot, and I wondered just how red-faced I'd been the whole time.

What had I gotten myself into? I leaned against the nearest bookshelf, trying to get my bearings, and that fluttering sensation in my belly returned. It might not have been the wisest idea to agree to a date with a complete stranger, but I was going to follow through, no doubt. I'd spent most of my adult life dreaming of an encounter like the one I just had, and there was no way I'd walk away from a chance to see more of Ben.

Even if it put me way outside my comfort zone. Buzzing with anticipation, I got back to work, a smile on my face.

Was it too much to hope that something real...something significant... might come of it? I definitely needed to be cautious with a man like that. Life experience had taught me that some of the worst bullies started out pretending to be your friend.

Memories rushed in, unbidden, of one particular teenage experience that had left me humiliated and untrusting. I shoved them away. It had been years ago. And something told me Ben wasn't like that. He might look tough and dangerous, but there was more to him than what he presented on the outside. Kind of like me. Whether it was a good idea or not, I was intrigued by this man, and I intended to be brave for once in my life.

I glanced at my watch. Not even ten o'clock yet. That gave me seven hours to pull myself together and figure out how to act normal when Ben showed up again this evening. Those seven hours couldn't go fast enough.

BEN

“**A**ll right,” Tevin said, a smirk spreading across his lips. That icy tone of his was still there, but he was clearly amused underneath it all. “What was *that* about?”

I put a hand between his shoulder blades and led him out the door and into the sunlight. Little Pax cooed happily, his tiny hands waving around as a flight of swallows cut through the skies. I couldn’t help but smile at the little guy, even if his father was a constant source of stress. Pax was a strong pup, and he’d be as tough a shifter as Tevin one day.

Standing outside the library, I turned on my heel and faced Tevin.

“You’re not the one asking questions here.” I jabbed a finger against his shoulder, the padded strap of his baby carrier dampening the effect. “What the fuck are you doing here, Tevin? And why did you leave the packlands without telling me?”

“Language.” Tevin looked down at Pax, but that smirk of his never left his face. “I knew you were going to lose your cool, so that’s why I left in the middle of the night. I respect you, Ben, I really do, but—”

“But?” I crossed my arms and waited for it. Whatever Tevin was about to tell me, I was pretty sure I wasn’t going to like it.

Tevin shrugged. “Serene misses her old school. She wants to stay in town and teach for one more year. We talked about it and...” He looked straight into my eyes and, finally, that damn smirk faded. “I agreed to it.”

My chest tightened, even as anger swept over me. Tevin took too many liberties, walking a fine line that I didn’t allow many in the pack. *I* was the Alpha. It was my job to lead the pack, even if that meant tough love. But

Tevin...he'd been with me for so long that I sometimes thought of him more as a brother, and the lines were blurred.

And now he wanted to leave the packlands. That fucking hurt.

"You gotta be shitting me," I said through clenched teeth.

"I'm not," he said, "I think it's the right call for us."

"You know Serene can just teach on packlands, right? She's as much a part of the pack as you are." I let out a sigh and shook my head. "Please don't tell me she doesn't feel safe there."

"It's not that," Tevin replied. "Serene likes it there, it's just that...it's not home. She misses her old job, her little place by the beach, and her family. And let's be honest—as much as I like the MC and the pack, I don't want my son to get any ideas. I want him to lead a normal life."

I ground my teeth so hard my jaw creaked. "Oh, right—because your son is so normal, right? Have you lost your goddamn senses, Tevin? Your son is a shifter. You can't raise him off the packlands. Have you thought of what would happen if he suddenly shifted in front of all these people?" I waved a hand at the library's entrance. "Do you think any of them would think of that as normal?"

"Look, Ben, I've got this under—"

"No, you don't have this under control," I growled. "Because, trust me, the pitchforks would come out if your son turned into a wolf all of a sudden. And let's not even talk about the other packs. If their alphas knew you were drawing attention to our community like this, they would go apeshit."

"You're worried, I get it." Tevin said it so calmly you'd think we were arguing about the weather. "You have a lot on your plate, and you don't want me causing any trouble. But I assure you, Ben, I've got it under control. I'm more than capable of keeping this a secret. I'm not going to put Serene, Pax, or the pack in danger."

"Snap out of it." My fingers dug into my palms. Before Serene, Tevin always did as commanded, what he knew would be best for his pack; this newly acquired stubbornness of his wouldn't be easy to accept. "Can't you see you're playing with fire here? A pup's change can't be planned or controlled."

"You might be the pack's alpha," Tevin replied, his voice dropping in pitch, "but you have no say when it comes to my family."

Just like me, he was clenching his fists, and his jawbone became more pronounced as he pressed his lips into a line. The urge to physically put him

in his place was strong, and I had every right in the face of this subordination. But we were right in the middle of human-filled Brightenville.

“This conversation is over,” I snapped. “Pack your shit. You’re going back to the packlands right now.”

“I don’t think I…” Tevin trailed off and looked down at his son. The baby was looking at me intently, perhaps feeling a threat, and his eyes were starting to elongate into a distinctive almond shape. “Oh, shit.”

Cradling Pax’s head with one hand, he pulled the kid close against his chest and rushed back into the library.

Fucking great, I thought, watching Tevin march past the librarian’s desk. *Just what I needed right now.*

Knowing I had no other option, I followed Tevin as quickly as I could. No more than fifteen seconds later and we were holed up in the men’s bathroom. Keeping my back pressed against the door—we couldn’t afford to have anyone walk in—I helped Pax out from Tevin’s carrier. I’d barely put my hands under the kid’s shoulders when his fingernails started turning into tiny claws.

Fur started sprouting from underneath the sleeves of his bodysuit, and his nose funneled into a muzzle as his lips parted to reveal tiny fangs.

“Oh, damn it.” Moving as fast as I could, I took the clothes off of Pax with Tevin’s help. By the time we were done, his transformation was complete.

He sat on his haunches, right there on the bathroom floor, looking up at us with puppy eyes. His tail wagged and he bit into the toe of my boot, giving his new fangs a workout. This was the best opportunity anyone could have given me to drive the point home—Tevin couldn’t raise Pax here—but not a word left my mouth. Instead, I just bent over and picked Pax up from the floor. He nuzzled against the leather on my jacket, then curled up into a furball in my arms and closed his eyes.

Tevin and I exchanged a glance.

“Seems like he’s fond of you,” Tevin said, running his long fingers through his pup’s fuzzy gray coat. “He’s even more energetic when he shifts, but with you…” He let out an amused exhale through his nose. “You put him right to sleep.”

“Maybe I’m just a boring old fool,” I whispered, enjoying the warmth of the pup against my body. All of my anger and frustration dissolved, almost as if they’d never been there. Even my wolf had become strangely quiet.

Unconsciously, I tightened my arms around Pax, as if to protect him from the world at large.

It felt right to hold him.

It only lasted a fraction of a second, but I still felt it. A craving, deep and undeniable, to have a family of my own. I wanted to raise my own pups, to protect them and teach them the ways of a shifter.

Of course, all that meant was that I was losing my fucking mind. If Morgan was truly my mate—and, damn it, she was—then none of this could ever happen for me. I couldn't build a family with a human. Sure, Tevin was insane enough to try it, but I simply couldn't do it. I was the pack's Alpha, after all, and it was my responsibility to ensure our existence remained a secret.

Not only that, but how was I even supposed to explain to Morgan that I was a damn wolf? My tattoos and faded leather jacket had already scared her enough, so I imagined that having me turn in front of her wouldn't be a good look. Still, that hadn't stopped me from asking Morgan out, did it? No, I had let my instincts get the best of me. That was sign enough that I was making a mistake, that pursuing a mating with Morgan would be detrimental to the pack I'd worked so hard for so many years to grow and protect.

"You look pensive," Tevin said, and then gestured to Pax. "Thinking of getting one of these for yourself?"

I glared at him. "Had I known you were this funny, I would've made you the MC's clown instead of its enforcer. This is serious, Tevin. What happened right here, it's just too risky for everyone and—"

"Is everything all right?" A smooth voice came from the other side of the door, accompanied by the rap of knuckles against wood. Serene. "I watched you two rush into the bathroom with Pax."

Sighing, I stepped back from the door and let Serene in. Once her eyes landed on Pax, they grew so wide I almost thought they'd jump out from their sockets.

"Oh, God," she muttered, the smoothness in her voice replaced by anxiety. Now she was the one holding the door closed with her body. "This isn't good. I'll call the school and let them know that—"

"You'll do no such thing," Tevin cut her short. He was firm but kind, a strange combination in a man who'd made his living by wringing necks and beating people's faces into a pulp. Then again, Serene had done wonders for Tevin. After she'd come into his life, he'd grown harder to handle as a

member of the MC, but his wolf was no longer a violent and uncontrollable beast. Even so, I couldn't leave him here without any supervision.

"Tevin." Serene put her hands on her hips. "You know this is serious."

"If you're not gonna listen to me," I jumped in, "at least listen to your woman."

Tevin ignored me.

He scooped Pax up from my arms, then bent down and kissed the tip of Serene's nose.

"I got this, all right?" he whispered softly. "I'm gonna take Pax home and make sure he's well-fed and that he rests. He'll shift back soon enough, anyway. He always does. No need to change your day because of this."

"Tevin, I—"

He didn't let her finish. He kissed her once on the lips, then opened the door and pushed her out of the bathroom. When he turned back to me, that annoying smirk of his had returned.

"Seems like it's just the two of us now," he said, his tone far more cheerful than I expected. "Want to help me get this kid home?"



I SAT on the tiny couch of Serene's living room and looked around.

It was hard picturing Tevin *here*.

Tevin's cabin, back in the packlands, was as stoic as a house could be. There were no flowerpots on the porch, nor did he have paintings on the walls or little ornaments strewn over the furniture. Of course, that's before Serene moved in. Now, the flowerpots were a thing, as were the little seashells he kept on his kitchen counter. Still, this place seemed far too idyllic for someone like Tevin, even with the changes he'd made to his cabin.

There was a colorful mat by the entrance, which prompted all guests to 'Please wipe your shoes!' and a hollowed conch where you could drop your keys into. A tablecloth with printed sheep had been draped over the kitchen table, and two potted orchids had been carefully put on display by the windowsill. This place felt cozy...and cozy wasn't a word I had ever used when thinking about Tevin.

The only thing that was characteristic of Tevin here was the tidiness of it all. Despite his rough appearance, the man was a neat freak, and I didn't

laugh when I pictured him spacing those potted orchids with a ruler.

“I know what you’re thinking.” Tevin stepped out from the room on the far side of the living room and closed the door behind him. He did it gently, careful not to let the latch drop with a sound. From his back pocket, he produced a baby monitor which he set up on the kitchen counter. Pax was fast asleep—and he looked like a human baby again.

“What is it that I’m thinking?”

Tevin threw me an amused glance, then opened the fridge and tossed me a beer. I caught it midair and popped the cap off.

“This place isn’t me,” he said. “That’s what you’re thinking.”

“What if I am?”

“Well, I wouldn’t disagree.” He shrugged, then grabbed a beer for himself. He leaned forward, elbows propped on the counter, and looked straight at me. “One year ago, had you asked me if I could imagine myself in a place like this...” He waved his hand at the four walls of Serene’s little cottage. “I would’ve laughed in your face. Now, though, it’s different. *I’m* different.”

“That much is true,” I agreed. “You’re a different man since you met Serene. I don’t have to worry about putting you down anymore, now that you’ve tamed that damn wolf of yours. Still, I can’t say I like this whole ‘normal life’ thing of yours. The last thing I want is to make things difficult for you...but you have to come back home. That’s where you belong, Tevin.”

Tevin set his beer aside and sighed. “My mate—my *family*—is more important than being on the packlands. Don’t get me wrong, Ben—the guys are like brothers to me, and you...shit, you’re more than a brother. But having a mate...” He looked down, as if to gather his thoughts. When he looked back up, he was smiling. Not a smirk, not a grin—a smile. “Having a mate changes everything.”

I said nothing to that. I just leaned back and took a swig of the beer. I wasn’t thinking of Tevin and Serene—instead, I was thinking of Morgan, and how her red hair spilled over her neck. I was thinking of how warm her hand had felt against mine, and of how her voice had sounded like perfection. And, above all things, I was thinking of how it’d feel to truly have her.

Could I really blame Tevin for acting the way he was? Given the chance, wouldn’t I act in the exact same manner? I knew too well how things changed when you found a mate. Unfortunately, things didn’t always change for the best, and that was a lesson I’d learned the hard way. No, I couldn’t

indulge in this fantasy...and that's because it was just that.

A fantasy.

"Are you listening to me?" Tevin snapped his fingers in front of my face. I was so distracted I hadn't even seen him approach. Now he was looking at me as if I'd suddenly grown a second head. "Where did you go? You were spacing out."

"It's nothing." I cleared my throat. "I was just thinking of—"

"Oh, shit." Tevin's jaw slackened, and that smile of his slowly turned into a grin. Before I knew it, the asshole was laughing. "You were thinking of that woman, weren't you? The librarian, the one with red hair."

"No, that's not—"

"No, you definitely were." Tevin patted my back and sat down beside me. "What's the matter? You look like someone pissed in your beer. A woman is a good thing. I know you have all these responsibilities, but it wouldn't kill you to have some fun once in a while. Go on a few dates, drink some wine. Get laid."

"It's not so simple."

"Why?" He arched an eyebrow. "I know you've been out of the dating scene for a while now, but you surely haven't forgotten how the pieces fit together, right?"

I pressed my lips together and looked at Tevin. "I gotta say, I preferred you when you were the brooding type." I raked a hand over my face, trying to pull myself together, and failed miserably at it. Morgan was still there, burrowed deep inside my mind, and it was almost impossible to think of anything else. "I think that Morgan might be..."

I couldn't say it.

"Might be what?" Tevin asked. "You're not telling me that—oh, shit, you *are*. Do you really think she's...?"

"Yeah," I said. "In fact, I'm sure of it. That woman is my mate." And there it was, a full confession. The word had felt heavy on my tongue, but I had to admit it felt good to say it out loud. "Our hands brushed, and I knew it right away. There's no mistaking it."

"Pardon my French," Tevin muttered, his jaw hanging low, "but holy fuck."

"Yeah."

"That's fucking ironic, isn't it?" He threw his head back and laughed, doing it so damn loud that his kid stirred in his sleep. Tevin bit his lip, snuck

a glance at the baby monitor, then let out a muffled chuckle. “You lost your shit when you realized I’d found a human mate, and here you are now.”

“It’s different,” I said. “Unlike you, I have no intention of pursuing this.”

“Oh, right, that makes sense.” He knitted his eyebrows together, as if thinking hard. “That must be why you’re picking her up at five.”

“I know, I know.” I pinched the bridge of my nose hard enough for a bolt of pain to shoot into my brain. That didn’t help. “I wasn’t thinking, too caught up in...well, in *her*...but I can’t do this. It’s far too risky. You got lucky with Serene, but that’s not always the case.”

Tevin was silent for a moment.

When he spoke up, that strange kindness I’d picked up on before, when he’d been talking with Serene, returned. “You gotta let go, Ben. What happened with Catherine, that was a long time ago. It’s time you stopped punishing yourself. You deserve to be happy.”

“She died because of me.” Because in my foolish arrogance, I’d thought I could control my wolf. I closed my eyes against the onslaught of memories. How I’d wanted to turn my girlfriend into a shifter—and the bloodbath I’d caused instead.

“Acting like a martyr won’t bring her back.” Tevin placed his hand on my shoulder and squeezed it. “When I first met Serene, I was fucking terrified. I was afraid of what might happen, and afraid of what I could do to her. But in the end, she was the best thing to ever happen to me.”

“I can’t risk it, Tevin.” My voice was strained with emotion as I fought for control. I refused to bring harm to my mate. I simply couldn’t claim her as my own.

“You can,” Tevin whispered, “and you will.”

MORGAN

It was simultaneously the longest and shortest day of my life. Every time I glanced at the clock, it seemed like the seconds were dragging by until my date with Ben. But by the time five o'clock rolled around, I wondered where the day had gone. My nerves were on edge, and I nearly ran out the back entrance in an effort to avoid the date completely.

But then Ronnie caught up with me in the small office where I stored my purse during the workday.

"That guy who came in earlier with Tevin and Serene is back," she hissed, eyes wide. "He's out front standing by some souped-up bike."

I swallowed, my throat dry as I croaked, "He's picking me up."

"*What?*" Her volume was entirely inappropriate for a library. "Like for a date?"

I shrugged, my stomach jolting with sudden nerves. A date. "I guess you could call it that. He's taking me for coffee."

"*Girl,*" Ronnie squealed, her smile so wide I could practically see all her teeth. "You have got to be kidding me."

I bit my lip. "I'm pretty nervous. Do you think it's a bad idea? I don't even know the guy."

It was definitely a bad idea. I had a habit of falling for the wrong kind of men. As much as Ben made me swoon, he looked like he fit the bill of heartbreaker.

"No, it's absolutely *not* a bad idea." Ronnie grabbed my purse and shoved it into my hands before steering me out of the office. "In fact, I think it's the best idea you've ever had. Go. Have fun."

She was grinning as she guided me toward the front doors of the library. And sure enough, there was Ben, leaning back against a massive motorcycle, arms crossed, the late afternoon sun glinting off his golden hair. He looked like a combination of a scruffy Greek god and trouble with a capital T. And I wanted nothing more than to race out the door, despite my ever-growing nerves.

After a few seconds, Ben shifted his gaze, almost as if he felt me watching him, and a slow smile curved his lips.

“Damn,” Ronnie breathed, then she was pushing me right out the doors. “I expect a full report in the morning.”

The next thing I knew, I was standing outside, staring at Ben as he stared right back at me. Brooding intensity flashed in his eyes for a split second, but was gone so fast I might have imagined it. Then he was pushing off his bike and striding toward me.

My heartbeat went from a steady trot to an erratic gallop in the matter of a second, and a kaleidoscope of butterflies took flight in my stomach.

Ben didn’t stop until he stood less than a foot from me, his massive body towering over me as I drank him in. What in the world was a man so sexy it should have been illegal doing here with me?

When he bent down and brushed his lips across my cheek, his woodsy scent filled my consciousness and my breath caught on a small gasp I was sure he didn’t miss.

“How was work?” Ben murmured as he straightened again, though he made no move to get out of my personal space. I was a-okay with that.

“Great,” I breathed, unable to tear my gaze from him. There was something about this man that was utterly captivating, sucking me right in. And I had no desire to fight it. I did, however, want to appear semi-normal, so I made an effort to steady my breathing and smile. “So, um, the coffee shop. It’s ...uh, the one just a few blocks away?”

Ugh. So much for normal. I was coming across exactly how I was—nervous and unsure of myself in the presence of such a force of nature.

“Exactly. Shall we?” Ben offered me his arm, and I looped my hand through, my body igniting with awareness once again as my fingers brushed his biceps. Damn, he really was ripped.

“So, tell me what a great day at the library is like,” he said, his tone full of amusement as he led me down Main Street, taking care to keep me on the inside of the sidewalk, away from street traffic. It was thoughtful and

gentlemanly, something I wouldn't have expected from such a tough-looking guy.

I laughed, knowing most people didn't understand the allure of being surrounded by stacks of dusty books for eight hours a day.

"Well, today wasn't typical." Mostly because I was thinking of him the whole time, but of course I didn't say that. "But we did get a new shipment of books today, and those are always fun to process."

"Fun," he repeated, arching an eyebrow and grinning wryly. "Can't say I've ever thought of books as fun, but clearly you enjoy them."

"Maybe you just haven't found the right books then."

"Maybe you could help me out with that."

I laughed again, strangely at ease with this stranger I normally would have gone out of my way to avoid. Again, I got that feeling, deep in my gut, that he would keep me safe. There was no reason for it—I didn't know him at all—but it was there all the same.

We stopped in front of Beans and Leaves Coffee Shop. The line was nearly out the door, and it looked like most of the tables were full. It was usually that way—Beans and Leaves had the best coffee in town.

"Come on," Ben said, slipping his hand into mine and pulling me into the shop. "I think I see a small table in the back."

I nodded, afraid my voice would give away just how much the feel of my hand in his was affecting me.

When we reached the free table, Ben pulled out a chair. "Why don't you sit here and save the table for us, and I'll go place an order."

I sat and watched as he got in line, noting every sharp plane and angle of his body, admiring his strong jawline with just the right amount of stubble, remembering the delicious roughness of it as he'd kissed my cheek. My face heated, and I lifted my hand to where his lips had been, a flurry of unfamiliar sensations coursing through me. Desire, need, lust, and a longing that I didn't understand.

Thankfully, my blush subsided before Ben returned to the table, a huge tray of treats in one hand as he balanced two coffees in the other. He set them down then took his seat.

"I didn't know what you like, so I got one of everything."

"You didn't have to do that, although I'm not complaining." I smiled, touched by the sweet gesture. Had a man ever been that thoughtful with me? Definitely not. I reached for my favorite—a lemon bar—at the exact same

time as Ben, and our fingers brushed. That thrill raced through my body once again at the contact, and we both laughed.

Splitting the bar, I handed him one half, then bit into the rest, closing my eyes and savoring the sweet and sour flavors that exploded on my tongue. When I opened them again, Ben was watching me intently, and I could have sworn I saw a flash of that broodiness in his eyes again, but it was gone before I could pin down the emotion behind it.

“So, you’re not from around here, I’m guessing?” I asked. “I mean, I think I would have noticed a guy like you walking around town.”

His grin turned teasing. “Are you saying I stand out?”

“Only in the best of ways,” I shot back, surprising myself with the flirty remark. Flirting wasn’t really my thing. At least, I hadn’t thought so. But for some inexplicable reason, I felt comfortable with Ben in a way I never had with another man. I liked it—a lot.

Just then, as I was about to ask what brought him into Brightenville in the first place, the coffee shop door swung open and the last person I wanted to see walked in. Aiden. My ex-boyfriend, the one who’d had me finally swearing off men—well, until Ben arrived on the scene.

I froze, my gaze locked on him, hoping he wouldn’t notice me back here.

“Morgan?” Ben’s voice was full of concern, looking me right in the eye as I glanced back at him. “What’s wrong?”

Before I could explain, Aiden spotted me—and damn it, he headed right towards us. Of course he did. He was such an asshole, the type of guy who just couldn’t let things go. I was sure seeing me with another man set his dick-o-meter to full throttle.

Ben must have noticed something was off because he turned, glaring daggers at Aiden as he approached. When Aiden stopped right in front of us, Ben let loose a low growly sound that had me doing a double take.

Aiden ignored him, focusing exclusively on me as if Ben weren’t even there. Like I said—asshole. “What are you doing here, Morgan?”

I opened my mouth, trying to figure out what to say and caught completely off guard, but before I could say anything, Ben turned in his seat, staring Aiden down.

“Who is this?” His tone left no room for question—he knew something was up and he already didn’t like Aiden.

“He’s my ex—”

“Lover,” Aiden supplied, and I was so shocked by the statement that a

giggle escaped my mouth before I could stop it.

Aiden glared at me, rage in his eyes, and I flinched involuntarily. It had become a habit in the brief months we were together. His temper always got the best of him. I'd hoped I wouldn't ever have to see him again, though in this small town that was unlikely. Still, I'd managed to go two months avoiding him.

I'd hoped he would be over the whole thing, but apparently not. And seeing me with another man clearly had his temper riding him hard.

I clamped my mouth shut, regretting my laughter as the old fear worked its way into my system. Aiden had been a huge mistake, a boyfriend I wished I'd never had. He'd been emotionally abusive—I realized that now. Somehow, he'd recognized the brokenness in me, the lingering self-doubt that came along with suffering years of bullying, and he'd preyed on it, manipulating my desire to be accepted. I'd let it go on for too long. When he shoved me into a wall one night after I told him I was too tired for sex, it had been the last straw.

But old habits died hard, and I shrunk into myself as Aiden reached for my arm as if he were going to yank me right up from my chair in retaliation for the giggle.

Ben wasn't having it.

Before Aiden's hand even touched me, Ben was on his feet, grabbing the jerk's wrist and twisting it around behind his back in under a second. He moved so fast, I barely saw what was happening. One minute we were sitting there, the next he was hauling Aiden out of the coffee shop.

My mouth hung open as I watched, stunned, barely noticing as the eyes of all the patrons turned toward me.

A few minutes later, Ben came back in, his jaw clenched as he opened and closed his fists. Part of me wondered what transpired outside. Maybe Ben was just as dangerous as I originally thought. Had he hurt Aiden? Maybe this was a bad idea. After all, what would a guy like him really see in someone like me?

But another part of me was just relieved Ben had taken care of the problem, and I didn't want the details.

He sat down at the table and looked at me, his expression softening, but now I was painfully aware of all the looks we were getting.

"Can we just leave?" I whispered, glancing down at the tray of sweets. I'd lost my appetite.

“Of course.” His voice was strained, and I felt bad for the turn our lovely date had taken. When I looked back up at him, though, he didn’t seem upset. All I saw was concern—for me. “Let’s get out of here.”

Our walk back to the library wasn’t nearly as lighthearted as the walk to Beans and Leaves, but Ben was just as much the gentleman, taking care to keep me on the inside of the sidewalk as the sun began to sink over the western horizon.

“I’m sorry,” I began when we reached his bike. “I was having such a good time before...” My stomach twisted, anxiety coursing through me at the mere thought of Aiden.

“Don’t worry about it,” Ben said smoothly, reaching for my hand and giving it a little squeeze.

I looked down at my feet, unsure what to say or do. Despite Ben’s assurances, our date had been effectively ruined. And now I couldn’t stop thinking about my poor choice in men. Was Ben the same? Aiden had started out nice enough. My initial instincts with Ben had been that he was dangerous, even though he’d been perfectly polite. Maybe I needed to listen to logic, be more careful, stay aware of red flags... and yet...something I couldn’t explain insisted he was different.

“Thank you,” I said softly. “For what it’s worth, I enjoyed your company.”

I started to back away, glancing around at the growing shadows, psyching myself up to walk home. It would be dark before I made it there. Normally, that wouldn’t be a problem, but now my nerves were frayed after the encounter with my ex.

“Wait,” Ben said, frowning as he glanced around. “Do you have a car?”

I shook my head. “I walked to work today.”

“Let me take you home, then.” It wasn’t a question.

“No, it’s fine. Really. I walk all the time.” But my shaking voice gave me away.

“Doesn’t matter,” Ben replied, closing the distance between us, his tone leaving no room for argument—but it didn’t feel controlling. It felt protective, in a selfless way. “I want to make sure you get home safely.”

My heart did a little flip at the chivalry I wasn’t accustomed to. Sucking in a deep breath, I debated the wisdom of it. After all, Ben was still basically a stranger. But the alternative... What if Aiden decided to show up at my house? I wouldn’t put it past him. Getting out of that relationship had been

scary, and I simply couldn't trust him to behave reasonably.

"I—I've never been on a motorcycle before." I tried to say it nonchalantly, like it was no big deal, but once again my voice betrayed me.

Ben edged into my space, causing my pulse to spike, but not in fear. No, it was just what he did to me whenever he got close, and I had to admit I could get used to the exhilarating feeling.

Then he reached up and cupped my face with his strong hand, sending any rational thought fleeing as I melted into his touch. He bent down so we were eye to eye.

"I'll keep you safe, Morgan. I swear. I'll protect you with my life."

It seemed like a big promise from someone I'd just met, but I *wanted* to believe him. That in itself was huge. After Aiden, I thought I'd never trust another man. But as Ben stared at me with those crystalline eyes, a strange calmness swept over me, erasing all the fear that had plagued me since Aiden first walked into the coffee shop.

For whatever reason, my instincts told me I could trust this man. While I wasn't ready to dive in headfirst with someone I'd just met, I went with my gut in the moment.

"Okay," I whispered, a thrill rushing through me as Ben grabbed his helmet and set it on top of my head. Then he swung a leg over his bike and helped me climb on behind him.

It was crazy to do something like this, very unlike me, but as I wrapped my arms around Ben's waist, his words echoed in my mind. *I'll keep you safe.*

BEN

Maybe Tevin was right.

Maybe it was worth giving this a shot.

Leaning forward, I curled my fingers tight around the throttle, forcing the Harley's engine to roar. The bike zoomed down Brightenville's streets like a beast, turning heads everywhere we went, and I relished every second of it.

I felt overjoyed.

Of course, that had little to do with the custom-built Harley I was riding. Instead, all of my joy could be attributed to the woman I'd taken as a passenger. Her scent wrapped itself around me, just like a coiled vine, and the pressure of her hands on my chest was more than I could've asked for.

I let a smile dance on my lips and twisted the throttle some more. The Harley responded as if it was an extension of my body, its tires gripping the asphalt hard as I turned a corner. I was taking the long way to Morgan's home, but she didn't seem to mind. She just leaned forward, arms wrapped tight around my torso, and laid her head against my back.

"It's right there," Morgan said after another five minutes of riding around, raising her voice so that I could hear her over the engine. "Right at the end of the street." Hesitantly, she pulled one arm back and pointed at the house that marked the end of the block. I looked up at the one-story townhouse and my heart tightened.

I didn't want this to end.

It doesn't have to, my wolf said, burrowing his way deep into my mind. I gritted my teeth on instinct, trying to banish his presence, but it was hard. It

didn't help that I wanted to believe him, just like I wanted to believe Tevin...but I couldn't go that deep into the rabbit hole. I just couldn't. The evening I had spent with Morgan had been amazing, and I felt more alive than ever now, but I had to know my limits. My wolf was more than Morgan could deal with, and I wasn't even sure if I could trust him around her.

The painful memories I'd dredged up earlier were still trying to invade my thoughts. I'd thought I could handle things with Catherine. Thought I had control of the beast within me. Regardless of what Tevin said, her death was my fault. The mere idea of hurting Morgan had my chest aching. I had to protect her from myself, which meant I couldn't give in to the desire to mate her.

I was no good for her anyway, even without the threat of my wolf putting her in harm's way. As president of the MC, my life was unsavory at best. Morgan was too pure and innocent for someone like me.

"And this is me," Morgan said when I stopped the bike, right in front of the steps leading up to the townhouse. She removed the helmet, her red hair spilling out like a tongue of flames and offered me a smile. I half-expected for her to turn and leave, but she didn't. She just stood there, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, and held my gaze.

"This was..." I ran my tongue over my lips, trying to think of the right words. Instead, I just reached for Morgan and wrapped my fingers around her wrist. I pulled her in gently and laid a gentle kiss against her cheek. My wolf went crazy inside me, demanding more than an innocent peck on the cheek, but I kept those urges at bay. "I enjoyed this evening, Morgan."

"Me too," she replied, her voice dropping to a low murmur. Her cheeks had turned red, to match the color of her hair, and her lips were parted as if in invitation. "I'll see you around?"

No, I thought, I'm going to grab Tevin, head back to the packlands, and forget all about Brightenville. That's the right thing to do. The sane thing.

"Absolutely." I offered a smile and took the helmet from her hands. "We'll do this again," I said, even as I knew I was toeing a very dangerous line.

She nodded softly, her cheeks turning into a more vibrant shade of red, and bit on the corner of her lip. For a moment there, I thought she was going to say something, but she just offered me one last smile. "See you around, Ben." And then she was off.

She walked up the steps and, as she looked for her keys inside her purse, I

let my eyes feast on the perfect outline of her body. My fingers twitched unconsciously, working in tandem with my imagination—more than anything, I wanted to run my hands down the side of her body, to feel the smooth curvature of her hips and...oh, fuck, I wanted so much more.

I wanted it all.

My wolf reared up in my mind, urging me to follow that train of thought, and I shoved him down forcefully. He wouldn't be kept at bay for much longer. I needed to get out of here and let him loose, maybe go on a run to clear my head.

“Damn it,” I sighed once Morgan disappeared into her house. I closed my eyes and raked my hand over my face. What was I doing? Why couldn't I remain true to myself? One moment I was thinking of putting some distance between the two of us, the next I was imagining how good it'd feel to claim her.

This was madness.

Lingering in front of Morgan's house probably wasn't wise, but I was still concerned her asshole ex might make an appearance. I breathed deeply, scenting the air, seeking out any signs of danger. There was nothing I could detect, but my wolf was still unsettled.

After a moment, I rode away from Morgan's house, but I didn't go very far. My encounter with her ex had left me on edge, and I needed to make sure he wouldn't go after Morgan once she was alone. Maybe I was being paranoid, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Four blocks away, near the entrance to Brightenville's park, I killed the engine and dismounted the Harley. It wasn't late yet, and I could see a few couples milling around inside the park. This was risky, but it still had to be done.

Or so I told myself.

In truth, I could've just headed back to the motel and called it a day. My wolf wasn't ready for that, though, and I knew I had to let him out of his cage, even if only for a while. I could feel that invisible pressure gauge inside me climbing higher and higher, already venturing into the red zone, and I needed to let some of that steam off.

Usually, this only happened when my wolf's instincts picked up on *something*. I hadn't noticed anything unusual—aside from Morgan's ex—but that didn't surprise me. The more unruly my wolf became, the more disconnected I felt from his primal instincts. Still, I could tell something was

making my wolf uneasy, and I hadn't become the pack's Alpha by ignoring my instincts. And I sure as hell wasn't going to start now.

I kept my head low and ventured into the park, hoping nobody would notice the 6'2" biker who'd decided to take a stroll at nightfall. A few couples changed direction and headed toward the exit, but that was fine. The fewer people who were around, the better. I didn't want an audience for this.

The park was practically deserted ten minutes later, until I was surrounded by nothing but shadows and the hushed whispers of a nightly breeze. I got off the main path, hid behind a thicket of bushes, and stripped naked. Carefully, I folded all my clothes and made sure they were hidden out of sight, then sucked in a deep breath and let it happen.

For a moment, it was as if a fire was raging inside me, tendrils of heat spreading outward from my chest. My muscles tensed up, adrenaline coursed through my veins, and a searing pain enveloped me. My muscles became leaner as I shifted, my body acquiring the shape of a four-legged killer, and all of my senses sharpened. One moment I was a man, the next I was a wolf.

I stretched my back, relishing the sense of power that dawned whenever I shifted, and sniffed at the air. There weren't many humans around, but I still had to be careful. My wolf's coat was pure white, and I needed to stick to the shadows at all times.

Luck was on my side that night, as I didn't see a single human as I left the park. I could still smell their lingering scent, but that wasn't enough to worry me. The night was growing long, and the autumn chill made sure people remained behind closed doors. My stroll back to Morgan's house was as peaceful as it could be. Until...

You feel it now? My wolf's voice was clearer now, so much so that it was hard not to confuse it with my own. I looked toward the end of the street, with Morgan's little townhouse occupying its corner, and tensed up.

Yes, I could feel it. This is what had me on edge earlier.

There was a scent in the air, and now that I was in wolf form, it was easy to pick apart from the thousand other scents I could sense. It had a layer of danger to it. My first thought was that I'd been right about Morgan's ex, but I quickly dispelled that notion—this wasn't his scent. Hell, this scent wasn't even human. Could it be a shifter? My pack dominated most of the lands that surrounded Brightenville, but we hadn't laid claim to the town itself. Still, it was unlikely for some other wolf to be here as we still considered the outskirts of the town to be our territory. As the Alpha, it was my

responsibility to monitor any other shifters who showed up in town.

Not a wolf, my wolf growled, his primal aggression welling up to the surface. Whatever this scent was, my wolf didn't like it. *This is something else.*

Before I moved down the street, I glanced around to make sure nobody was in the vicinity, then padded closer toward Morgan's house. The scent grew stronger as I approached, and a low growl rose from the back of my throat.

Mercifully, whoever the scent belonged to hadn't lingered here. The invisible trail went past the house and across the street. Just to make sure, I closed my eyes and focused. I could pick up Morgan's footsteps as she walked over creaking floorboards, and her scent remained pure and innocent—I sensed no fear in it. She was safe.

At least for the time being.

I lowered my nose and followed the scent across the street. It went over the wooden railings that separated the road from an empty lot. Anxious, I let my wolf's hunting instincts take over and followed that damn scent as far as I could. It went in a straight line for a while, made a turn that led back into Brightenville's park, and then, as the vegetation grew thicker...it vanished.

I walked in circles for fifteen minutes, trying to pick the scent back up, but it was useless. Whatever my prey was, I had lost its tracks. Not that there were any tracks to lose. Aside from that damn scent, there was nothing else: no broken twigs, no muddy prints, no nothing. That made my job of protecting Morgan more difficult—I couldn't protect her from shadows—but it didn't mean I was giving up. Instead, I just circled back to her place and kept watch until the rising sun pushed back the night.

I didn't know how far I wanted to take things with Morgan, but I was sure of one thing—I was going to keep her safe at all costs.

Yes, we will, my wolf agreed, his thoughts oddly in sync with my own. He'd never been that good at standing watch, but that night he didn't complain a single time. Maybe Morgan was a good tonic for the unruly bastard. Or maybe he was just trying to convince me that he could control himself.

Whatever it was, I was far too exhausted to consider it. I just made my way back to the park, collected my clothes, and shifted back. By the time I got back to the hotel, the rising sun had already taken over Brightenville, and its light flooded the room, adding an annoying vibrancy to those coastal blues

everyone seemed to like around these parts.

With a groan, I closed the curtains and threw myself on the bed. I didn't even bother with taking my clothes off. I would just crash for a few hours, and then I—

“What the fuck is it now?” I grumbled, blindly reaching for my phone. It was vibrating against the bedside table, turning in circles happily, and I was half-tempted to crush it with my fist. Instead, I slid my thumb across the display. “What is it, Charles?”

“A new job came in,” my beta replied, as expedient as ever. “You weren't here, so I took the liberty of accepting it on your behalf. It's a simple job too. We just need to persuade a banker not to make a certain investment strategy, and the pay's enough to cover the new cabins.”

“The cabins, right.” I pinched the bridge of my nose and tried to focus. Some of the cabins in the packlands were growing old in age, and I'd decided we'd construct new ones...and beef up some of our security systems in the process. A good decision, but expensive. “How time sensitive, is this?”

“We don't have a lot of time,” Charles replied, a bit of hesitancy creeping into his voice. “In fact, we kinda need to move fast on this one. We have two, three days, tops. We've been told this guy is going to act by then, and we need to—”

“Stop it before it happens,” I cut him short. “I got it.”

“We could give the job to Tevin, but...”

He left the rest unsaid, but I knew exactly what he meant. Tevin was far too busy playing house and, if this job was as important as Charles was making it seem, I would need to spearhead the operation. Sure, any asshole could twist arms and punch assholes in the throat, but I prided myself in running an efficient MC. Organized. Professional. If my presence was required, then I'd be there.

“Fine.” I sighed, annoyed at the word that had just left my mouth. “I'll head back tomorrow, and we'll handle it then.”

I ended the call and tossed the phone aside. More than anything, I wanted to stay in Brightenville, where I could be close to Morgan. Unlike Tevin, though, I wasn't willing to let everything go to shit on a whim. I had a responsibility toward the pack and the MC, and I wasn't going to let my men down.

But she's our mate, my wolf snapped, what's more important than that?

“She might be our mate,” I said out loud, “but if you think I'm going to

claim her against her will, then you can go fuck yourself.”

It was true—my wolf was riding me hard, and he was desperate to claim Morgan, but I would never let my other self hurt her.

But there was more to it.

Something was off. Irrational as it might be, I felt as if Morgan could be in danger if I left Brightenville. It was more than just feeling protective of my mate. That damn scent I’d picked up near Morgan’s house had me anxious. It didn’t belong here, and not knowing who or what it was left me on edge. Almost as if it were an omen of things to come.

A bad omen.

MORGAN

The sound of birdsong woke me from the most delectable dream, and I stretched in my bed, enjoying the luxurious feeling of getting to sleep in. I was scheduled to work this coming Saturday, so today would be my day off instead.

As my dream of Ben faded, I thought back to last night and how exhilarating it had been to ride behind him on his powerful bike. I almost couldn't believe I had done that. It was very unlike me, considering I always played it safe. But ever since Ben had walked into my life yesterday, my desire to push the boundaries of my comfort zone had fully taken hold.

For as long as I could remember, I'd simply lived my life vicariously. Too afraid to step out into the real world and experience things myself. My past had taught me to be cautious, to not put myself out there. To stick to the shadows and hide rather than risk drawing attention to myself. And for good reason. Growing up as the shy, nerdy, freckled redhead had come with plenty of torment. Not just from mean girls, but from boys who wanted to make a joke out of me, to make me believe they wanted me only to humiliate me in front of everyone.

I'd learned the hard way that life was safer if I remained on the sidelines.

But I'd grown tired of that lately, even a bit restless. Watching others live their lives, or even reading my beloved romance novels, simply wasn't enough anymore. I craved adventure of my own.

And yesterday I'd gotten just that. My face warmed as I recalled Ben's lips grazing my cheek last night after he brought me safely back home. Then there was the rush of adrenaline from riding behind him, the wind in my hair,

my arms wrapped around that carved body...

“Whew, easy girl,” I muttered to myself as I kicked off my blankets and made my way to the bathroom. “Cool off a bit.”

But I couldn’t stop smiling as I took a shower and got ready. I even found myself humming as I prepared a breakfast of eggs and avocado toast. Ben had already worked his way into my every waking thought. I wasn’t complaining, though. Despite the encounter with Aiden at Beans and Leaves, yesterday had been the best day I could remember having in a very long time. Maybe ever.

After finishing breakfast and straightening up my apartment, I grabbed a jacket and my oversized tote bag and headed out the door. First stop, the independent bookstore just down the street. Other than the library, it was my favorite place in the world. Henry, the owner, was an excellent curator of fiction, and the selections he kept stocked never disappointed. We’d had many conversations over the past couple years that I’d lived here, and the kind elderly man was one of the few people I’d really connected with.

“Morning, Henry,” I called out as I stepped inside. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee mingled with the scent of new books, and I sighed in pleasure. There was no better way to spend a day off. Ironic, considering I spent most of my time surrounded by books already. But I just couldn’t get enough. I was the epitome of a bookworm, and I could live out my life surrounded by them, perfectly content.

Even my recent adventurous streak couldn’t drown out my love of books.

“Hello there, Morgan, dear,” Henry replied, coming out from behind the counter with a mug of coffee cupped between his gnarled fingers. “How are you this morning?”

“Fantastic.” I smiled widely. “Has my order come in?”

“Ah, yes,” he said with a nod. “Packaged it all up for you.” He went back behind the counter and pulled out a small box.

I felt a little giddy as I opened it up and pulled out the hardcover copy of my favorite author’s newest release in her series. I’d completely forgotten to take the library copy home with me yesterday—I’d planned on getting a head start on the book before grabbing my own copy for my collection. Running my hand over the shiny dust jacket, I grinned. I’d be digging into this when I grabbed lunch.

“Is there anything else I can help you with today?” Henry asked.

“I’ll just take a look around and see.” I couldn’t make a trip to the

bookstore without checking out all the newest offerings Henry had in stock. In no hurry, I strolled the aisles of the store, picking up a book here and there to read the back cover copy, gaze at the art, and occasionally read the beginning to see if it pulled me in.

After grabbing a book on gardening—my tomatoes hadn't turned out great this year—I wandered to the fantasy section. Immediately, a book cover caught my eye, and I reached for it, examining the artwork. The cover model had the bluest eyes I'd ever seen, aside from Ben's. Those piercing ice-blue eyes were mesmerizing, and I flipped the book over to see what it was about.

Alpha Wolf. It was a shifter romance series, one I'd never heard of, and I was intrigued. Paranormal romance wasn't my typical go-to for romance reads, but I couldn't help thinking of Ben as I started flipping through the pages. I paused when I came to a particularly steamy scene, biting my lip as I read.

Normally, I read and enjoyed these types of scenes with a made-up image of the characters based on the author's description, but as I read now, all I could think about was Ben and his scruffy chiseled jawline, his soulful eyes, and that droolworthy body that I'd been lucky enough to feel pressed against my own on the ride last night.

My cheeks heated and my heart beat a bit faster as I continued to read, imagining what it would be like to do these things with Ben. To feel his scruff on my inner thigh, his ice-blue eyes locked on mine as he brought his full lips to my center, ready to devour me. Caught up in the scene, it took me longer than it normally would have to sense the presence of another person near me.

As soon as I did, though, I jerked my head up, shocked to find Ben standing almost right next to me, flashing a wicked grin that lit up those baby blues. I gasped in surprise, slamming the book closed and tucking it behind my back as I whirled around. Oh, god. Had he seen what I was reading?

His grin widened and he arched a brow as he stepped closer, his scent hitting me and making my body react instantly. I swallowed hard, struggling to breathe steadily.

"Interesting taste in reading material, Morgan," he said, his deep voice sliding over me, and I was hyper-aware of just how close he was standing to me.

"Oh, uh." I giggled nervously. "You, uh, saw that, did you?"

Ben leaned in, his presence nearly overwhelming me, and his eyes glinted

with mischief as he said, “The author got it all wrong, though.”

“Well, it is fiction.”

“Indeed,” he murmured, his gaze locked on mine. “Why aren’t you at work? Cheating on the library at the book store?” He made a tscking sound that had me laughing and smiling, and once again I was pleasantly surprised at just how easy this man was to be around.

“It’s my day off.” I slid the shifter book into my shopping bag with the gardening book—I’d definitely be reading that one tonight. Maybe even before I dug into my favorite author’s new release.

Ben raised an eyebrow. “And this is where you come.”

“Yeah, I’m one wild and crazy party animal, let me tell you,” I joked, enjoying the mild flirting that came all too easy when I was with Ben.

He ran his gaze over me, his eyes darkening slightly, and my breath caught in my throat when his eyes locked with mine once more. What was it about him that made me so discombobulated? I’d never had such intense reactions to a man before.

Not that I was complaining.

“Do you have plans for lunch?” I found myself asking, surprised at my own boldness. Maybe I was getting the hang of this living a little thing, stepping outside my comfort zone even more. Typically, I’d be too afraid to ask such a thing, certain I’d be shot down.

“I do now.” Ben reached for my hand and laced his fingers through mine, and my pulse ratcheted up into a gallop as heat spread through my veins.

“Have you been to Manny’s?” I managed to ask without my voice betraying just how much he affected me. “It’s not far from here.”

“No, but I’m not picky.”

Less than ten minutes later we were seated in the diner, giving our orders for burgers, fries, and milkshakes.

“So I can see you’re a total bookworm,” Ben said with a grin once the server left our table to put in the order. “I’m assuming that’s why you’re a librarian.”

I nodded. “Books have always been my safe haven, my escape from real life.”

“Escape,” he echoed. “I can see that. What are you escaping from, Morgan?”

I shrugged, not ready to reveal just how deep my old wounds went. “Day-to-day life? I don’t know. Some people like to watch television for

entertainment. I like to get lost in an epic love story.”

He quirked a brow and leaned forward. “Romance is your favorite, huh?”

“It is,” I said matter-of-factly. “And what about you? You kind of stick out like a sore thumb in the library. Not much of a romance fan, are you?”

Ben leaned back in his seat, letting out a hearty laugh. “Can’t say that I am.”

“And here I thought you were hiding your sensitive side behind this tough exterior,” I teased, and he shook his head as he chuckled.

“You’re quite a surprise, Morgan Reign.”

“So what about you?” My curiosity about this man was at an all-time high. “What do you do? Did work bring you to Brightenville?”

“You could say that,” he replied slowly. Carefully. “I’m in the private security business.”

Well, that was vague. “Like a bodyguard?” He definitely looked the part.

“Not quite.” He chuckled softly. “But my work does keep me alert and busy. I’m actually going to be leaving town here soon. Just for a bit,” he added quickly, and I wondered if my disappointment at that statement had shown. “And I’ll be back soon.”

“So how did your work bring you here?” I jumped on the opportunity to learn something solid about Ben. While I wanted to trust him, I got the distinct feeling he was hiding things about himself. I could easily see myself getting swept away by his magnetism, and I needed to be smart and careful. To not put myself in another bad situation.

“My friend Tevin—the one with the baby at the library yesterday. We... work together. He just disappeared without a trace a few days ago. I was worried about him, so I tracked him down.” His lips twisted in a wry smile. “And let me tell you, the local library was the last place I expected to find him.”

“Yeah, you *both* looked totally out of place.”

Just then, our food arrived, and we dug right in. As we ate, I reflected on what he’d said. While there was still so much more I wanted to know, one thing in particular stood out. Ben wasn’t from here, and he’d only come to Brightenville for some sort of business. Now he was about to leave again.

He said he was coming back, but how long would that be? I didn’t want to push him for details—clearly he was private about his work. Plus, we’d only just met. I didn’t want to come off as desperate or anything. But the idea that he might not be around for long didn’t sit well with me.

And that right there was a big flashing warning sign. It wouldn't be wise to start something up with a man who was only going to leave before long. If I could already see myself falling for him, getting too close would only be setting myself up for heartbreak.

But I was getting way ahead of myself. I'd known the man for barely more than twenty-four hours. Somehow, though, the idea of him not being a part of my life already didn't sit well with me.

"Do you have any siblings?" I asked. Maybe I didn't know him well yet, but I was curious to know more.

He shook his head. "Just my brothers in the club. We're like family, though."

"What's that like?" I asked without thinking, and Ben gave me an odd look.

"What?"

I shrugged, embarrassed now. "Just having people that feel like family. I grew up...without having anyone I was that close to."

Ben paused, studying my face. God, the last thing I wanted was his pity. I hadn't meant to say that, even if it was the truth. Being alone had been my fate for most of my life. To his credit, he didn't push on my comment, instead regaling me with tales of trouble he and his "brothers" had gotten into over the years. Nothing crazy—I had a feeling he'd keep the less than savory parts of MC life from me—but I loved getting a better picture of who he was: loyal, dependable, and caring, even if he likely wouldn't attribute that last one to himself.

As we finished up our burgers, Ben asked, "Do you have any other plans for your day off?"

"Not really." My pulse quickened when he smiled in satisfaction.

"How about another bike ride?"

I hesitated. After the rationalization I'd just gone through in my head, was it really the wisest thing to spend more time with Ben? Was I setting myself up to get hurt?

But one look at his handsome face, and I knew I was a goner regardless. I simply couldn't say no—not when I'd been waiting for so long for a chance to finally live my life. Here was the perfect opportunity, and I was tired of only reading about romance. I wanted a little of my own.

"Another ride sounds like the perfect way to spend the day," I told him, and his answering smile was all I needed to know I'd made the right choice.

“Perfect,” he repeated with a wink. “I know just where we should go.”

BEN

“**T**his is...”

“Pretty great, right?” I rested my hand on Morgan’s lower back, and my heart performed a frantic somersault. She’d kept her arms wrapped tight around my torso during the whole ride here, but it was different to be touching her like this—to have my fingers on her shirt, to feel the warmth that slipped past the fabric...it felt deliberate. It felt like progress.

“Yeah,” she breathed out, “this is amazing.”

Morgan stood beside the Harley, eyes wide as she took in the scenery. We were on a jutting lip of bedrock, just a couple of feet away from the backroad we’d taken, and the view was as breathtaking as Tevin had promised me. I didn’t want to give that troublemaker too much credit, but this had been a good suggestion.

An endless army of pine trees dotted the landscape, covering the hills with a mellow green that accepted autumn’s chilly embrace while refusing to yield to it. The woodlands only parted to embrace the lake, a natural water reservoir that sat there like a bright mirror, its calm surface reflecting the ragged clouds that drifted across the sky. Brightenville was there too, in the distance, its intricate maze of streets and red-brick buildings framing the woodlands as if they were a sketch that needed to be boxed in.

As impressive as the view was, I paid little attention to it.

How could I, when Morgan’s beauty eclipsed all of it?

Her lips were slightly parted, and a few stray locks of hair cut across her face, like a spray of red over snow. She had her arms wrapped around her chest to protect her from the chill, and her breasts strained against her blouse,

drawing my gaze like a forbidden fruit.

“Here.” I took my jacket off and draped it over her shoulders, my knuckles brushing against the smooth skin of her neck. Carefully, I pulled her silky hair over the collar, and it fell over the cracked leather like a curtain of fire.

“Thank you,” she muttered, pulling at the ends of the jacket. It hid most of her figure from sight, which was a shame, but at least she wouldn’t be cold. “I thought you weren’t from around here. How do you know about this place?”

“Tevin told me about it,” I admitted. “Nothing really impresses him, so when he told me that the view from up here was breathtaking...I had to take his word on it.”

“I’m glad you did.”

“There’s more.” Smiling, I went back to the bike and grabbed a small blanket from the satchel. I tucked it under one arm and, finally, I pointed at the lake down below. “What do you say we head down there?”

She didn’t reply—at least not with words. Instead, she just closed the distance between us and slipped her hand into mine, her delicate fingers brushing against the palm of my hand. Lightning shot up my spine, and my wolf howled so loudly I could barely hear my own thoughts. For an instant, all the scents and colors that surrounded me seemed to become sharper. My wolf thrashed inside its invisible cage, forcing its way up to the surface, and I had to wield all of my willpower like a sledgehammer to keep it under wraps.

“You okay?” Morgan asked, as if sensing something. She looked up at me, momentarily looking away from the narrow trailhead we were on and stumbled on a broken branch. She let out a little yelp, stumbled awkwardly, and caught herself against my shoulder for support.

I turned fast, both my hands shooting down to her waist, and I held her close against me. My eyes caught hers and I forgot how to breathe. Then and there, all I wanted to do was to slam her against one of those pine trees and make her mine. My wolf relished the thought, but such thoughts weren’t meant for the light of day. At least not yet.

“I’m fine,” I said, my voice deeper than usual.

“You just...” She ran her tongue over her lips, as if trying to organize her own thoughts. Her eyes escaped mine, but they didn’t go far—instead, they were drawn to my lips. Even without the sharpness of my shifter senses, I could still feel her heartbeat quickening. For a split second, I actually thought

she was going to go for it and kiss me, but she didn't. She just cleared her throat, took a step back, and looked down at her shoes. "You just seemed a little preoccupied."

How can I not be preoccupied? I thought. *It's just the two of us here, and my wolf is clawing at my insides. It seemed such a good idea to come up here, but now...*

"Sorry." I took her hand again and led her deeper into the trail, all while swatting away any hanging branches that could hurt her. "I'm just not used to taking a break. Even if I don't want to, my mind's always dealing with work stuff."

That wasn't exactly the truth, but it wasn't a lie either. Work was always partially on my mind. A job that I would have to deal with this week, now that Charles, my second-in-command, had more important business to take care of, would take me away from Morgan. I didn't like that one bit. I wanted to stay right by her side and keep her safe. But I was already playing a dangerous game. Letting my mate distract me from my job would have all kinds of consequences.

And I couldn't tell Morgan what was really on my mind—that my wolf wanted to claim her as our own. If I did, she'd be running through these woods fast, and she wouldn't stop until she found the nearest police station.

Don't, I told myself, just don't.

It was hard not to go down that spiral of negativity, but I had to rein myself in. After all, I'd made the decision to bring her all the way here, hadn't I? Nobody had forced my hand. Sure, my wolf might have given me a push, but I was still in control.

Or so I hoped.

"And here it is," I announced after a bend in the trail, where the trees opened into a grassy shore. The water was crystalline, and it murmured gently as it lapped against the smooth pebbles that lined its edge. I chose a spot near the water, smoothed out the ground with the sole of my boot, and only then did I spread out the blanket.

I sat down on it, elbows propped up on my knees, but Morgan didn't join me. Instead, she walked up to the edge of the lake and kicked her shoes off. She threw her head back, closed her eyes, and smiled at the clear skies, all while kneading the grass with her toes.

I drank it all in.

It was a perfect scene, straight out of one of those romance novels

Morgan enjoyed. Now, I wasn't exactly an expert on those, but I imagined *this* was what romance was about. A perfect woman against a perfect background.

How can you be this beautiful? I thought.

Or said.

The words slipped out from between my lips before I could stop them, and Morgan looked back at me over one shoulder. Her lips opened into a smile, showing me a glimpse of her pearly white teeth, and a shade of crimson crept up to her cheeks.

"I'm not used to that, you know?" she said.

"Used to what?"

"Compliments," she replied. "Especially compliments like that one."

I laughed, the sound of it rolling over the lake and into the distance. "I find that hard to believe. A woman like you isn't used to compliments? No, that just can't be."

"It's the truth." She took my jacket off, folded it with a careful motion, then laid it on the blanket. When she did, she looked straight into my eyes, and I noticed a glimmer of fear and hesitancy there. "Maybe I'm not good at relationships, or maybe I just don't know how to choose the right men, but..."

She trailed off, not wanting to finish that thought, but images of Aiden flashed before my eyes all the same. It was hard imagining an asshole like him complimenting anyone. For him, a compliment was probably just a tool, a way of making people dance to his tune. My wolf stirred inside me, and a wave of anger washed over us both. Just like me, he wouldn't mind the opportunity to teach Aiden a lesson.

"A woman like you deserves all the compliments in the world," I whispered, my eyes never leaving Morgan's as I stood up. I towered over her, and she looked so damn delicate...it seemed right to hold her, to whisper sweet nothings into her ear, and to promise her the world.

Then do it, my wolf pleaded. We can give her the world. We can give her anything she wants. Claim her, and—

I looked away from Morgan and kicked off my boots. I didn't want to step back, but my wolf's voice was getting far too strong for my liking. That hadn't been a problem for years, but I had to be careful here—the pull of a mate was far too strong, and there was no telling what could happen if I indulged in it.

I spread my toes out, letting the blades of grass brush against the sole of my feet, and padded toward the lake. I stepped into the water, allowing it all the way up to my ankle, and let the biting cold put a lid on my inner frenzy. It wasn't enough, not quite, and so I rolled my pant legs up to my knees and waded in a little bit further.

"And what exactly are you doing?" I heard Morgan laugh from behind me. Before I could do anything about it, she was careening into the water. I looked back just in time to see her hiking her dress up to her knees, and then she was there, right beside me. "Oh, wow, not exactly warm, is it?"

"Not really," I agreed, my eyes drawn to the bare skin under her dress. She bunched it up with one hand, the fabric spilling from between her fingers, and bent low to run her other hand over the water.

"Could be worse, I guess," she said, venturing further into the lake, "considering that it's autumn and all."

"Well, if you're cold, maybe we should just—"

"I'm not a princess who needs to be protected," she cut me short with a vibrant laugh, all while slapping her open hand into the water. The splash hit me straight in the face, cold fingers digging into my shirt, and I countered with a quick move of my own. It wasn't long before we were both dripping wet, our laughter drifting over the lake and toward the woodlands on the other side of it. We were playing around as if we were kids, something I hadn't done since...well, since I'd been a kid.

And it felt good.

"Okay, okay," I said, holding my hands up. "I give up, you win."

"I didn't think you'd surrender this easily," Morgan threw back, her smile reaching all the way up to her eyes. Her hair was plastered to her forehead, little droplets of water running down the sides of her face, and her shirt was completely soaked...so much that I could see the contour of her bra and the perfect swell of her breasts. As cold as the water was, it did little to prevent my blood from boiling, my heart pumping it all the way to between my legs. My cock stiffened against my jeans, and I had to take a deep breath to steady myself.

"Well, a man has to know when he's been beaten," I said. "Besides, you're soaked. I don't want you to get sick." Before she could argue, I took her hand and led her out of the water and onto the blanket.

"You're soaked too," Morgan said.

"The clothes will dry up fast." I pulled my shirt over my head, enjoying

the cool air as it kissed my skin, and threw it over a nearby branch. My back was turned to Morgan, but I knew she was watching me all the same—I could smell her arousal. Her scent was a perfect aphrodisiac, and it made my heart beat so fucking fast, I wouldn't have been surprised to see it burst out from my chest.

I looked down at my jeans, wondering if I should take them off, then just went for it. Even if I was a shifter, I wasn't immune to getting a cold.

"Oh," Morgan laughed nervously. "You're going all the way."

I looked back over my shoulder to see her covering her eyes. "Don't worry, I have boxers on." I pushed the jeans down my legs and threw them over my wet shirt, fully aware that Morgan wouldn't resist the temptation to peek. And, just like predicted, she spread her fingers apart to take a peek, her cheeks turning the loveliest shade of red.

"See?" I laughed. "It's more than some people's bathing suits."

"Right," she muttered, that word coming out as a whisper.

"And you're soaked too," I said. "You should take your dress off. I promise I won't—"

"Peek?" She finished saying. "As if you could resist."

I can't say I was ready for it.

Morgan stood up fast and, without a moment's hesitation, pulled her dress over her head. My jaw slackened as I took a hard glance at her glistening skin, her underwear clinging to her body like a lover's hands.

"What?" Her smile turned devious, and the glimmer in her eyes told me she knew exactly what she was doing. It seemed like her innocence had an edge to it. "You don't want me catching a cold, do you?"

Keep it together, Ben, I urged myself, which was a pretty tough ask. How was I supposed to keep it together when she looked like this? I'd already imagined her naked before, probably more times than I should've, but this...this was *real*.

Too real, in fact.

"That's the last thing I want." I gave her a little wink, all while forcing my eyes to remain locked on hers. As nonchalantly as I could, I returned to the blanket and lay on top of it, fingers laced behind my head. "I meant it when I said I'd keep you safe."

"Can you keep me safe from a cold?"

I heard a rustling as she lay beside me, and I leaned up on one elbow to look at her. Beautiful didn't quite describe her. She looked fucking divine, as

if someone had just plucked her from the heavens.

“I can try.” I paused, momentarily hit by the sweet scent of Morgan’s arousal, and let the words spill out from my mouth. “Anything I can do to keep you safe, to make you happy...I will do. No matter what it is.”

“Nobody ever said anything like that to me.”

“Maybe it’s time someone did.”

This time I didn’t have the time to filter my instincts. They hit too fast, as sharp as a dagger, and cut through whatever layers of self-restraint I had in place. One moment I was looking into her eyes, the other I was closing the distance between us, my mouth drawn to her strawberry lips.

I hesitated just an inch away from her, suddenly realizing that I’d given my wolf too long of a leash, but it was already too late. Morgan closed the gap between us, crushing her mouth against mine, and there was no going back. We kissed hard, and it was as perfect of a moment as it could be. I knew she was my mate—one momentary touch had been enough for that—but this sealed that knowledge.

This woman was the one.

I threaded my fingers into her hair, desperate to keep her close to me, but I shouldn’t have worried—Morgan wanted this just as much as I did. She rolled over, her naked skin against mine, and slung one leg over me. Once she was straddling me, she slid down my body until she couldn’t go any further, my hard-on pressed against her underwear.

Our bodies moved as one, the sway of her hips matching my thrusts. There was still a barrier of fabric between us, flimsy as it was, but it mattered little. We were drawn to each other as if our bodies had turned magnetic, and the sweet pressure of my cock against her was all that I needed.

“Oh,” she purred against my lips, “this is...”

She left the rest unsaid, but the meaning was clear enough. Her movements grew more erratic, just as her breathing grew more ragged, and it was only a matter of time until she stopped moving altogether. She just thrust hard, driving her wetness against my hard length, and held her position as her whole body trembled in place.

“Fuck,” I said past gritted teeth, the little spasms of her thighs driving me up the fucking wall. Pleasure hit my nerve endings like a whip, and I shut my eyes as a blinding light exploded inside my head. Before I knew it, a raging fire shot down my spine, spreading outward until it was enveloping all of my body, and I...

I came.

“Oh, fuck,” I breathed out, throwing my head back against the blanket. Still with my eyes shut, I sucked in a deep breath and tried to regain my bearings. Morgan didn’t let go. She laid her forehead against mine and kissed the tip of my nose.

“I can’t believe we did this.”

“Trust me, I can’t believe it either,” I said, running a hand through my hair. “Feels like I’m a teenager all over again.”

“But it feels good, doesn’t it?”

It really, really did.

Then again, every waking second I’d spent with Morgan felt good. To hold her hand, to kiss her lips, to feel the warmth of her skin against mine...with her, the world became weightless. The pressures of my daily life as Alpha a president of the MC eased, and even my wolf felt more settled. I could get used to that feeling.

That afternoon, as we left the woodlands and returned to Brightenville, the wind at our backs, I finally accepted the inevitable: Morgan and I belonged together...

I wanted to stop fighting it and revel in the miracle that I’d found my mate. I just had to make sure I could handle my wolf, because the idea of hurting my mate the way I’d hurt Catherine was more than I could bear.

MORGAN

I gave the eggs in my frying pan a quick flip, humming all the while. I hadn't stopped smiling since yesterday with Ben. It had unquestionably been the best day I could ever remember having. The way he'd made me feel so lighthearted and carefree. His sexy smile and ability to get me to loosen up a bit and just have fun. It had been a long time since I'd let myself forget my worries and just enjoy myself.

And then there'd been the way he touched me, his kisses. He'd made me feel things I'd never felt before with his skilled caresses and magic tongue.

A shiver of delight coursed through me as I relived it all, nearly burning my eggs in the process.

"Oops." I winced as I scraped the eggs from the pan onto my plate then filled the pan with hot soapy water. It would have to soak before I could clean it, but that was fine by me. A price I was willing to pay for getting caught up in my daydreams about the sexiest man I'd ever met.

Ben was like my very own book boyfriend come to life.

"What do you think, Pep? Have I stepped into the pages of a book?" Peppermint looked at me from her perch in the kitchen window, let out a long meow, then turned back to her birdwatching.

I ran my hand along her fur, then quickly ate my breakfast before finishing getting ready for work, my thoughts on Ben the entire time. He was just so incredibly amazing, unlike any man I'd ever known, and not just because his looks got my pulse racing.

It was more than that. He embodied everything I'd always felt was missing from my life. Adventure, excitement, passion... I only hoped his

work wouldn't take him away from me again anytime soon.

"Okay, Pep, be a good girl. I'll see you tonight." I grabbed my bag and slipped out of my apartment, a smile still plastered on my face. After checking the lock, I turned, nearly colliding with someone on the path.

"Oh, my gosh, I'm so sor—" The words died in my throat when I realized it was Aiden. He stood there on the path, blocking my way, his jaw set and his eyes full of anger.

"What the fuck are you doing with that guy, Morgan?"

"Excuse me?" The words came out weaker than I wanted them to, and I instinctively hunched my shoulders and wrapped my arms around myself. Ugh. So much for the new, braver side of me. Except—no, I wasn't going to take that. Ben had shown me that I didn't deserve that and didn't have to accept it. Forcing myself to stand straight and square my shoulders, I looked Aiden right in the eye. "What are you doing here? I have to go to work."

"How could you be with someone like that?" he demanded, ignoring my words completely. That was something I was used to.

"Aiden, get out of my way. I have places to be. And it's none of your concern, anyway."

His eyes narrowed and his hand shot out to wrap around my upper arm. "Morgan, this is serious. I looked up that motorcycle club—Demon Hollowers—and they're nothing but a bunch of thugs. Glorified gangsters, if you ask me."

"Well, I didn't ask you. So if you'll excuse me." I tried to jerk my arm away, but he only clamped down tighter, getting right up in my face. The old me would have shrunk back and listened to the bullshit he wanted to feed me. But something had changed over the past week. I didn't want to be weak any longer.

With a move I knew he'd never see coming, I jerked my knee up hard and fast, getting him right in the balls. I watched his eyes glaze over as he groaned in pain, but the move was effective. Aiden released me and doubled over, clutching his groin. Served him right, the asshole.

Not wanting to miss my opportunity for escape, I hurried away, down the path and onto the sidewalk where there would be other people who would hopefully be a deterrent for Aiden. My heart pounded and adrenaline pumped through my veins as he called out after me. I flipped him off, something I never would have done a week ago, but otherwise ignored him—and the spike of fear threatening to overpower my newfound bravery. Hurrying

toward the library, I forced myself to breathe deeply, but I was still all worked up when I rushed through the doors ten minutes later.

“Morgan?” Ronnie’s concerned voice floated toward me from between the stacks, but I kept on moving to the break room to stash my bag away. She was onto me, though, and clearly didn’t want to let it go, following right on my heels. “Morgan, what’s going on?”

I sighed, knowing she wouldn’t stop until she had answers, so I told her the whole story while I put my things away and poured a cup of coffee. My hands were shaking as I stirred in some sugar, needing the extra boost.

“Are you kidding me?” She folded her arms over her chest as I finished up the replay. “What a jackass. How dare he show up at your house like that! Do you want me find his sorry ass and rip him a new one?”

Ronnie looked furious, and a bit of my own anger lessened as I realized she was ready to go to bat for me. A small smile played on my lips. “Thank you, but no. I’d rather just pretend it never happened.”

Ronnie huffed. “Well, if it happens again, I won’t let it go so easily.”

My heart warmed at her words. I’d kept her at arm’s length for too long, afraid to get close to anyone at all, but Ronnie was a true friend. I was starting to see that opening myself up and taking chances with relationships didn’t have to be a scary thing, and I owed that to Ben. Maybe I was ready to move beyond my past hurts and trust those in my life who were there for me.

“I appreciate it,” I said with a chuckle. “I’ll keep that in mind.” Then, another thought hit me. “Hey, what do you say we go to the book signing that’s coming up at the book shop in Walburg? It could be a lot of fun.”

Ronnie’s eyes lit up. “That would be awesome.”

Together, we came out of the break room to unlock the doors for the day, and I was surprised to see a man standing outside the doors waiting, a giant bouquet of multi-hued flowers in his hands. What in the world?

I opened the door for the man. “Can I help you?”

“Is there a...uh...” He glanced at the card attached to the vase. “Morgan Reign?”

“That’s me.”

“These are for you.” The man handed the bouquet to me, and I brought them to my nose, breathing deeply. They smelled amazing.

“Thank you,” I murmured as he turned and left. Shifting the vase in my arms, I read the card, a smile blooming on my face as I realized they were from Ben. My heart did a little flip, my face warming as I recalled the more

intimate details of our time together yesterday.

“Okay, girl,” Ronnie said. “I want all the deets of what’s going on with you and hot biker boy—from the look on your face, I know they’re good—but right now I need to get upstairs and prepare for story time. Want to grab lunch together?”

“Sure, that sounds great.” I’d never really engaged in girl talk about men, but I was practically bursting with excitement over Ben and needed to tell somebody. Maybe this was a good first step for me in trying to be a better friend.

The day flew by, my thoughts consumed by my *hot biker boy*, and before I knew it, it was already time to lock up for the day. I moved toward the doors, but a man with an expensive-looking briefcase walked inside before I could.

“Hi, can I help you?” I did a double take when I noticed how out of place he looked. He was extraordinarily tall, just like Ben, but leaner. And he was wearing a designer suit that looked as if it had been custom made to fit his body. What was he doing in the library?

He smiled slowly. “You can do more than help me.”

Okay, that was weird. But I waited patiently as he set his briefcase on a table and opened it, revealing an ancient-looking book. Drawn in by its unique gilded designs on the worn leather cover, I stepped closer, examining it. The designs looked more like runes rather than cover art, and my curiosity was piqued.

“I’m not a research librarian,” I warned the tall stranger. “Nor am I well-versed in historical tomes.” I wasn’t quite sure why he was bringing it into a small-town library like mine. If he had questions about the book, he’d do better taking it to a university library, and I told him as much, but he didn’t seem to care.

“I’d love it if you could take a look anyway,” he said smoothly.

“Okay.” I shrugged. “But let me get some gloves so I don’t damage the pages. It looks ancient.”

I grabbed gloves and a cloth from behind the counter, then returned to the study table and delicately removed the book from the briefcase, setting it on top of the cloth to protect it as much as possible. With my gloved hands protected as well, I ran my fingers over the cover with its raised designs, but hesitated before opening it.

Glancing up at the stranger, he nodded encouragingly, his intense gaze

fixed on me. “Go ahead. Open it.”

I shrugged again and flipped the cover over carefully, wincing when it made a cracking sound that echoed through the empty library. *Crap, I hope I didn't break the binding.* I glanced at the man, but he didn't seem worried.

I flipped a few pages, and the words seemed to shift around slightly. Blinking, I took my glasses off and cleaned the lenses with my shirt. My eyes must have been tired after a long workday. Putting my glasses back on, I looked back at the book, and the words came into focus.

The book was absolutely gorgeous, like an old, illustrated volume of fairytales. Colorful, whimsical pictures were surrounded by gorgeous script, and I would have bet money this was hand-drawn, maybe even one of a kind. But other than that, the volume didn't seem like anything extraordinary. It told stories of wolves and other woodland creatures that could turn into humans.

“I suppose this book could be of value, as I can't say I've seen anything quite like it before,” I told the man, assuming he wanted some type of professional opinion. “The illustrations are definitely unique.” I flipped a few more pages, noticing how many stories seemed to contain the same theme. “But it's basically a book of fairytales about shapeshifters.”

I glanced up at the man, and a slow smile spread across his face as he continued to stare at me rather than the book.

“I'm so glad you can read it,” he said, and I had to admit, the way he was smiling and watching me was more than a little creepy.

I closed the tome and placed it back in the briefcase, ready to be done with this and head home for the day. “Well, most anyone should be able to read it, as it's written in English.”

His grin grew wider, amplifying his creepiness, and he took a step toward me. Instinctively, I stepped back, and my backside hit a bookshelf. Inexplicable fear spiked in my chest, and suddenly it felt hard to draw in a breath, as if a heavy weight were resting on my chest.

Before I could panic, though, Ronnie rounded the corner and spotted us, her sharp gaze sizing up the situation. She cleared her throat and walked toward us.

“Sorry, sir, we're closed for the day,” she said, her voice calm but firm, leaving no room for question.

The man jerked back, apparently startled, and he shook his head before scowling at Ronnie. Then, without a word, he slammed his briefcase closed

and yanked it up, storming out the front door. Ronnie followed right behind him, locking up and drawing the blinds shut.

I remained where I was until she came back over, my heart still thundering away. I couldn't quite say why, but there was something very strange about that man, and fear momentarily tightened my throat.

"Are you okay?" Ronnie's face was the picture of concern as she reached out and gently touched my shoulder. "Did that man do or say something to you? You look as white as a ghost right now."

I sucked in a few deep breaths, then shook my head. "I don't know," I murmured. "I'm not sure what just happened, but thank you for coming to my rescue."

"Of course, girl. I'm here for you. You know that, right?"

I smiled, some of the tension draining from my body. "I do know that. And I may not have told you before, but I'm grateful for you and your friendship."

"Aww." Ronnie laughed lightly. "Now, what do you say to me giving you a ride home? I don't want you walking home alone after that encounter with that weirdo, especially with what happened with Aidan this morning, too."

Normally, I would have shrugged her off and said I was fine, but I didn't feel so fine after two separate unsettling encounters today. And besides, I was trying to open up more and be a better friend.

"Thanks, Ronnie. That actually sounds really good."

She grinned. "Perfect. Want to grab some ice cream on the way?"

I relaxed ever so slightly. "That sounds even better."

And while I appreciated having Ronnie there for me, I hoped Ben would hurry up and be done with his business and get back to Brightenville soon. I was missing the safety and security that surrounded him more than I could have thought possible.

BEN

I sped down the freeway, weaving in and out of traffic almost unconsciously. My hand was on the throttle, my eyes were on the road, but my mind was someplace else. That, of course, was far from ideal. To make matters even worse, the setting sun was a flaming half-sphere on the horizon, its warm glow spilling over the road and bouncing off the car hoods, and I knew it'd be night before my body caught up with my mind.

I tightened my fingers around the throttle, urging the Harley to go even faster, and a muted pain went up from my bruised knuckles to my wrist. Still, that was nothing when compared to the pain I had inflicted. I didn't enjoy having to use my fists—violence worked better as an unrealized threat—but this time it couldn't be helped.

The thing about investment bankers is that they're not frugal when it comes to their security. The one I'd been sent to persuade was no exception, and his bodyguards had been more than eager to earn their paycheck. I just hoped their paycheck was large enough to cover their hospital bills.

You'd think that knocking over three suited-up gorillas would be enough of an argument, but you'd be wrong. As insane as that may sound, my target was more enamored with his bottom line than anything else. Eventually, though, he saw the light—money would be a poor substitute for a busted kneecap. Unfortunately, the bastard had taken a long time to come to that realization, and I was getting back to Brightenville much later than expected.

My plan was to meet Morgan right as she left the library, then whisk her away someplace for dinner, but it was too late for that. Now, I was torn between heading to the little motel I'd been staying at, or heading straight to

Morgan's and surprise her.

It wasn't a difficult decision to make.

As I took the exit ramp and rode past the dimly lit streets of Brightenville, I quickly realized I couldn't wait to see her. I'd been gone for three days, and every single one of them had been torture. There was no way I'd be able to spend another night without seeing Morgan, even if only for a moment. Something about her soothed me, and after the violence I'd inflicted on the job, I needed that more than ever. It helped me to know there was still some good in the world. Innocence and kindness that Morgan embodied.

Fifteen minutes later, I was pulling up in front of her house, my heart racing with excitement. I took my helmet off, popped it in the under-seat storage, and took a deep breath. The moment I did, though, my excitement quickly turned into fear. That ominous scent I'd first noticed almost a week back had returned, and this time it was even stronger.

I focused, trying to meld my wolf's senses with my own, but I still couldn't tell who—or what—this scent belonged to. It was completely foreign to me, but I could identify the crackle of deadly power that accompanied it. This scent didn't belong to a shifter, that much I knew, but it definitely belonged to some other supernatural creature.

That was worrying enough, but the worst part was that the scent was all over Morgan's house. It was stronger under the windows and at the top of the front steps, as if this creature had been looking for a way in.

Stop thinking, my wolf growled, and do something.

He was right—if this creature had broken into Morgan's house, she could be in danger. I rushed up the steps, half-ready to kick the door off its hinges, but took another deep breath before rushing in. Morgan's scent was there, her presence unmistakable, but I couldn't hear her moving around inside.

"Morgan!" I banged my fist against the door so hard that it rattled on its frame. "It's Ben!" I raised my fist again, then decided against it. This was a waste of time. Instead, I took a couple of steps back and readied myself to charge into her house. I was almost ready to put my boot against the door when I heard a sleepy little voice coming from inside.

"Ben?" She was on the far side of the house, and her voice was nothing but a whisper, but I could still pick it up as if she'd been standing next to me. I had my wolf to thank for that. No more than a second later, I heard the rustling of bedsheets and the muted slapping of bare feet on floorboards.

The door swung open and there she was.

“Ben?” she repeated, rubbing the sleep off her eyes. Her hair was tied into a bun, stray locks falling across her face, and she looked slightly disoriented. “What’s going on? Did something happen?”

“No,” I replied, the tension that had settled on my shoulders fading. Morgan was safe. “Everything’s fine.”

Before she could say a thing, I stepped forward and took her in my arms. She was stiff at first, probably surprised at seeing me here, but she leaned into me quickly enough. She wrapped her arms around mine and rested her head against my chest.

“You scared the living shit out of me, you know?” she whispered softly, looking at me with an amused expression. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

“Yeah, sorry about that.” I scratched the back of my head as I tried to come up with a suitable apology. “I didn’t mean to wake you, it’s just that...I couldn’t wait to see you.”

“That makes for two of us.” Smiling, she went up on tiptoes and brushed her lips against my own. “And I’m glad you are here...although it’s better you get inside. You were pretty loud, so half the neighborhood is probably up now.”

“Are they nosy? Your neighbors?”

“Not exactly,” she said with a chuckle. “Although I think some of them might wonder about the tall biker knocking on my door this late at night.”

“Then it’s a good thing I didn’t climb in through the window,” I said. “I don’t want your neighbors to band together and come after me.”

Which was exactly what would happen if people knew about my true identity. Never mind the fact that I was the president of a criminal MC—if these people knew I was a shifter, they would lose their collective shit. I just hoped Morgan wasn’t like that. Sooner or later, she would have to learn the truth.

“I think they’d be too scared to come after you.” With a wink, one that made my heart skip a beat, she stood aside and waved me in. “Now, will you come in or do I have to drag you? Come, I’ll make us some tea.”

I followed Morgan inside and relaxed.

As strong as that scent was outside, there was no trace of it in here. Whoever was stalking Morgan hadn’t stepped foot inside her house—at least not yet. That didn’t mean I could lower my guard, though. Now more than ever, I needed to keep a close eye on her.

If Charles called me with another job, this time I would have no choice

but to turn it down. The idea of that didn't sit well with me. I was the leader, after all, and my duty should first and foremost be to my pack. But finding my mate had created a shift in my priorities. Not that I'd ever let down my club or my wolves, but leaving Brightenville before had been a mistake, and I wasn't going to do it twice. I was sticking around this time, and I wouldn't stop until I figured out what kind of creature was hounding Morgan.

"And here's the kitchen," Morgan announced, veering off into the right. "I'd give you a tour of the place, but the bedroom is kind of a mess right now."

I wouldn't have minded visiting the bedroom, but I said nothing. I just sat at the table on the corner of Morgan's little kitchen, right beside the window overlooking the street. On the windowsill, a little clay pot housed an overgrown parsley plant, a few of its tangy leaves drooping toward the plate where the pot sat.

"What kind of tea do you prefer?" Morgan asked me, her voice accompanied by the wooden clack of drawers being opened and closed. "I've got chamomile, black tea, and some fruit teas...if I can find them, that is."

She was standing on tiptoes, trying to peek into the cabinet over the sink, and the loose shirt she was wearing hiked up to her waist. A knot formed in my throat as I noticed the smooth contour of her backside, her curves peeking from underneath the shirt, and my blood simmered in my veins. I should've looked away, but it was impossible—the muscles on her legs were tense, her black underwear highlighted the curve of her ass, and my instincts couldn't cope with such a perfect sight.

I was on my feet before I knew it, a growl on the back of my throat, and I closed the distance between us in a single step. My hands darted to her hips, and I turned her around, my eyes desperately searching hers.

"Oh," she giggled, her voice hitching up. "No tea then?"

"That's for later."

I kissed her, the strawberry flavor of her lips amplifying my lust. My blood went from a simmer to a boil, and my cock hardened right away, straining against the rough fabric of my jeans. Morgan didn't mind it—in fact, it was just the opposite. She laid her hands on my chest and pushed herself against me, trapping my growing erection between our bodies. A soft little moan escaped from her lips, and she melted into my embrace.

"I want you," I growled, allowing one of my hands to go up to her face. I brushed her hair away from her face, then let my fingers go down to her neck,

my thumb lightly grazing her collarbone. She didn't hesitate. She placed her hand on top of mine and guided it home. I laid my open palm over her right breast, her nipple poking at me through the fabric of her shirt, and I just lost it.

It pained me to let go of her breast, but I returned my hand to her hips. With one fluid motion, I lifted Morgan up, forcing her to sit on the kitchen counter. She gasped, surprised, but didn't object when I pulled her shirt over her head. There was nothing underneath her shirt, and I took a moment to drink in every detail of her naked body. From the dip between her breasts, to the rosy nipples that hardened as the cool air of the room caressed them...I let nothing escape my gaze.

"I want you so fucking much," I half-whispered, half-growled, feeling like a hungry man standing before a feast. I wanted to kiss every inch of her body, I wanted her flavor to coat my tongue, and I wanted to lose myself in her.

And that's exactly what I did.

I leaned in, but this time I didn't bring my lips down onto hers. I went for her neck instead, my lips tracing a downward line toward her chest, and let the tip of my tongue make its way up the rising curve of her right breast. Gently, I twirled it around her nipple, then parted my lips and sucked it into my mouth.

"Oh," Morgan breathed out, her fingers running through my hair. "That's...oh."

"I'm only getting started."

I let her nipple escape from my mouth and continued the journey down her body, peppering her naked skin with gentle kisses. I only stopped when I met her thong's elastic band, but Morgan didn't let me hesitate. She raised her butt off the counter, and I did the rest. I bit down on her thong and, as I knelt between Morgan's legs, I peeled it off of her body. Once her underwear was hanging off her right foot, Morgan flicked it away with a careless movement, and my eyes snapped to the nakedness between her legs.

Ours, my wolf growled, his lust turning into maddening desperation, *you have to make her ours*.

It was hard not to obey. The scent of Morgan's arousal was filtering straight into my brain, sidestepping whatever rationality I still claimed as my own, and I was overwhelmed with lust. Even so, I couldn't claim Morgan—she wasn't ready for it. Hell, she didn't even know who I *really* was.

And yet...

“I want to...” I kissed my way up her right leg, navigated toward the smooth flesh of her inner thighs, and looked straight into her eyes. “I want to kiss every inch of your body. I want to devour you.”

“Then do it,” Morgan purred, her fingertips against my scalp. She dragged her teeth across her bottom lip and, after a deep breath, she drew me in. My mouth went straight to Morgan’s sweet wetness, the scent and flavor of it driving my wolf into the depths of madness.

I ran my tongue up and down her inner lips, tracing the contour of her pussy with maddening patience, and I took my sweet time with it. Once I found that hidden spot of hers, I wrapped my lips tight around her clit and pressed on it with my tongue. Morgan yanked on my hair as she swayed her hips, pushing herself against my mouth, and I matched her eagerness with some of my own.

With my eyes closed, I surrendered to the wonders of her naked body. My nerve endings bloomed to greet the onslaught of sensations, and time came to a standstill. I lost myself in the moment, oblivious to the passage of time.

“Ben...I... I think...”

Morgan’s last words rose into a high-pitched moan, and the swaying motion of her hips stopped suddenly. She threw her legs over my shoulders, crossing her ankles on my back, and trapped me in place. I pressed hard on her clit, my tongue dancing around it in a frenzy, and then...

“Oh, God,” Morgan hissed, her head thrown back. Her muscles tensed up for a moment, then trembled in place, electric twitches running through her inner thighs. I didn’t stop—I kept on devouring her as she came, relishing the scent and flavor of her ecstasy.

“Ben,” she whispered, her voice trembling. She ran her fingers through my hair, more gently now, and cupped my chin with one hand. I looked up at her, her flavor still coating both my lips and tongue. “This was...oh, God.” She closed her eyes and chuckled, as if to process what had happened. “You’re incredible.”

“You are incredible.”

“I want to—”

Return the favor, was what she wanted to say, but I didn’t give her the time for it. I rose to my feet and placed one finger over her lips, hushing her.

“This wasn’t about me,” I whispered. “You don’t need to do anything.”

But I want to, her eyes seemed to say.

“Seriously,” I said, gently kissing the tip of her nose. “Tonight was all about you.”

She opened her mouth as if to protest but didn’t. That was for the best—if she insisted, I didn’t know if I’d be able to resist it. That’s exactly what my wolf wanted, but I knew we weren’t ready for it. As much I wanted—*needed*—Morgan, I couldn’t rush into things.

“Stay the night,” Morgan whispered, dragging her thumb over my lips. “Please. I want to fall asleep knowing that you’re there, right beside me.”

Well. Even I had my limits, and that...

That wasn’t an offer I could refuse.

MORGAN

I blinked awake slowly, not ready to get up just yet. But something had woken me, and I was ridiculously hot under the covers, more so than I ever was without being sick. I started to kick the blankets off but then finally processed that I was wrapped up in strong, muscular arms and warm breath fanned over my neck.

Ben.

He was holding me from behind, cradled up against his rock-hard and completely *bare* chest. A smile bloomed on my lips. He'd spent the night here with me, in my bed, and waking up next to him was incredibly intimate. I could definitely get used to it, right along with a few more mind-blowing orgasms.

Last night had been amazing. *Ben* was amazing. Even now, thinking of the way his skilled tongue had slid along the most intimate parts of my body had me overheating. It had been the best orgasm of my life, and that was no exaggeration. Recalling the way he'd made my body feel had me instantly aching for more. What would it feel like to have him deep inside me as we moved as one?

My breath came in shallow pants, and I pressed myself back against him, a small gasp escaping as I felt his rock-hard cock push against my ass. A white-hot bolt of desire rocketed through my body. I wanted him—more than I'd ever wanted a man in my life.

A low, nearly feral growl rumbled in his chest. "Stay still," he mumbled. "It's early."

I giggled and pushed back again, loving how this strong, powerful, and

utterly gorgeous man groaned with need—because of me. What alternate reality had I been dropped into? I didn't know, but I sure wasn't complaining.

Ben's fingers dug into my hips. "Morgan," he growled, his voice strained but still full of warning.

"What?" I asked innocently. "It may be early, but I still have to get to work soon." I turned my head, studying his face, and felt a throb in my core at the dark desire reflecting in his eyes.

"And maybe..." I grinned teasingly. "Maybe I want to feel a little happier when I get there."

A muscle in his jaw ticked, and I could see he was fighting some internal battle, though what exactly it was about was beyond me. I was ready and willing for anything he could dish out—especially when I thought about his mouth on my pussy last night. I bit my lip and wriggled my butt against him again for good measure.

When he spoke again, his voice was raw with need.

"Let's get this straight. The first time I take you—" His fingers tightened on my hips. "—it won't be a rushed morning quickie." He bent his head and brushed his lips over my cheek, his warm breath sending delicious shivers through my body. "No, it will be slow and thorough, and take all damn night."

An involuntary moan escaped my lips, and now it was Ben's turn to grin wickedly. "I won't leave you wanting, though, baby."

Baby. I liked that. I liked it a lot. I didn't know what we were or where we were headed, but the idea of being his made me unbelievably happy.

Then he slid his hands down between my legs, teasing me with torturously slow circles around my clit, and I stopped thinking entirely. Electricity coursed through my body as he touched and explored me in the most intimate of ways, and I parted my thighs, opening up to give him better access.

That sexy growl rumbled in his chest again, sending my desire sky-high, and when he nudged his cock against my ass, I whimpered, wanting more, more, more.

The sounds of his fingers as he dipped into my wetness had me crying out his name, and he rained down kisses all over my neck, my shoulders, and my back, never stopping his skilled movements. I pushed back against his throbbing cock, relishing how I drew a groan from him, and he rocked his hips against me.

In no time at all, I was on the edge, fighting off an orgasm that I wanted to make last. But it was just too good, and I surrendered to the sensations, pleasure coursing through my body as Ben sent me careening right over the edge.

I dug my fingers into the sheets as wave after wave of ecstasy ruled my body, the feelings heightened by Ben's own moans of pleasure as he came with me, his warm seed spilling on my overheated skin. It was, without a doubt, the sexiest moment of my life. If things were this intense now, what would it be like to actually have him inside me?

Relaxed and sated, I remained there in his arms until my alarm went off, signaling an end to the fun. "Time to get up," I said reluctantly.

Ben kissed my shoulder. "Why don't you go take a shower first?"

I didn't want to leave the bed, but duty called, even if it was only in the form of placing book orders and shelving books. I showered quickly, then made a quick breakfast of sausage and egg burritos while Ben took his own shower. Peppermint was nowhere to be found this morning, but she wasn't a big fan of people she didn't know well.

"Can I walk you to work?" Ben asked when he came into the kitchen, his hair still damp. "We can stop for coffee."

I handed him a burrito. "I'd love that."

Grabbing my bag, we headed out together, hand in hand, and I felt as if I were floating down the street rather than walking.

"I had a great time last night—and this morning." I gave him a smile, surprised at how comfortable I felt. How there was no awkwardness at all between us, the way there sometimes could be after first being intimate with a new partner.

"So did I." Ben's mischievous grin and the glint in his eye sent sparks shooting through my veins. A single glance from this man was able to get me all hot and bothered, even after the orgasms we'd just shared. Would it always be like this? I sure hoped so.

"Would you like to have dinner tonight?" he asked as we approached Beans and Leaves.

"Yes," I replied, too quickly, but Ben only smiled. "I can cook for you at my place."

"Perfect."

Ben bought coffee for us, and we settled on a time for him to come over, but I was still sorry to see him go, even if I had a lot of work I needed to get

done.

“Until tonight,” he murmured, placing a soft kiss on my lips before leaving me at the entrance to the library.

I walked inside, practically floating as I made my way to the break room to eat my burrito before it was time to unlock the doors for the day. Barely a minute later, Ronnie came marching in.

“Morning, Morgan,” she said, taking the chair opposite me.

“Morning,” I said around a bite of eggs and sausage. Would she notice that I couldn’t seem to stop smiling? She seemed to have other things on her mind, though.

“You know, I got to thinking last night.” She frowned. “What the hell did that guy want last night at closing time? We never really talked about it, but he was creepy as fuck.”

I sighed. Ben had made me forget all about that weird encounter, but the strangeness of it rushed back to me now.

“I know,” I agreed. “The whole thing was really weird.” I proceeded to tell her everything that happened, how he wanted me to read the book, and how confusing it was considering it was basically a kids’ fairytale book—written in English, at that.

Ronnie shook her head. “People are weirdos, Morgan. Gotta watch out.” She glanced at the clock. “I need to get upstairs, but if anything like that happens again, give me a call and I’ll come right down.”

“Will do.” Though I hoped that would be the end of it.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t. Just around lunchtime, a woman came into the library, asking for me by name at the front desk. I was just a few feet away processing returns and glanced up.

There was something strange about her that reminded me of the man who’d been there last night. Unusually tall, unquestioningly beautiful, and with an air about her that screamed she was used to being in charge. I was instantly wary, especially when I noticed she was holding a book that looked similar to the fairytale book the man had brought in.

“I’m Morgan,” I said, coming out from behind the counter. “How can I help you?”

She smiled at me, and while she seemed a bit more genuine than the man had, her next words had me narrowing my eyes.

“I was wondering if you could read this book for me, help me understand it.” She smiled widely, revealing perfect too-white teeth as she handed me the

book.

I flipped through it, noting that it was very similar to the one the man had brought in last night—also in English.

“I’m sorry, but are you not able to read it yourself? You seem to speak perfect English.” This was starting to get weird.

The woman shook her head. “Only certain people can decipher the words, and I really need it translated. Right away if possible.” She reached into her purse. “It’s really important, and I can pay you a lot of money if you’ll help me out.”

She named a sum, and I tried my best not to look as flummoxed as I felt. Was she serious? I didn’t know what to say to that. I could obviously use some money. Student loans were killing me, and I’d love to start saving for a house. But this was weird. Was this woman really willing to pay me to “translate” a book written in my native language?

Still, despite feeling like something was off here, I nodded.

“Sure, I can do that.” What harm could it do? If she was willing to pay, and I got out of debt faster...

“Thank you so much. Do you think you can get started right away? I can come back in a few days for the first few chapters.” She pulled an envelope out of her purse and pressed it into my hands. “Consider this a down payment.”

I blinked, confused, but opened the envelope anyway. My eyebrows flew up when I saw ten one-hundred-dollar bills inside. I opened my mouth to tell her I couldn’t start right away, that I was busy and could only work on this after my standard library hours were done, but she was already backing toward the door.

“Thank you so much,” the woman repeated in a rush. “This means a lot to me. See you in a few days.”

Then she was gone, leaving me staring at the fairytale book and the thousand dollars, dumbfounded. Things definitely kept getting stranger, but I had no reason not to do the job, and a thousand dollars could go a long way for me—especially if this was just a down payment.

The rest of the day flew by, and I barely thought of the book and the money. Instead, I focused on what I would cook for dinner with Ben. And what I might wear under my clothes in case he stayed for dessert. By the time five o’clock rolled around, I’d figured it all out—chicken and pasta with a butter cream sauce—and I grabbed my things and headed out, stopping just

down the street at the gourmet food market. I popped into Brenda's Bakery for a pie as well, then hurried home to get started cooking.

I prepped and cooked first, then hopped in the shower to freshen up. Just in case. Right as I finished getting dressed in an emerald green above-the-knee wrap dress, the doorbell chimed. I ran to answer the door, pausing before I opened it to smooth my hair and catch my breath. I already felt overheated, and I hadn't even seen Ben yet.

When I opened the door, butterflies danced in my stomach. Ben looked a little nicer than usual, dressed in new-looking jeans and a Henley, but he still had that leather vest on, which gave him that dangerous and seriously sexy look I was starting to love.

"Hi." My voice was a bit breathless as I stepped back and held the door open for him. "Come in."

He stepped into the entryway, his huge body taking up all the space, and I set my hands on his shoulders and went up on tiptoe to brush a soft kiss across his stubbled jaw. A shiver of anticipation ran through me as I remembered what those whiskers had felt like on my inner thighs last night.

Clearing my throat and struggling to think straight, I stepped away from him before I forgot about dinner entirely. "Are you hungry?"

His gaze slowly raked over me from head to toe and back again, and my pulse ratcheted up a notch. "Starving."

Taking his hand, I led him to the table. "Have a seat and I'll just warm everything up real quick."

I moved to the stove to reheat the sauce, feeling Ben's eyes on me the whole time. When I turned to sneak a glance, intense desire blazed in his eyes, and I felt a little lightheaded. I swallowed down my nerves—would tonight be the night?—and plated our meals before bringing them to the table. Ben didn't even look at the food, just fixed that stare on me.

I reached up to smooth my hair, loving the attention while at the same time being wholly unused to it. Ben must have noticed.

"Sorry, I just can't take my eyes off you."

I giggled. "It's okay. I like it."

He cocked an eyebrow, the corner of his mouth tipping up in a sexy smile. "That dress is so damn sexy. You look good enough to eat."

Again, an image of his head between my legs flashed in my mind, and judging by the way his grin widened, he was thinking the exact same thing. My skin was prickling with heat and I struggled to breathe, but in the best

way possible.

“Sorry.” Ben shook his head, finally tearing his gaze from me long enough to look at the meal I’d placed before him. “This looks delicious as well.”

“Oh, I almost forgot.” I jumped up again and grabbed a bottle of wine I’d been saving. “This goes really well with the pasta.”

“May I?” Ben reached for the wine. “You’ve gone to so much trouble. The least I can do is pour my lady a glass of wine.”

My lady. I liked that a lot too.

I sat as Ben took over, pouring us each a glass before he sat back down across from me and clinked them together. “To a lovely evening with an even lovelier woman.”

I smiled as I brought the wine to my lips. Ben was such a contradiction at times. So rough around the edges, but he truly was a gentleman when he wanted to be. I liked both sides.

“So how was your day?” He took a sip of his own wine then picked up his fork and dug right in.

“Good,” I began, twirling pasta around my fork. “There was this weird moment around lunch, though...”

“Weird? How so?” He leveled an intense gaze on me, worry shining in his blue eyes.

“Well, it’s probably nothing.” But I still told him everything that happened with the two unusually tall and beautiful strangers over the past couple days. He continued to eat while I talked, but his face tightened, lines forming around his mouth and eyes. When I told him about the money the woman had offered for my translation, he grimaced.

“What is it?” I asked, wondering what I’d said.

“Nothing.” He shook his head quickly and smiled, but it seemed a little forced to me. “This is absolutely delicious, Morgan. I don’t know that I’ve ever had pasta sauce this fresh and flavorful.”

I preened at the compliment, more than a little pleased that he liked my cooking. As we ate, I felt his gaze on me, curious and assessing.

“What?” I asked, squirming uncomfortably under the scrutiny.

“I’m just trying to figure out how an amazing woman like you hasn’t been snapped up already. Not that I’m complaining.” He grinned. “At least I don’t have to fight an army of men for your heart.”

My breath caught at the idea that he would do that. For me. I cleared my

throat. “Well, they haven’t exactly been lined up at the door.”

Ben shook his head. “That’s crazy. I don’t see why not.”

“You’d be the only one,” I murmured, then wished I hadn’t said anything at all when he frowned, his brow furrowing.

“What do you mean?”

I took another bite, buying some time while I figured out how to explain to him that I’d been bullied my entire life, ultimately coming to believe that I just wasn’t good enough or strong enough to deserve a relationship—except now I was questioning that belief.

“I’ve...had some bad experiences with the opposite sex. Aiden was the last of my toxic relationships, but he wasn’t the first.”

Ben made a noise deep in his throat that sounded an awful lot like a growl, his hands clenching into fists. My heart took flight at his defensiveness of me, and I couldn’t help but smile.

“It’s okay. I’ve made some poor choices when it comes to men, but I’m starting to see that maybe it wasn’t me.”

Ben’s eyes took on a dangerous glint. “I’d love to take a shot at every man who ever made you think you were lacking in any way. You’re perfect, Morgan. Don’t ever let anyone make you feel less than that. You only deserve the very best.”

My throat tightened as a wave of emotions swept over me. No one had ever said things like that to me before, and definitely not with the passion that practically radiated from Ben. I couldn’t stop smiling as we finished our meal, our conversation moving to lighter things. I’d never been so comfortable around another person as I was with him. And I definitely never would have thought I’d fall for someone like Ben—someone who seemed so dangerous, even scary at first glance—but I could definitely see myself doing so with him. In spite of my sordid romantic history, the more I got to know him, the more I knew I could trust him,

After dinner, we shared a slice of the pie, taking it into the living room to eat on the couch while we watched a movie. I snuggled in close to him as he chose a movie, settling back with his arm around me, but I couldn’t help but notice his eyes drifted to the fairytale book on the coffee table more than once. I’d set it there when I came home.

Glancing up at him after a few minutes, I realized he was staring at the book now, and I could have sworn he...sniffed it?

I sat up. “Do you want to see the book?” He certainly seemed interested

in it.

“Sure.” His voice was nonchalant but the intensity in his eyes made me question just what it was about this book that had people acting so strangely.

I grabbed the book and pulled it onto our laps, opening it and flipping through it. “I know this sounds crazy, but you can read this, right?”

“I can.”

“Okay, because both the man and the woman said they couldn’t, even though it’s written in plain English, and they clearly could speak the language.” I shook my head. “I was starting to wonder if *I* was the crazy one.”

“You aren’t crazy, Morgan,” he murmured, his brows drawn together as he scanned page after page. “But this isn’t English.”

“What?” I sat straight up. How was that possible? “But it is—I see the words plain as day.”

Ben shook his head. “I know this doesn’t make sense to you. It doesn’t make sense to me, either. But this is written in an old dialect of a forgotten language—one I learned from my grandparents.”

I sank into the couch, flabbergasted. “You’re kidding, right? Why do I see it in English, then?” He had to be joking with me.

Ben pressed his lips together, and I got the sense that he knew way more than he was letting on. I also got the distinct feeling he wasn’t joking—at all.

“What do you know about this, Ben?”

He sighed, closing the book and turning to me. “I don’t really know. At least not for sure.”

I wanted to press him for more, but I could see the reluctance in his eyes. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Would you mind if we took this book to Serene’s place to see if Tevin can read it, too?”

“Um...sure, I guess?” My curiosity was compounding by the minute. If Ben or Tevin knew something about this book, I wanted to find out what it was. Especially after the weird encounters yesterday and today. Ben started to stand up. “You mean right now?”

He nodded, giving me a regretful look. “Yeah, if you don’t mind.”

It wasn’t how I’d planned for the evening to end, but I had to admit, this book was intriguing. Perhaps any answers we could find would help as I worked my way through it. “No, not at all.”

Ben leaned in and kissed my cheek, then grabbed his phone out of his

pocket and called Tevin. I listened to one side of the conversation as Ben asked if we could come visit him and Serene tonight, telling him he had something he really wanted him to look at—that it was urgent.

Which only left me with more questions.

When Ben ended the call, he reached for my hand. “Want to go on a ride?”

I took his hand and let him pull me to me feet. Maybe I’d finally get some answers about this mysterious book... and about Ben.

BEN

This wasn't good.

The scent coming off the book—the same scent I'd noticed around Morgan's house—was pungent, and I didn't like it one bit. Not only that, but I was sure this wasn't a regular book. The script was an old form of Romanian, used mostly by the supernaturals of the Old World, and it had been put to paper with magic. I couldn't feel its scent—magic was odorless—but I had felt the faint crackle of energy coming off the pages.

And there was more.

When I first laid eyes on the book, the images had *moved*. The illustrations had been drawn with thin and delicate lines, but they acquired a certain robustness when they fell under my gaze. An ancient dragon had moved between paragraphs, its tail crackling like a whip, and the pine trees in the background had shifted as if caressed by some unseen breeze. It was the same on every page, with the illustrations coming to life every time a page was turned. Only the script remained still, an immovable wall of text amidst living illustrations.

Of course, I'd kept *that* to myself.

Then there was the fact that I couldn't read everything. Some of the writing was clear, but the rest was made up of symbols I didn't understand. Morgan could read that ancient script as easily as if it were English, but I wasn't sure she could see the moving illustrations. Had I brought it up, she probably would've thought I was a raving lunatic. And that's exactly why we were going to Serene's. I wanted to know if it was just me, or if Tevin could also see it. Not only that, but I also wanted to show Serene the book.

Morgan's ability to read its script had baffled me, and I wanted another regular human being to take a look at it.

Of course, it wasn't my curiosity that was moving me. The truth was...

I was afraid.

This damn book meant Morgan was in the middle of some magical bullshit involving other supernaturals, and in order to make her understand she was in danger...she'd have to know the truth about me. More than showing Tevin and Serene the book, I wanted them to help me soften the blow of a sudden revelation.

I was still thinking of that when we rode onto Serene's street, her little cottage no more than a stone's throw from the beach. The lights in the house were out, but a faint glow came from the backyard, spilling onto the street through the gaps on the wooden fence.

I stopped the bike next to Serene's car, kicked the stand into place, and helped Morgan off her seat.

"Are you sure they're home?" she asked me, eyeing the darkened windows. She hadn't noticed the lights in the backyard, nor had she picked up on anyone's scent. I had—Pax was inside the house, probably in the bedroom, and Morgan and Tevin were in the backyard.

"Yeah," I said, "they're here."

With a strained smile, I laid a hand on Morgan's lower back and led her past the front steps and toward the wooden gate at the back. She looked at the faint glow coming from the other side of it, heard some muted laughter, and looked back at me over one shoulder.

"How did you know?"

"Let's just say that I'm very good at knowing things." I stopped before the gate and tried the latch. They hadn't locked it, and so Morgan and I strode into Serene's backyard unopposed. They didn't seem surprised to see us. Tevin had likely already picked up on my scent and, besides, the growl of the Harley's engine was unmistakable.

The two of them were sitting on the steps of a newly built deck, one separating the house itself from the little garden Serene kept at the back. Between them was a baby monitor, and it showed Pax soundly asleep in his little wooden crib. Tevin had built it himself, just like the deck they were sitting on—if he kept it up, soon enough he'd be more valuable to the pack as a carpenter than an enforcer.

"You want a drink?" Tevin held up a lowball glass, two fingers of

whiskey sloshing around the bottom. “This is my poison, but we have some red as well.”

Serene tapped her own glass with one fingernail.

“It’s French,” she announced, “and it’s expensive. Now, I don’t know anything about wine, but I’m more than happy to grab another glass.”

“Thanks,” I replied. “I’m good.”

“Such a killjoy,” Tevin said, turning his attention toward Morgan. “Don’t follow his lead. Have some wine.”

“I, uh, sure,” Morgan muttered, disoriented by the warm welcome we’d just received. Even so, she didn’t let that stop her from putting on a smile and accepting a glass from Serene.

“So, what brings you here?” Serene asked, keeping her eyes on mine as she took a sip of her red. There was a tiny crease on her forehead, one that always showed when she was worried, and I immediately knew she thought I was here to insist they return to the packlands. That was a conversation we still had to have, but that wasn’t why I’d come here.

“A book,” I replied, waving a hand at Morgan. She nodded and, with a careful gesture, grabbed the tome from inside her purse. She held it up so that both Tevin and Serene could see its cover, and almost dropped it when Tevin jumped to his feet.

“May I...?” Tevin asked, his brow creased as he held out his hand.

“Sure.” As carefully as if she was handling a bar of dynamite, she offered Tevin the book. The moment his fingers brushed the cover, his frown deepened.

“That’s odd,” he whispered, more to himself than to us, and then opened the book at random. He closed his eyes, put his nose to the paper, and sucked in a deep breath. Morgan snuck a glance at me, probably confused by what Tevin was doing, but I just shrugged. This was just the beginning. Once Morgan knew the truth, Tevin smelling some old book would be the last of her concerns.

“Can you see the...?” I made an undulating motion with my hands, to illustrate the movement of the drawings. Tevin looked up and nodded.

“Yeah, I can see it.”

“Let me have a look.” Serene put her glass aside, climbed the stairs on the deck so that she could peer over Tevin’s shoulder, and frowned. She turned her attention to me, then back to the book. “I don’t get it. What’s so interesting about this notebook?”

“Notebook?” I repeated.

“Yeah,” she said. “Isn’t that what it is? It’s just empty pages.”

“You can’t see it,” Tevin muttered, looking at his mate with a curious expression on his face. “Well, that’s even more interesting.” He held the book up and flicked through a couple of pages at random. “There are drawings and text here, Serene. Only Ben and I can see it, though. I’m not sure what that’s about, or where Ben found it, but—”

“I can see it, too,” Morgan cut him short. “How come Serene can’t? I mean...that doesn’t make any sense.” She grabbed the book from Tevin’s hands and looked down at it so hard, I half-expected for her to start torturing it for answers. “I truly don’t get it. Why is everyone acting so crazy around this book? It’s *just* a storybook.”

Now or never, I thought, my heart tightening.

“Morgan.” I reached for her hand, hesitated, then brushed my fingers against hers. “Sometimes things aren’t as simple as they look. Sometimes there’s...more.”

“I...I don’t understand.” She had a hesitant smile, but it quickly faded once she noticed the expression on my face. She turned and looked at Tevin and Serene, probably for reassurance, but they looked as serious as I did. They knew what I was about to do. “All right, what’s going on here? Why is everyone losing their minds with this book?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted, “but I know that you shouldn’t be able to read what’s on it. Just as I know that whoever gave you that book...they’re...different. Someone’s very interested in you, someone who might be dangerous, and you have to be careful.”

She looked more confused than ever.

I ran one hand through my hair and took a deep breath. “There’s no easy way of telling you this, Morgan, but there’s more to this world than meets the eye. Humans like to think of themselves as the apex predator, but there are far more dangerous creatures out there. Creatures like *me*.”

“What?” She blinked, as if the words coming out of my mouth had been nothing but gibberish.

“I’m not a regular human,” I breathed out, my whole body tensing up as I waited to see her reaction. “Tevin and I are from a different breed. We do look normal, but we have certain...abilities.” When Morgan didn’t say anything, I just pushed on. “We can transform into wolves.”

There was a pause, and for a moment I thought Morgan was going to

burst out laughing. She didn't.

"You can't be serious." She knitted her eyebrows together, then shot a look at Serene. "This is a joke, right?" When she looked back at me, one of her eyebrows arched up as if she'd just realized something. "Is this because you found me reading that romance novel? The one with the werewolves?"

Serene walked up to Morgan and laid a hand on her shoulder. "It's not a joke. I know it sounds insane, but it's the truth."

"That...that just can't be!" Morgan shook her head, her hair whipping around her neck. "I mean, are you really telling me you're werewolves? C'mon!"

Knowing words wouldn't suffice, I took off my jacket and threw it onto the deck. Tevin leaned forward, already knowing what I was about to do.

"Are you sure about this?" he asked, but he didn't look as if he was going to stop me. In fact, it was just the opposite. A half-smile was dancing on his lips, and he seemed eager to see this happen.

"Is there any other choice?" I took my shirt off and tossed it aside. When I kicked my boots off and started unbuckling my belt, Morgan took a step back, her mouth ajar. This was way out of her comfort zone, and she was probably confused as hell.

And yet, I couldn't stop—not now.

The only way I'd be able to protect her was if she knew the truth.

Once my jeans and underwear were lying at my feet, I pressed my lips into a line and breathed in deeply. My wolf stirred inside me, eager to be set free, and I let its energy well up to the surface. His life force permeated my bones and tendons, my muscles stretched to accommodate my new form, and my heart turned into a hand-grenade inside my chest.

With a groan, I leaned forward.

I reached for the ground with my open hands, but they didn't touch the grass—my paws did. I shook my white coat, relishing the power that coursed through my veins, and looked up at Morgan. For a moment, she just returned my wolfish gaze, all color slowly draining from her face.

And that's when she screamed.

The sound of it pierced my eardrums, and a whirlwind of emotions washed over me. To have my own mate terrified at the sight of me...that *hurt*.

"No," Morgan said, shaking her head from side to side, "this isn't happening."

She turned on her heels, ready to bolt out the door, but Tevin was faster.

He stood between Morgan and the door, blocking her path, then held his hands up to show he meant no harm. That didn't stop her. She was so damn terrified that she tried rushing past Tevin, even though that was impossible.

"Careful now," Tevin said, carefully grabbing Morgan by the wrist and spinning her around. He held her by the shoulders, his touch firm but gentle, then looked at Serene for support.

"It's okay," Serene said, taking Morgan's hands in hers. "I promise you, it's okay. I was as shocked as you are the first time I saw Tevin shift, but this is part of who they are. Ben would never hurt you. He looks different, but he's still the same."

Slowly—*very* slowly—Morgan finally turned her attention back to me.

I padded toward her and lay down at her feet.

This was it.

"Ben?" she whispered, her voice so faint even my heightened senses could barely pick it up. Carefully, she went down on one knee and put out a hand. I nuzzled it, enjoying the touch of her fingers, and smiled inwardly. Morgan squealed, her scent telling me she was both excited and scared, but she didn't move away.

There was hope for us.

MORGAN

What the actual fuck? I wanted to pinch myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming. Or hallucinating.

Ben was a *wolf*?

It wasn't possible. Yet here I was with a massive white wolf resting his head in my lap, staring at me with ice-blue eyes that were too conscious to belong to a mere beast. This wasn't smoke and mirrors. This was real life.

I should have been terrified. I should have been running out of this house, screaming for dear life. But as the wolf—no, as *Ben*—nuzzled against me, licking me gently and pressing his muzzle into my stomach, I felt oddly at ease. It made no sense, none of this did. But I definitely wasn't dreaming.

Serene and Tevin watched me closely, and when I met Serene's gaze, she gave me a sympathetic smile. "You're taking it much better than I did when Tevin shifted for the first time. I passed out."

I let out a laugh tinged with disbelief. "How is this possible? Werewolves are real."

It sounded crazy when I said it aloud.

But then I thought back to the fairytale book, to the first chapter that I'd barely had a chance to read. It told of shapeshifters and other supernaturals. I'd dismissed it as pure fiction, a child's tale—but I'd been very, very wrong.

And then there was what I'd witnessed with my own two eyes, Ben changing right in front of me.

"Shifters," Tevin corrected. "Werewolves are a bastardized version of what we really are."

"And you aren't the only types of supernaturals," I said slowly, shaking

my head. It was too much to process, and my mind wanted to shut down, but I forced myself to breathe through the chaos of my thoughts.

“Correct.” Tevin narrowed his eyes. “And apparently the others have decided to show their faces for the first time in as long as I can remember. Our presence—with both the pack and the MC—usually deters them.”

It was as if all the stories I’d read over the years were coming to life. It should have been terrifying. But a part of me was absolutely delighted to know that fiction had a basis in reality.

Bringing my attention back to the massive white wolf in my lap, I ran my fingers through his fur. It was thick and soft, almost downy. As I trailed my fingers over his head, behind his ears, he let out a purr of contentment that vibrated through my whole body.

No wonder Ben was so big and strong in his human form. His wolf was a force to be reckoned with, powerful and mighty with—literally—superhuman strength. Leaning in closer, I ran my hands over his back and sides, mesmerized.

He was gentle and patient with me as I acclimated to the huge shift in everything I’d thought I knew about the nature of reality. Eventually, I lowered myself to the ground, and Ben settled in beside me, cuddling up to me as I continued to stroke his soft fur.

“This is crazy,” I murmured to him, to which he responded with another lick across my cheek, making me laugh.

When I looked up at Serene, she was watching us with a faint smile. “You haven’t screamed once since he first shifted. I think that’s a great sign. I was terrified of Tevin.” She reached over and cupped his cheek. “Sorry, but you know it’s true.”

Tevin laughed. “Yeah, the timing was bad.”

“What happened?” I asked as I scratched Ben behind the ears, earning a sigh of contentment from the wolf.

The couple exchanged glances, and Serene huffed out a laugh. “Let’s just say that I was in danger and Tevin came to my rescue—in wolf form. I passed out when he shifted back to human. I had no idea what was happening. Thought I’d lost my mind.”

I gasped, eyes wide. “I’m sure glad you guys were here with me because that thought has crossed my mind a time or two.”

“I can assure you that you aren’t going crazy.” Tevin smirked.

I stared down at the huge wolf beside me, and intelligent eyes stared right

back. I could almost hear Ben's thought process. Did I accept this part of him? Without hesitation, I knew that I did. I was still here, wasn't I?

So what did that say about my feelings for him? I swallowed hard at the realization that I wanted something more with him. Something real and true and committed. I wanted a relationship with this man who'd come into my life and turned it upside down, who had brought out the best in me and shown me a side of myself I didn't even know existed. Ben had brought excitement and adventure into my life. I wanted him—all aspects of him, including the fact he wasn't entirely human.

I chuckled to myself. Who would have thought?

As if he sensed what I was working through in my mind, Ben nuzzled me once more, then stood and backed up, shifting back to human form with an accompanying bright flash of light. I squinted, but when I opened my eyes fully again, he was standing before me looking both confident and vulnerable at the same time.

He quickly put his clothes on then came back to help me to my feet and sit beside me at the table. I couldn't stop staring, but sensing he needed some type of sign of assurance that I accepted this part of him, I reached out and took his hand, threading my fingers through his.

He smiled then, and I wondered if I'd imagined the vulnerability I thought I saw because he was back to being his cocky self once more. I grinned right back at him.

"Well, now that we have that out of the way," he said, clearing his throat. "Let's find out more about this book."

"Agreed." Tevin moved in closer, and we all stared at the book sitting in the middle of the table. "I want to know who these fuckers are."

"And what they want with Morgan," Ben practically growled. Those growly sounds he always made were making a lot more sense now.

"The man that came into the library a couple days ago gave me a really bad vibe." I shuddered as I recalled the way he'd gotten in my space, how I'd felt cornered up against that bookshelf. "The woman was nice enough. But the fact that she offered me money tells me there's an ulterior motive at play. What is it they want to know so badly?"

I pulled the book to me and flipped through it. "This first chapter seems to be an origin story. It gives details about some of the first supernaturals and where they came from."

Serene frowned. "I still don't understand why I can't see anything. How

can all of you read it yet I only see blank pages?”

“I’m not sure,” Ben said. “One more question to add to the list.”

I studied the images and words carefully. “It sounds to me like there was a plane of existence where all supernaturals came from—even shifters. That plane no longer exists, but it was a magical place. No humans.”

Ben scooted in closer as we moved on to the second chapter. “There has to be something in here to give us a clue why these others are showing up here.”

“Look.” I pointed to an image that gave off a dark and despairing vibe. “This depicts some type of fall from grace.” Reading quickly, I gathered the gist of the chapter. “Apparently there were two types of supernaturals who lived in this other reality, which sounds like it was practically paradise. They got greedy, wanted more.”

“Sounds about right,” Tevin muttered.

“They called themselves the Fallen,” I continued. “They wanted what the humans had in our plane of existence, but not everyone was on the same page. It eventually sparked a war, which ultimately destroyed the supernatural plane.”

Serene shuddered. “I don’t like the sound of that. Enough power to destroy an entire reality?”

Tevin wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and I looked at Ben. If these two supernaturals had shown up at the library looking for me, what else might they be interested in? Was I still safe? Suddenly, I just wanted to stay right here where no one could come close to me.

But just then, a wail from down the hallway pulled me out of my thoughts. The baby.

Serene got to her feet. “Midnight feeding time,” she said with a sigh. “Looks like this will have to wait.”

“It’s getting late anyway.” Ben stood as well. “Let’s go back to your place, Morgan?”

I nodded wordlessly as I stared up at him. I didn’t really want to leave, but what choice did I have? At least I’d have Ben by my side. Maybe he’d stay the night again.

Ben turned to Tevin. Serene had already disappeared down the hallway. “We’ll touch base with you tomorrow and figure out where to go from here.”

“Sounds good. Be careful.” Tevin stared hard at Ben, some silent communication passing between them. Ben nodded, grabbed the book, then

reached for my hand and led me outside.

After Ben secured the book in a compartment on his bike, he swung his leg over and helped me climb on behind him. I wrapped my arms around his waist, resting my head against the smooth, cool leather of his vest. I was suddenly very tired, the adrenaline that had been pumping through my veins all evening finally abating, leaving me drained.

So much had happened tonight, and I still had a million unanswered questions. I tried not to dwell on them too much though as Ben revved the engine and sped off down the road. I simply enjoyed the feeling of riding behind my man, instinctively knowing he'd keep me safe at any cost.

I didn't know where our relationship was going, or what the future held, but I did know that I was important to Ben. He wouldn't have revealed his deepest secret if he didn't trust me. For now, that would have to be enough.

I was lulled into a sense of calm as we rode through the empty streets. There was nothing but the cool night air and the warmth of his body, and for a while, I was able to relax.

All too soon, that false security was shattered, though. The minute we pulled up to my house, I knew something was wrong by the way Ben's body stiffened. He sniffed the air, his jaw clenching and eyes narrowing as he climbed off the bike and helped me to my feet.

"What's wrong?" I whispered, fear spiking my pulse.

"I'm not sure yet. I scent something. Just stay behind me."

Ben grabbed my hand and led me toward the house, making sure to keep me safely tucked behind him. I could barely hear anything as blood rushed through my head, roaring in my ears as adrenaline dumped into my veins once more. I'd thought I liked all the excitement and adventure, but now I wasn't so sure. The world as I knew it was changing rapidly. Wolf shifters existed, as well as mysterious books laced with magic that I could somehow decipher? It was almost too much to process in one night, but I couldn't fall apart just yet.

I tried to peek around Ben's massive frame as we walked up the steps to my apartment. Instantly, I saw that my front door was ajar. The lock had been busted. Peering into the darkness inside, I couldn't see a thing.

"Can you see in the dark?" I murmured, my voice shaking.

"Not as well as in wolf form." His voice was so low I had to strain to hear him. "But better than you can for sure." He held a finger to his lips as we crept closer to the door, and I willed myself to be as quiet as possible, barely

even breathing.

Going completely still, Ben inhaled deeply several times before nodding. “Whoever was here, they’ve been gone for a while.”

He kicked the door open, pausing for a moment just to be sure, then stepped inside and flipped the lights on.

I gasped, bringing shaking fingers to my mouth. “My home...”

It had been destroyed. Drawers and cabinets were open, their contents strewn all over the floor. The couch and chair were shredded to pieces.

As if someone had been searching for something. Immediately, Ben went right back outside, pulling me along with him, and headed straight to the bike to retrieve the book.

“I don’t know if they were looking for this, but I’m not taking any chances,” he growled, tucking the book under his arm before we went back to the apartment.

“Are you sure they’re gone?” I knew Ben would protect me, but I was on edge. My personal space had been invaded, my sense of security shattered.

“They’re gone. But we need to call the cops.” He grimaced. “Not my favorite folks to deal with.”

I could imagine. His line of work was already questionably shady. “Are you sure?”

He nodded. “We have to act as if things are normal. You can’t not report something like this, not unless you want to give it away that we’re onto these guys.”

“Okay.”

As soon as I agreed, Ben was pulling out his phone, leaving me to stare helplessly at the mess. How could I ever get my home back in order after this? How would I ever feel safe again? I really just wanted to head right back to the safety of the woods and the wolf pack, ironic as that was.

I walked around, not even knowing where to start. Then it hit me. “Pep? Where are you?” My voice was strained as I fought the rising panic. “Peppermint?”

Ben ended the call and frowned. “What are you looking for?”

“My cat, Peppermint.”

Ben sniffed the air. “Let’s check your room.”

I definitely didn’t want to go in there. What other destruction would I find? Ben went in ahead of me. “She’s in here,” he called out. “And they didn’t touch your bedroom.”

“I never took the book in there. Maybe they could sense that?”

“Maybe.”

When I walked into my room, I had to laugh, despite my circumstances. Peppermint was hiding under the bed and Ben was lying flat on his stomach, trying to coax her out.

“Not sure she’s going to respond to the big bad wolf,” I joked.

Ben cut his eyes toward me, a touch of humor lighting their depths. “Glad you can laugh about it. I was afraid for a minute there at the cabin that I might’ve lost you completely.”

He stood, leaving Pep under the bed—she definitely wouldn’t be coming out anytime soon—and crossed to me, wrapping me in his arms.

“I’m here,” I whispered against his chest, drawing strength from his mere presences. “I don’t know if you could get rid of me if you tried.”

Ben pressed a kiss to the top of my head, holding me tightly. His voice was gruff when he said, “Well, that won’t be happening—ever.”

My heart swelled, despite our circumstances, as I felt the truth of his words.

A few minutes later, the cops showed up. We filed the report, Ben at my side the whole time, holding my hand and lending me his strength. The cops said they would look into the break-in, but I didn’t have a lot of hope. Not if we were dealing with supernaturals.

Once that business was wrapped up and Ben and I were alone again, he said, “I’m not leaving you tonight. I don’t want you to be alone.”

There was no room for argument in his tone, but that was fine by me. If he’d tried to leave, I would have begged him to stay anyway. Tonight had been too much, and I wasn’t sure I could handle being alone now. Not when I felt like I could come apart at the seams any minute.

“Thank you for being here for me,” I said as he wrapped me in his arms once more.

“Always,” he whispered, and despite everything, a sense of calm settled over me.

BEN

The police were useless.

They came in, exchanged a few surprised glances, then scribbled Morgan's version of events on their notepads. It didn't take a genius to see they were baffled. Brightenville was a peaceful town, a place where the most dangerous criminals were jaywalkers, and no one knew what to think of such a break-in. Something like this was almost unheard of.

The place had been trashed, but no valuables had been taken. Morgan's laptop remained on the living room table, her jewelry was left untouched, and her emergency fund—a thousand dollars kept in an envelope tucked deep inside a drawer—had been found out but left behind. The police had chalked it up to a random act of vandalism and promised Morgan they'd have a patrol car making the rounds more often, but that was it. They were at a loss on what to do.

"Any chance they're right?" Morgan asked, arms wrapped tight around her chest. She followed the fading taillights of the police car with her gaze and, when the car finally turned a corner and disappeared from sight, she looked at me. "Maybe...maybe this had nothing to do with the book. Just a random act of vandalism."

She wanted to believe that.

For a split-second, I thought of lying and saying that yes, there was nothing she had to worry about. Thing is, Morgan already knew this had nothing to do with vandalism. The people who'd come here had been after the book, and she knew that just as well as I did.

"I wish that was the truth." I dug my fingernails into the palm of my

hands, my wolf's anger meshing with my own. I hated that Morgan's place had been ransacked like this, just as much I hated not knowing what we were dealing with here. "It's that damn book, Morgan. Whoever came in here was looking for it."

With a sigh, she walked back into the house and went straight for the book. It sat on the living room table, its brown leather cover contrasting with the chrome-like surface of Morgan's laptop. She ran her fingers over the cover and pressed her lips together. I couldn't read her mind, but I knew that she was struggling.

Morgan had lived her whole life as a regular human, completely oblivious to the fact beings like me existed, and now she'd been thrown into a whirlwind of supernatural events and creatures.

"But who would come here and do this?" She waved a hand at the chaos her living room had become. "This book was freely given to me. Why would these people come here and thrash my place?"

"I don't think whoever gave you the book is behind this," I said. "Whoever handled this book before has a very particular scent and this..." I looked at the overturned couch, the upended drawers, and the torn pillows. "Whoever did this left a different scent. We're dealing with different people here."

"People," Morgan repeated, as if the word had somehow lost its meaning. "More supernaturals, you mean. Can you tell what kind are behind this? I mean...are they werewolves, like you? Or something else?"

"Not werewolves," I replied. "They're something else, but I don't know what exactly. Their scent is charged with magic, but I don't recognize it. I never came across anything like it before." My fingernails dug deeper into my hands, my anger inflamed by my powerlessness. "It doesn't matter, though. I'm going to keep you safe, Morgan, and that's a promise."

"I know." She closed the distance between us and fell into my arms, her head snug against my chest. Her anxiety was still there, surrounding her like a dark aura, but I could feel her relaxing all the same. She didn't understand what was going on, but she believed my promise.

"You'll be okay," I whispered, one hand on the nape of her neck as I held her close. "Tevin and I are already here, and I'm going to ask some of my men to come join us. Give me a day and I'll have eyes on everything that's happening in this town. I'm going to get to the bottom of this, one way or another."

“I’m just glad you’re staying here.” She whispered softly, eyes half-lidded as she looked up at me. “I couldn’t bear staying alone, not after this.”

“I’m right here.” I kissed her forehead, then the tip of her nose. “And I’m not going anywhere.”

“Then something good has come out of this.” She hugged me even more tightly and kissed my cheek. “I’m just going to get changed. You want to come with me?”

“You go ahead,” I said. “I need to make a call.”

One quick smile and she was off, tiptoeing between the mess on the hallway. Once she was inside her bedroom, I put the overturned couch back in place and sat down on a slashed cushion. No more than thirty seconds later and I had my phone pressed against my ear, Charles’ voice coming at me from the other side of the line.

“How’s it going?” he asked me, not a hint of worry in his voice. “Enjoying your time off? Gotta say, we miss you ‘round here. The boys have been—”

“Charles,” I interrupted him, “I’m going to need some help here.”

“What’s going on?” His tone changed almost instantly, acquiring that sharp professionalism that had made Charles into my trusted beta. “Is something wrong?”

“I guess you can say that,” I admitted. “Charles, I...”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve found my mate here.” It was better to come out and say it. Sure, I’d given Tevin a lot of shit when he brought a human mate into the packlands, but what the hell—I couldn’t lie to my men. Not now, not ever.

“A mate? Is she...?”

“She’s human, yes,” I replied. “Look, I know the boys might not like it, especially after the way I handled things with Tevin, but—”

“I wouldn’t worry if I were you,” Charles said. “The boys like Serene, and I’m sure they won’t mind having another human around here. Besides, you’re the Alpha. No one’s going to question you on this. And if you don’t mind me saying it...” He cleared his throat, buying enough time to choose his next words. “It was about damn time. You’re the Alpha, and an Alpha needs his mate.”

“It’s the other way around.” My fingers tightened around the phone, so much I could hear the plastic creak. “Right now, it’s my mate who needs me. I’m not sure what’s going on here, but someone’s stalking her.”

“Someone?”

“Supernaturals,” I said past gritted teeth. “They’re after a book that’s in her possession. They’ve already trashed her place, and who knows what they might do next. Look, I don’t know much, but I don’t like the way things are going. I want you to gather the boys and ask for a couple of volunteers.”

“You think things might go south?”

“I’m not sure,” I replied, “but if that happens...I want to be ready.”

“I’ll talk with Scott and Fenrin. They can handle themselves in a fight.”

“Good.” Aside from Tevin, Scott and Fenrin were probably the most capable members of the pack, especially when it came to violent situations. Fenrin was better with a gun, in part due to his military past, but Scott also knew how to take care of things with his fists. Those two would make a good team. “See if they’re up to it and send ‘em my way.”

“I’m on it.”

I threw the phone onto the couch and raked one hand over my face. What a clusterfuck of a situation this was. I’d spent my whole life spearheading a pack and a MC, and I knew how to deal with dangerous situations better than anyone else, but this was different. I wasn’t dealing with the disgruntled alpha of some other pack, nor was I dealing with some unruly MC who wanted to stake a claim on our territory. I was dealing with a fucking question mark, and that made me nervous.

With a groan, I rose to my feet and went into the bedroom. I knocked once but, when Morgan didn’t answer, I pushed the door open.

“What the...?”

A ball of fur slipped out of the bedroom, hissing as it made his way past me, and rushed into the half-destroyed kitchen. Finally, the elusive Peppermint made his appearance. With a shrug, I entered the bedroom and closed the door behind me.

Morgan had already changed into her loose sleeping shirt, the hemline barely reaching her knees. Sitting at the edge of her bed, she had the book lying flat on her legs, and she was looking down at it with a vacant gaze. There was a faint glimmer in her eyes, and a lone tear rolled down her cheek.

“Hey,” I whispered, sitting beside her. “What’s going on? I’m here, Morgan. I’m right here.”

“It’s just...” She bit on the corner of her lip and closed her eyes. “It’s just too much. This whole thing is out of control. Twenty-four hours ago, I didn’t know this stupid book existed, nor did I know werewolves were real, and

now...now *someone* has broken into my house, and there's no telling what they're capable of."

"Morgan, I—"

"I mean, werewolves? Supernaturals? I didn't even believe those were real when I was a child, but then you went ahead and turned into a freaking wolf!" The tears kept on rolling down her face, and a muted sob had her shaking. I acted on instinct and wrapped my arms around her, eager to protect her from the world. If only I could ease her pain, take it into my hands and grind it into dust...

"I don't understand any of this," she continued, struggling to get the words out. "I should've been afraid of you. I should've been terrified, but I wasn't. None of this makes any sense, and I don't know what to think. I'm scared, Ben."

"I know you are." I pulled her into me, and she laid her head on my shoulder. "We'll sort it out, Morgan. Together."

If I were honest, I had no idea how we were going to sort anything out. How was I supposed to find answers when I didn't know the right questions to ask? I didn't even understand why Morgan could read the book while Serene only saw blank pages.

And yet, I knew I wouldn't stop—Morgan needed me to find answers, and I'd be damned if I wouldn't try my hardest.

"Thank you," she breathed out, her voice still trembling. "I'd be lost without you." Before I could say a thing, she laid both hands on my chest and hooked her fingers on my shirt. She reeled me in, her eyelids fluttering, and pressed her lips against mine. I offered no resistance. I met her halfway, our lips fitting just right.

I grabbed the book, set it on the bedside table, and cupped Morgan's face with both hands. "You're my world, Morgan," I whispered, the words pouring out of me. "I will do anything to protect you. I will do anything to make you happy."

"Anything?"

"Anything."

"Then kiss me."

I did as I was told, my mouth returning to hers. We fell onto the bed, the mattress creaking under our weight, and I let my hands roam down her body. She felt good, every inch of her, and my heart picked up the pace. My fingers met the hemline of her shirt and, without a moment's hesitation, I pulled it up

and over her head. Morgan didn't have a bra on, and my eyes were immediately drawn to the perfect shape of her breasts, her rosy nipples beckoning me.

"You're perfect," I half-whispered, half-growled, allowing my lips to trail down her neck and up the rising curve of her left breast. Carefully, I sucked her nipple into my mouth and twirled my tongue around it, allowing her scent and taste to filter into my brain. My wolf came alive at once, his uncontrollable energy flooding me like acid, and my whole body turned into a raging furnace.

My cock grew hard, fighting against the embrace of my jeans, and the whole world went out of focus. Then and there, only Morgan existed, her presence like a lighthouse in the fog. Her body was all that mattered, the warmth that slipped from her skin and into mine driving me absolutely crazy.

"I love every inch of you," I whispered into her ear, my hand slipping between her legs. I cupped her drenched underwear and Morgan responded at once, bucking her hips at me and pressing her aching pussy against my palm. Wanting more—so much more—I ripped her underwear off her body and caressed her inner lips. She was as wet as I was hard, the warmth coming off of her body turning into a searing heat.

"Then take me," Morgan whispered back at me, flattening her palm between her legs. She grabbed my rock-hard erection, her fingers like hooks over my jeans, and looked straight into my eyes. "Make me yours, Ben."

I had no words for that.

I just held her gaze and, as slowly as I could, I slipped one finger past her inner lips and into the warmth of her body. Morgan's eyes rolled in her orbits, a moan escaped from her lips, and she arched her back. Her body was drawn like a violin's string, taut and ready for music.

"Oh, God," she moaned, her voice filling the room like magic. Never mind the unseen energy that made supernaturals real—her voice, trembling and brimming with ecstasy, was *true* magic. "I want more, Ben. I want—oh!"

I slipped one more finger inside her and she screwed her eyes shut, the lines on her face turning into deep sulks of pleasure. She threw her head back, arching her spine to its limits, and then collapsed onto the mattress when I draped my thumb over her clit. Her whole body convulsed, her muscles spasming at random, and her moaning turned into a high-pitched scream that rang deep inside my ears.

"That was..."

“That was nothing,” I said, slowly pulling my fingers out. “We’re just getting started.”

She used her elbows to prop herself up and dragged her teeth over her bottom lip. “Is that so?” she purred, grabbing the collar of my shirt to reel me in. Once I was kneeling over her naked body, she put her hands to my belt and unbuckled it, pulling it free from its loops with a swift motion. She threw my belt onto the floor, then flattened her palm against my stomach and slid it down, her delicate fingers finding their way into my jeans.

“Oh,” she whispered, her eyes widening in surprise. “You’re so...”

“I’ll be gentle,” I promised her.

“But not too much.” She tightened her fingers around my cock and offered me a devious grin. Before I could respond, she started flicking her wrist, her fingers going up and down the length of my hardness.

“Fuck,” I muttered, crazy with lust. “You’re driving me insane.”

“And that’s exactly what I want.” She pulled her hand back, then tore at my shirt like a wildcat, her fingers tugging at the fabric and brushing against my pectorals and abs. I kicked my boots off, she pushed my jeans down, and then it was just my boxers on the way.

“You’re tall, big, and strong,” she whispered, running her index finger over the contour of my cock, “but this...” She grabbed my cock over my boxers and stroked it, the coming and going of her fingers driving me to the edge of insanity. My wolf was snapping inside me, his fangs out, and it took all I had not to lose control.

Claim her, my wolf growled, claim her now!

I wanted to, I truly did, but I had to resist that urge. Had to keep my wolf at bay. The last time I’d believed I had control of him when it concerned a human, the result had been a river of tears and blood.

I couldn’t let that happen again.

Not with Morgan.

“Make my yours,” she repeated, slowly pulling my boxers down. My cock sprung free, as hard as it had ever been, and Morgan went on the offensive. Gripping it by the root, she leaned into me and opened her mouth wide. Her lips touched my flesh and I closed my eyes, feeling so overwhelmed I couldn’t even think straight.

With a sigh, I laid my hands on her head, red locks of hair spilling from between my fingers, and surrendered to the pendulum motion of her mouth. It was the most intense sensation I’d ever experienced, and yet...I wanted *more*.

“Now,” I growled, pushing Morgan back until my cock slipped out from between her lips. I pushed her back onto the bed, hooked my hands on the back of her knees, and dragged her toward me. She responded right away, lacing her legs around my waist once I was within reach, and threw her arms around my neck. Reeling me in, she crushed her mouth against mine.

“Now,” she repeated, digging her heels into the mattress. She bucked her hips at me, pressing her wetness against my hard cock, and my whole body felt as if it’d caught on fire. My wolf’s energy had grown wild and fierce, so much that it drowned out all of my thoughts, and I straddled the thin line between man and beast.

Think, Ben, I chided myself. Think!

Blinded by lust, I still managed to reach my jeans and grab a condom from my pocket. I tore the wrapper as fast as I could and Morgan did the rest—she took the condom from my hands and unrolled it down my length.

I cupped her breasts with both hands, let my fingers slide down to her belly, then grabbed my cock and angled it down. Once my hardness was pressed against her pussy, I held my breath and eased myself on. She was incredibly tight, the warmth of her inner walls like a balm, and it was a miracle I didn’t come right then and there.

“This feels…” I let every inch of me go deep inside her body, then rested my forehead against hers and looked into her eyes. “You feel so fucking good, Morgan.”

“Yes,” she merely said, her fingernails like claws on my lower back. Gently, she bit on my bottom lip as she pulled me in, and I showed no hesitation. I started building a rhythm—gentle and caring at first—and let it reach a frenzied crescendo. Our bodies fused, whatever barriers existed between us fading into nothingness, and we became one.

I moved my hips in tandem with hers, my instincts dictating the pace, and I ravaged her as if my life depended on it. Morgan’s voice flooded the room, her moans and screams of ecstasy bouncing off the walls, and that just made me go even harder.

I lost track of time.

Seconds turned into minutes, and minutes turned into a long, feverish night.

“Ben,” she hissed all of a sudden, her fingernails turning into daggers. “BEN!”

She became tighter around my cock, squeezing it so tightly I could barely

thrust, and her legs turned into a vice. I didn't have to think—my body knew exactly what to do. I thrust one final time, driving my cock as deep inside her as I could, and I held my position as Morgan started trembling in place.

“Come for me,” she moaned, her hands falling from my back and to her side. She bunched up the sheets in her hands, her expression one of pain-turned-pleasure, and I knew I couldn't resist her command. I let out a sharp exhale and surrendered to the moment.

“Morgan,” I whispered, the whip of pleasure cracking against my body, mind, and soul. “Morgan...” My cock twitched against her inner walls, unleashing pleasure all over my body, and I came *hard*.

I closed my eyes and saw nothing but stars, tiny sparks of light dancing behind my shut eyelids. Breathing hard, I rolled to the side and sprawled my limbs. My brain was overloaded, struggling to process all that was happening, and whatever filter existed between my mind and mouth was no longer in place.

I rolled to the side, let my eyes fall on the woman that had conquered my heart, and kissed her cheek.

“I love you, Morgan,” I said, not a trace of hesitation in my voice. “You are my one and only. You are my mate.”

“I'm your...mate?” She repeated, the silken curtain that had fallen over her eyes lifting up. Slowly, she brushed a stray lock of hair away from her face and looked into my eyes. “What does that mean?”

“Every shifter has a mate,” I replied. “It's the one person he's meant to spend his whole life with.”

“But how can you be sure of that?” She ran her fingers through my hair, her touch tender. “I feel different when I'm with you, but—”

“I'm sure,” I said.

“Because of tonight?”

I smiled. “Tonight was incredible...but I already knew you were my mate.”

A pause, then a hint of a smile.

“How long have you known?”

“Since the first time I laid eyes on you.” I brushed my fingers against her cheek, my thumb going over her lips, and kissed her forehead. Her eyes betrayed her confusion, and there was even a hint of fear in there. She didn't know what being a mate entailed, and that scared her. “This doesn't change anything, Morgan. I just wanted you to know.”

She remained silent for a moment, then nodded and nestled up to me.

The night lulled our tired bodies past the veil of unconsciousness, and we fell asleep in each other's arms.

MORGAN

“I just don’t see how I can work today, Ronnie. I’m so sorry.”

“Girl,” she said through the phone, “don’t even be sorry about it. Seriously. But are you sure you’re okay? I’m worried about you. Do you have any idea who would have broken in to your apartment?”

I hesitated, not sure how much information I should give her, and ultimately decided she’d be safer the less she knew. I went with something vague, not wanting to outright lie to my friend. “The police are investigating.”

Ronnie blew out a breath. “Okay. But be careful, promise?”

“I promise. I have Ben here with me, so I feel safe.”

She made a little humming sound. “Now that’s something I’m going to want details on, but it can wait.”

I laughed. “You can count on it.”

“Just let me know if there’s anything I can do, okay?” She sounded genuinely concerned, and my heart was full as I realized I really did have true friends who cared about me. It was starting to get hard to remember why I’d pushed everyone away for so long.

“I will. And thank you, Ronnie.”

I hung up and settled back into bed, some of my nerves settling now that I’d taken care of my work situation for the day. I’d thought going in might be good for me, a nice distraction from the chaos my life had become, but ultimately I decided I needed a day to recover. To process.

After all, the man I was falling for—the man who said I was his mate—was a freaking wolf shifter. How the hell was I supposed to come to terms

with that? Things had happened so fast yesterday that I hadn't had time to think through any of it.

What did being Ben's mate even entail? Was it like marriage, or something different, something more? We'd have to talk about it at some point. Everything was changing, and there was still so much I didn't understand. Part of me wondered if it had all been some crazy dream. After all, people didn't just turn into wolves. Except they did.

And Ben was apparently the Alpha of the entire pack, which sounded like a huge responsibility. We'd known each other for such a short time. How had this become my life?

Feeling my stress levels ratchet up, I pushed all the questions away for now. Instead, I focused on more positive things—like the mind-blowing orgasms Ben had given me last night. Despite the craziness of the day, that part had been perfect. I'd never felt so in tune with a man, and he'd known exactly what my body needed.

I bit my lip, my body heating at the memories. Maybe Ben was up for distracting me a little more this morning.

Just then, he walked into the bedroom with a plate piled high with freshly cooked pancakes and a side of fruit in one hand, a mug of steaming-hot coffee in the other.

"Oh my god, that smells delicious," I moaned, sitting up and eagerly reaching for the coffee. I cupped my hands around the mug, the warmth seeping into my hands, and took a deep inhale. There was nothing like that first whiff of morning coffee after a long night.

Ben grabbed a chair from the corner of my room and pulled it over to the edge of the bed so he was facing me, then helped fluff my pillows so I could sit comfortably while I ate.

"You're going to spoil me if you aren't careful," I said before taking my first sip of rich, smooth coffee. I hummed. "Delicious. I could get used to this."

"Well, you better." Ben produced a tray, which he set over my lap, then handed me the plate of pancakes and fruit. "Because you deserve to be spoiled. If I have my way, I'll treat you like a princess every day for the rest of your life."

My heart leaped at that statement. He really was talking about a future together. I wanted to ask him more about what it meant to be mates, but I held myself back. We had a good thing going right now, and I didn't want to

screw it up by pressing the subject. It seemed like a pretty serious commitment, even more so than a human marriage from the bits and pieces I'd gathered. We had plenty of time, and those questions could wait. Besides, the pancakes smelled so tempting that I picked up the fork and knife and dug right in.

I moaned around the mouthful of perfectly moist and fluffy goodness. "Where did you learn to cook like this?"

Ben chuckled. "So glad you like them. I learned the hard way that if you want to keep wild wolves at bay, you feed them. This was my grandma's recipe."

"It's amazing." I sank back against the pillows, savoring my breakfast. "Did you already eat? Do you want some?"

"I'll have a bite or two if you don't mind."

Spearing the stack of pancakes with my fork, I held a large bite up for him. He ate the whole thing in one gulp, and I had to laugh. "You eat like an animal."

"Ha ha." But Ben grinned. "Only because I need my energy."

I smiled, feeling more content than I had in a long time, despite everything that happened yesterday.

"So, what's the plan for the day?" I took another sip of coffee. "I called in, and Ronnie said she'd cover for me."

Ben nodded. "Good. You need to take it easy. Plus, I want to keep an eye on you. Some of my best wolves are coming to town today to provide extra protection for you."

I swallowed down my panic. "You really think that's necessary?"

Ben must have sensed my fear because he reached out and took my hand, bringing it to his lips. "I'm not taking any chances where you're concerned. They're going to stay at the motel where I've been sleeping and keep an eye out for any suspicious activity in town. I'll also have someone watching over your apartment. Plus, I have some club business I need to take care of. I need to know you're safe when I'm not able to be by your side."

I nodded. It made sense, even though the idea of needing protection alarmed me. I had Ben, though. As well as his pack mates. And I knew they would keep me safe.

"I do need to go meet them at the motel soon, though," he added with a sigh. "We need to start making a game plan. After the way you've been targeted, I'm considering these supernaturals to be a threat to my pack. I'll

grab my things while I'm there and start staying here with you now." He paused. "If that's okay."

"It's more than okay." I'd be happy if he never left my side again, especially in light of all the unknowns and the potential threats, but that was irrational. I'd lived my life in fear for so long, and I'd only just started learning how to step out of my comfort zone and be brave. I didn't want to be a helpless damsel, so I forced the next words out. "I'll just stay here and work on translating the book while you do that."

Ben grimaced. "I don't know, Morgan. I'd feel better if you came along with me."

Me too. But I needed to prove to myself that I'd made progress. I wanted to be Ben's equal, not some pitiful, weak human who couldn't even stay home alone for an hour.

"I'll be fine. I promise. It's daytime, the cops already know about the break-in. I really don't think I'm at risk."

Ben released a heavy sigh and scratched the back of his neck. "Are you sure? I don't know..."

"I'm sure. In fact, I insist. I need to get this translation taken care of, anyway."

He nodded reluctantly, but ultimately gave me a kiss on the cheek, promised he'd be back in under an hour, then left to take care of business. I finished up my breakfast and took a quick shower, then got dressed and settled in on my couch with the book and some notebook paper.

If it weren't so frighteningly real, I might have found the story contained in the ancient tome interesting. Chapter three continued on where the first two had left off, with the supernaturals having destroyed their plane. They were now in this plane, battling each other for territory and power.

As far as I could deduce, based on the descriptions of the world at the time this was happening, this was in ancient times. I paused in my note-taking, hardly able to believe that supernaturals had existed alongside humans for much of recorded history.

The supernaturals were actually the gods of old, the ones who were prayed to and beseeched for mercy and blessings. If the humans were good enough and pleased the gods, aka the supernaturals from the other plane, they would bestow gifts upon them and grant them power.

The chapter continued with a description of the decline in both numbers and power of the supernaturals. Humans weren't as easily manipulated as the

supernaturals had believed, and the takeover of the planet didn't go according to plan. Over time, their numbers dwindled. They weren't able to reproduce nearly as quickly as humans, and before long humans vastly outnumbered any other beings. By the time the modern age arrived, the supernaturals were so few that they kept to themselves, not wanting to mingle with the rest of the population.

I reviewed my notes, intrigued by the history, and went to grab my laptop to start writing up a report of the first three chapters for the mystery woman who'd given me the task in the first place. Just as I settled back down on the couch, the doorbell rang.

Panic seized me, my chest tightening and my pulse racing, and I jumped to my feet, not sure what to do. But that was silly. It was probably just a delivery. After all, why would a bad guy politely ring the bell?

Or maybe it was the police, back with more information. I went to the door and pulled it open. On my doorstep was another unnaturally tall man, beautiful just like the other, but not nearly as creepy as the first one had been. Still, something was off about him. He stood too still, saw too much, and I immediately regretting opening the door.

Keeping my hand on the knob, ready to slam it in his face at the slightest indication that something wasn't right, I demanded, "What do you want?"

He smiled slowly. "Oh, there are many things I want, Morgan Reign." I shuddered at the way he looked me up and down. "But what I want most of all is the book in your possession. It doesn't belong to you. You must give it back so I can return it to its rightful place."

"Sorry, that's a hard no." I moved swiftly, pushing the door shut. But he was faster. He stuck his foot in the doorjamb, then flung the door back with such force that it bounced against the inside wall.

I gasped, instinctively stepping back. Why had I answered the door in the first place? But regret was a distant second to the fear that now coursed through me. I slunk back into the kitchen as the man entered my home, his eyes taking everything in before they settled on the book I'd left on the couch.

He made a move toward it, and panic seized me. No, he couldn't take it. There were probably answers in there that Ben and the pack needed. Things that would help them better assess the threat to the pack so they could figure out how to eliminate it. Moving on autopilot, I reached for the gun I kept hidden in a cookie jar on my kitchen counter. I'd hoped I'd never need it, but

I was beyond grateful that I'd used to my experience with Aiden to take precautions and invest in protection.

Holding it up, I aimed it at the stranger's chest. "Put your hands up."

It came out a lot weaker than I hoped, and adrenaline had my hands shaking.

The man did stop and turn to look at me, but then he simply laughed, a wicked glint in his eyes. "You don't even know what to do with that thing. Be a good girl and put it down."

I drew in a steadying breath and tried to remember my training. Slowly, I adjusted my aim to point right at his left eye. I was a good enough shot that I knew I wouldn't miss, and a headshot would take him out.

"I was the best in my class at target practice. I wouldn't test your theory." My voice was surprisingly steady now.

The man narrowed his gaze, assessing the situation, raising his hands slowly as he took a step back. Relief hit me, but a moment too soon.

In a move that was too fast to be human, he lunged at me, grabbing my wrist and twisting. The gun clattered to the floor, and the man laughed, the sound pure evil as he shoved me to the floor.

The breath was knocked from me as he lunged again, reaching for me, only this time his hand had morphed, his fingernails protruding like giant claws. He raked them across my thigh, and bright white pain clouded my vision as the claws ripped through my skin.

I cried out as blood gushed from my leg, the pain more intense than anything I'd ever experienced. Time seemed to slow down, everything happening in slow motion as every heart beat sent more blood flowing from my body. I couldn't move, couldn't think, couldn't even defend myself as the man came at me again with those deadly claws.

Just then, a flash of white appeared in the doorway, blurred as my vision went in and out of focus. *Ben.*

The wolf growled, deep and menacing, then flung himself at the intruder, fangs bared. He flew through the air, knocking the man away from me and pinning him to the floor. In a flash, the man had regained his footing, moving faster than anything I'd ever seen. Fear spiked, and white dots appeared before my eyes. I struggled to move, to reach for the gun and help in any way I could. But I was too weak. The pain from my injury faded, and my thoughts became muddled. I was vaguely aware that I was going into shock, and that I was losing a terrifying amount of blood. But I didn't even have the strength

to compress the wound.

The wolf and the man—a supernatural of some sort—fought it out, but they were equally matched and neither seemed able to get the upper hand. The man flung his hand out, sending a wave of light toward Ben, and he was pushed back by an invisible force, crashing into a wall.

The wolf roared, hunching down and readying to pounce. He knocked the man down again, gaining the upper hand as he plunged his canines into the man's shoulder. Somehow, the man kicked him away, then fled from the apartment, moving so fast he was a blur.

Or maybe that was my vision failing. I wanted to call out to Ben, but I was fading fast. Ben shifted, racing to my side and speaking, but I could hardly make out what he was saying. His voice sounded so far away.

I caught the words “artery” and “so much blood” but they barely meant anything to me anymore. Ben must have grabbed a towel because he was pressing down on my wound with what looked like a lot of force, but I was losing all sensation.

“Hang on, baby,” he said, his voice raw with fear, “an ambulance is on the way.”

He pressed a kiss to my forehead. Then everything went black.

BEN

“I ’m sorry.” The paramedic held one of his gloved hands up, the other still clutching the ambulance rear door. “Are you related to her? We’re only allowed to let family—”

“I’m her fiancé.”

A lie, but I didn’t care. Right now, honesty ranked very low in the list of the things that mattered. Before the paramedic could say anything else, I ducked under his arm and climbed onto the back of the ambulance.

Morgan was unconscious, her inert body strapped to the gurney. A splotch of bright red covered her jeans and blouse, and her breath was faint and ragged. I held her hand and draped my thumb over her wrist. Her heartbeat was fragile and delicate, but it was there.

“Please, sit back,” one of the paramedics said as he climbed in. He didn’t even glance my way. He just waved me away, as if I were an insect, and leaned over Morgan with a frown.

Reluctantly, I did as I was told and let them get to work. My wolf growled as I saw them cut through Morgan’s clothes with EMT shears, their movements precise and clinical, and I had to remind myself Morgan was in the hands of professionals. I knew some basic first aid, enough to make sure my men didn’t bleed out after a fight, but the cuts that damn creature had inflicted on Morgan were too deep. As much as it pained me, the only thing I could do for Morgan now was sit back and wait.

The ambulance zoomed through the streets at breakneck speed, its siren wailing loudly, and we got to the hospital in less than ten minutes. Again, I was ordered to stand back as Morgan was wheeled into the ER. Through the

glass doors, I watched as a team of nurses and doctors in blue scrubs surrounded Morgan, and then she was gone.

I spent the following hour in a daze.

I paced the waiting room like a caged tiger, my wolf's anger coursing through me like hellfire, and went as far as buying a pack of cigarettes from a convenience store across the street. Smoking had never really been my thing, but this time I relished it—the smoke burned its way down my throat and into my lungs, and the sudden influx of nicotine put a very momentary lid on my wolf's anger.

“Morgan Reign's fiancé?” A doctor in a blue surgical cap peeked out from the waiting room. He looked down at the clipboard he was carrying. “Sorry, the paramedics didn't get your name. Are you Morgan's—”

“That's me.” I crushed the cigarette butt under my heel and stood before the doctor. Somehow, I resisted the urge to shake the man by his shoulders. “How's Morgan? Will she be okay? Those cuts were—”

“Morgan's fine,” he said. “She has lost a lot of blood, and the cuts were deep, but she'll be all right. We're going to keep her overnight, just so we can keep an eye on her, but she'll be able to leave tomorrow.”

I let out a sharp exhale, the hundred-ton monster that had settled on my chest finally going away. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been this stressed. It felt as if there was a weight on my chest, crushing my ribs into my lungs and heart. To see Morgan in such a state, to know that I had failed her...it hurt.

“Would you like to see her?” the doctor asked me.

“Of course.”

I followed him down a maze of sterilized corridors, that deep scent of industrial cleaning products hitting my nostrils hard, and held my breath before stepping inside Morgan's room. She was still unconscious, but her wounds had been cleaned and dressed, and her old clothes had been replaced with a nondescript hospital gown. Her complexion was pale, and her breathing remained weak. Despite all that, she looked peaceful.

“She's sedated, so it might take a while before she wakes,” the doctor said before leaving. “The important thing is, she'll be okay.”

I sat down on the tiny metal chair beside the bed and held Morgan's hand. It was cold, but I still felt that electric presence of hers. It offered some comfort to know she was well, but my wolf's anger couldn't be tamed. I didn't blame him for it. Then and there, there was nothing but anger in my

heart.

I should have never left Morgan alone. How in the world could I have been so fucking careless? Pack and club business aside, that was a rookie mistake, one that had almost cost Morgan's life. If I hadn't gotten back to her place in time...

I stood up straight, suddenly remembering my fight. My enemy had been strong—far too strong for me to kill—but I'd wounded him. With some luck, maybe I could pick up his scent and find out where he was hiding.

Yes, my wolf said, pleased with my half-baked plan. *Find them, kill them. That's how we'll keep our mate safe.*

It was a violent solution, but this was a violent problem. My wolf wasn't always right, but this time I found no fault in his argument. Morgan would never be safe until this threat was eliminated, and that's exactly what I was going to do.

I leaned over Morgan and kissed her forehead.

"I'm going to fix this," I whispered. "I promise you."



"I CAN'T BELIEVE this fucking bullshit is happening here," Tevin snarled, shoving his helmet inside his Harley's underseat. He looked up at Morgan's house, hands on his hips, and shook his head. "I don't give a fuck who's behind this. We're gonna make 'em pay."

"We are." Scott's lips were a thin line, his brown eyes scanning the perimeter as if he expected for another one of those bastards to jump out from the shadows. He was as tall as Tevin, and he looked every bit as menacing. His leather jacket was hanging over his Harley's seat, and his oversized biceps were stretching his shirt's fabric to the limit.

"I'm glad you asked us to come." Fenrin rested his hand on his Glock in its holster, his face grim. He was slightly shorter than the other two, with a leaner physique, but that had never troubled him. Not the kind of guy to solve his problems with his fists, he preferred using bullets as a conflict-resolution tool. "These assholes won't even know what hit 'em."

"Don't get too cocky," I warned them. "We don't know what we're dealing with here. I've fought one of these assholes and I couldn't put him down. Whoever these fuckers are, they're strong."

“I like a challenge,” Tevin said, cracking his knuckles.

I nodded. “What about Serene? Do you think—?”

“Serene will watch over Morgan,” he cut me short. “She knows how to handle herself, and I gave her one of my guns. Besides, they’re at the hospital. I doubt anyone will try to attack them there.”

“Very well.” I turned on my heels and pointed toward the back of Morgan’s house. Our Harleys remained behind, silent protectors of an empty house. As much as we’d like to take them, there was no way we’d be able to track our prey in human form.

Once we were behind Morgan’s house and away from prying eyes, I got undressed and shifted, that familiar searing pain washing over my body. Tevin strapped the bag to my back, then they all removed their clothes and shifted.

Finally, I was leading my pack again.

With a low rumble on the back of my throat, I raised my muzzle and breathed in the crisp afternoon air. That supernatural scent remained as pungent as ever and, as fate would have it, it led straight into the woodlands that surrounded the park. The only time we risked being seen was when we crossed the street, but we were no pups—we simply waited for an opening, then dashed across the road and into the safety of the trees.

We didn’t rest.

We ran fast and hard, our overpowered limbs carrying us around the park and deep into the woodlands. We left Brightenville behind, blending in with the wilderness, and followed the supernatural’s invisible scent like bloodhounds. The only time I feared we’d lose his track was when our prey had crossed a creek; thankfully, luck was on our side. Wounded, the supernatural had continued on a straight line, and his scent remained as easy to follow as ever.

Where the hell have you gone? I wondered, the shadows growing long around us. We’d been running for three hours straight now, and were almost out of state lines. My lungs were on fire, my muscles were turning into concrete. Surely, a wounded supernatural couldn’t have gone much further than this...

That thought had barely crossed my mind when the supernatural’s tracks suddenly veered off into a barely visible trailhead. Our prey had gotten sloppier, probably thinking nobody would follow him this far, and we had started to notice his footprints and the broken branches and twigs he’d left

along the way. Not that it mattered. His scent was getting stronger by the minute, which was a good indicator—we couldn't be that far now.

I stopped on the trailhead and looked up.

The vegetation that surrounded the trail had been left to grow over it, probably to conceal it, but it was obvious this trail was being used regularly. I looked at my pack and they instinctively knew what to do. The four of us shifted back to our human forms and got dressed.

“Seems like the trail leads up,” Fenrin said, tucking his Glock on his waistband. He looked at the mountain that rose up ahead, the dark canvas of night stretching over it. “Maybe there’s a cavern? Judging by the amount of blood I can smell, I’m betting he’s holed up somewhere in the vicinity.”

“Agreed,” I muttered, already leading my men up the trail. Five minutes later and the trail had turned into a steep incline, crisscrossing all over the mountain’s jagged terrain. Just like Fenrin had predicted, it led straight into a cavern’s mouth. The scent here wasn’t strong—it was *overpowering*.

I stepped toward the cavern’s entrance, but Tevin laid a hand on my shoulder. “I’ll go first.” Stubborn as he was, he was also loyal to a fault, and he put my safety above his own. Not something I liked—as the Alpha, I wanted to be the one protecting my men—but he didn’t give me the time to argue. He just marched straight into the darkness.

Silently, the rest of us followed after Tevin, the shadows so dark they seemed to absorb the light. After just a few seconds, though, the path veered right, and we caught the flicker of flames up ahead.

“Stairs,” Tevin whispered, feeling at the rocky ground with his boot. “And they seem to lead—*what the fuck?*”

I caught up to him and peered over his shoulder. The stairs led into a cavernous hall, torches hanging from the smooth walls. At the center of it was an enormous stone altar, a crimson cloth draped over it. The place was completely bare, aside from the torches and altar...but it wasn’t empty.

“Fuck me,” Scott muttered, his words echoing my thoughts.

There were dozens, if not hundreds, of men and women standing there. A few wore hooded robes, others let their silky hair fall over their shoulders. They were all tall and slender, their features so precise they all seemed made of marble, and I could only think of a word to describe them—beautiful.

Terrifyingly beautiful.

“What the hell do we do?” Tevin looked back at me. “There are too many of them.”

It was true.

One of those fuckers had already given me enough trouble, and there was no way the four of us could face an entire army.

“We wait,” I replied, flattening myself against the wall. It was risky to be standing here, as one of those things could look up and see us at any moment, but I couldn’t leave this place without getting some answers. Besides, none of them were moving. They were just standing there, gazing at the altar in anticipation.

We didn’t have to wait long.

A robed man appeared from a side entrance and marched to the front of that army. He was dragging another man after him, and he dropped him on the steps that led down from the altar. My heart started beating harder—that second man was the one we’d followed here. His clothes were bloodied, his hair disheveled, and there were deep cuts on his shoulders and legs.

“We do not acknowledge failure,” the robed man said, his voice cavernous and smooth at the same time. It had a hair-raising quality to it, like fingernails on a chalkboard. “We do not accept failure.”

With a smooth and practiced movement, he pushed the folds of his robe aside and drew a gun from his hip. He pointed at the man kneeling before him, the bastard who’d attacked Morgan, and squeezed the trigger.

No one moved.

No one said a thing.

“If you fail,” the robed man said, addressing the crowd, “this is the fate you’ll meet.”

I’d seen everything I needed to.

I still didn’t know what they were after, but I knew they needed to be stopped. The four of us weren’t enough, but if I summoned the whole pack and led my own army of shifters back here...

One look at the others and we all peeled back from the stairs, stealthily moving back into the cover of the shadows. We retraced our steps back to the cavern’s entrance, then went down the mountain’s side, careful to be as silent as we could.

“Someone’s waiting for us just beyond the edge of the trees,” I said once we reached the base of the mountain, recognizing the scent I’d picked up from Morgan’s book. “Keep your eyes open. If this is an ambush, then—”

“You’re safe.” A woman emerged from the shadows, her voice smooth and calm. How she had crept up on us like this, I had no idea.

I shot my men a glance, but the woman just carried on talking.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she said, “but I mean you no harm. I’m here to talk about what happened. You’ve stumbled onto a mystery, after all, and I’ve come here to lift the shroud from your eyes.”

“Fuck your riddles,” Tevin growled, taking a step toward the woman. “We don’t give a fuck about who you or your friends are, and—”

“No.” I put my arm across his chest. “We need to know what’s going on.”

“Then will you come with me?” the woman asked, her eyes glimmering as she smiled. She was as beautiful as the others, her presence ethereal.

Instinct screamed at me not to trust her. This could easily be a trap. But I needed answers. These creatures were a threat not only to the pack and our territory, but to my mate. As the Alpha, I had to make sure those I cared for were protected, and this might be the only opportunity we’d get to learn more about our enemy. I didn’t see how I could refuse.

“Yes,” I replied, “we will.”

MORGAN

A beeping sound came to me from what seemed like very far away, but it was persistent enough to drag me from the depths of sleep. When I blinked awake, it took me a minute to understand what was going on.

Where was I?

The lights were dimmed, but it didn't take long for me to realize I was in a hospital—in a hospital bed to be exact, hooked up to the machine making the steady beat. My mind was hazy, but slowly, everything came back to me.

Finding out Ben was a wolf shifter, coming back to my place and finding it trashed, then the attack this morning.

I shifted then, trying to sit up. The last thing I remembered was Ben's frantic voice as he promised everything would be okay.

"Shh, it's okay," a soft, soothing voice said from nearby. I turned my head to find Serene sitting on the hospital room sofa, her phone in her hands. "Don't try to move. You're safe. You're okay."

"Where's Ben?" I croaked, my throat dry and my voice weak.

Serene studied me for a moment before saying, "They've gone to find answers."

Well, that didn't tell me much, but it was enough to make me worry. "Where? How?" I pushed to a sitting position, and Serene rose to her feet to pour me a glass of water.

"Take it easy, Morgan." Her tone was kind but firm. "I don't know any of the details. And honestly, it's probably better that way."

Panic pierced my chest. "That person—that creature, or whatever it was...he attacked Ben, too. Is he—?"

“Ben is fine. He’s the alpha of the pack for a reason. You don’t need to worry about him. All you need to focus on is getting better. Now, drink this slowly.”

I took the water she pushed into my hands, taking small sips. While Serene’s words were meant to soothe, I couldn’t help but worry. Ben had already come to mean so much to me in such a short time. If that supernatural had been a tough match for an alpha wolf, who knew what kind of trouble Ben and the others might find while they were looking for answers.

“It’s going to be okay,” Serene assured me once more, and I noticed my hands were shaking as I handed the water glass back to her.

“But what if they end up in trouble?”

Serene sighed. “I know how you feel right now. Scared, a little helpless, a lot freaked out. I’ve been there. But let me assure you, these men know what they’re doing. I’ve never seen a group of men stronger than these.”

I nodded but didn’t tell her just how close of a match that supernatural had been to Ben. “You don’t have to stay here. I’m sure you want to get back to the baby.”

“He’s okay for now. And I’m not leaving.” Serene offered me a warm smile. “I know what it’s like to be tossed into the middle of a world where you don’t belong—and don’t even fully understand. I’m happy to stay here with you as long as you need me.”

I bit my lip. I supposed she did know what I was going through, at least to an extent. “How do you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Deal with the worry and the fear? Deal with this life? I mean, I don’t know what it’s normally like, but it can’t be...well, normal.” I blew out a deep breath. “Does it ever get to be too much? Do you ever feel like the weakest link?”

I certainly did. I was a human who’d fallen into a world I wasn’t meant to be a part of. I didn’t have supernatural strength or the ability to fight off danger. I would always be a liability.

Serene regarded me for a moment, almost as if she were gauging how much I could handle, before nodding.

“I’m not going to lie to you. It’s not easy. The man I love is from an entirely different world that I didn’t even know existed. Knowing what kind of danger he faces regularly doesn’t do my heart any good.” She glanced down at her hands, clasped in her lap. “And then there’s the matter of not

fitting in. That's why Tevin and I have been spending time away from the packlands lately. It just became too much with all the female wolves..."

"What do you mean?" My chest tightened.

Serene sighed. "I'm the only human on the packlands. The only human mate that's existed in living memory. Well, now there's you, too. But the females wolves don't like me. They're constantly trying to challenge me in a fight. Like they have something to prove."

"Oh." That didn't sound promising.

She gave me a tight smile. "Yeah. And it's not like I even have the intention of becoming a wolf. I don't want to be changed. I want to remain human, but none of them seem to understand that. It's...a lot to deal with."

Great. Just when I was finally coming into my own and learning to deal with the trauma of my past, I was going to have to face a pack of wolves ready to challenge me? But still, despite the challenges Serene had faced, she'd stuck it out because of her mate. Because she loved him. Anyone could see just how much. It must have been worth it.

"Well, at least neither of us is alone in this strange new world," I said, offering her a smile of my own. Somehow, that made me feel better. And I did really like Serene. Maybe we could be friends too, now that I seemed to be getting this friendship thing figured out a bit.

Just then, there was a knock at the hospital room door, and in walked Tevin and Ben, both with their eyes a little wild until they landed on Serene and me, and saw we were safe.

"You're okay," I breathed as he came straight to my bedside and placed his hand on my cheek.

"You doubted me?" He gave me a cocky grin, then bent down and kissed me so thoroughly that I wasn't left with any doubts at all. This man cared for me, and I wanted him with my entire being. Danger and all, I'd take everything that came along with loving Ben.

Love? Was that too much, too soon? Maybe in any other relationship with any other man. Not just maybe—probably. But with Ben, it just felt right. Like we were meant to be. And according to him and all his talk of being mates, we truly were fated to be together.

"Come on, babe, let's go home," Tevin said softly to Serene, and the two of them crept out of the room to give Ben and me some privacy.

Ben broke our kiss and grabbed a chair, pulling it right up to my bedside before kissing my forehead and settling down with my hand cradled in his.

“Just rest for now. I’m not going anywhere.”

“I really am exhausted,” I admitted, and even though I didn’t want to go back to sleep, I found my eyelids drooping. When I woke again, the sun had moved into the western sky and Ben was slumped in the chair, snoozing away.

I took the opportunity to really study him, marveling all over again that this gorgeous, strong, sexy man was all mine. It seemed crazy, impossible even, that I would fall for a man like Ben, so hard and so fast. But I had. The longer I watched him, the more I knew that my impulsive feelings earlier were grounded in reality. I was falling in love with him, my very own real-life hero.

It wasn’t long after I woke that the doctor came in with discharge papers, and Ben woke up then as well.

“Thank you so much for everything, doc,” he said. “What can I do to help her recover?”

I smiled and bit my lip at his concern. I had a feeling he was going to fuss and fret over me until I was healed, but I was okay with that.

Once the discharge was complete, Ben helped me out of the hospital gown and back into my own clothes, then eased me into a wheelchair—I could still walk, thankfully there hadn’t been any major damage—but putting weight on my leg was too painful to endure just yet.

We took a cab back to my apartment, and Ben carried me inside. I caught a quick glimpse of Peppermint darting into my room and under my bed, hiding from Ben as usual, and I started laughing.

“What is it?” He quirked an eyebrow.

“I don’t think Peppermint—my cat—likes you very much.” In fact, I couldn’t remember her ever coming out when Ben was over.

He grinned wryly. “She can probably sense I’m part canine.”

I giggled at the thought as Ben settled me into my bed and tucked the covers all around me before kissing my cheek. Despite the fact I’d just been released from the hospital, his nearness had my heart picking up speed. Even the slightest touch from him instantly set my body on fire.

Ben stepped back from the bed. “I’ll just be out on the couch if you need me. I want you to get some rest.”

“What if I don’t want to rest?” I asked coyly, giving him an unmistakable look, hardly able to believe that I was being so forward. But then again, there were a lot of things that I never would have believed about my life just a few

weeks ago.

Ben cleared his throat, his eyes darkening. “You’re wounded, Morgan. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You aren’t going to hurt me. Besides, we can do stuff that doesn’t involve me moving my leg...” I wiggled my eyebrows, and Ben groaned. When I glanced down, I saw that he was already *very* aroused, just from my suggestion. “You know you want to.”

Ben chuckled a bit at that. “I always want you, Morgan, make no mistake about that.”

I bit my lip, liquid heat already pooling between my legs. Ben must have scented my arousal because the next thing I knew, he was gently settling himself beside me on the bed.

“I’m not going to be happy if I hurt you,” he began, but I silenced him when I cupped my hand around his hard cock through his jeans, eliciting another groan. “How the hell am I supposed to say no to you?”

“Easy. You don’t.” Then I made quick work of his zipper, tugging his jeans down until his cock sprang free. I took a moment just to admire it, running my fingers along the rigid length, exploring the velvet-covered steel as my breath became shallow and my need grew so strong that I simply couldn’t help myself.

I leaned over and took him in my mouth, drawing a shocked gasp from him that had me smiling around his soft tip.

“Morgan...” It was a warning and a plea, and I chose to ignore the first in favor of answering the latter.

I ran my tongue around the ridge of his cockhead, the flicked it over the top, savoring the salty flavor of him as my desire kicked into high gear. I wrapped my fingers around his shaft, stroking him slowly at first. Taking my time, wanting to enjoy this moment, I explored him with my mouth, tracing a line up and down his shaft before taking the tip of his cock into my mouth again. I sucked gently, drawing a needy groan from him, and I reveled in the feeling of making this big, strong man come apart for me.

I took more of him, inch by inch, feeling his body quake beneath me as I slowly dragged my tongue back up the underside of his cock before doing it all over again. I brought him closer and closer to the edge, still taking my time, but when his hands fisted in my hair, I couldn’t hold back. I followed my instinct and my own longing, and began pumping him faster, bobbing my head up and down in rhythm with my fist until he was groaning my name and

gasping for breath.

“*Fuck*, Morgan,” he ground out through gritted teeth. “Your mouth feels so fucking good.”

Pleased, I redoubled my efforts until he was barely hanging on by a thread. He reached down and cupped my chin, pulling at me gently. “I’m about to—”

I pushed his hand away, hollowing my cheeks and flattening my tongue, taking him even deeper. Wanting to feel his cum spill down my throat. He got the message loud and clear, and seconds later he swelled and throbbed, my name on his lips as he came.

When he was finished, he stared down at me in awe, his voice gruff as he said, “Do you have any idea how fucking amazing you are?”

And the next thing I knew, he was hovering above me, working my pants down my legs ever so carefully, then spreading my thighs wide. “Beautiful,” he murmured, running a teasing finger along my inner thigh.

Not too long ago, I would have been embarrassed by being on full display like this. But not with Ben. He made me feel settled and comfortable, even as he made me feel wild and crazy and desperate with need.

I wiggled my hips, that desperation taking center stage as he trailed circles from my inner thigh to just above my clit but never quite giving me exactly what I want.

“Ben,” I whined. “Please.”

“Tell me what you want,” he whispered, his breath dancing along my sensitive skin, sending shivers through my body.

“I...I want...” I bit my lip, never having said flat-out what I wanted. At least not out loud.

“Yes?” He pulled his fingers back to my thigh, and I groaned in frustration. He simply smiled, a wicked glint in his eyes.

“I want you to eat my pussy,” I manage to say before covering my face with my hands.

Ben laughed softly, pulling my hands back down and staring into my eyes. “With pleasure.”

That’s when I realized I had no reason to be shy here, no reason to be afraid of speaking my mind and saying what I wanted. I trusted Ben with everything. With my body, with my life, and most of all, with my heart.

Then he gave me exactly what I wanted, spreading my legs even wider—taking care to watch for my injury all the while—and lowered his mouth to

my pussy.

I cried out at the contact, every nerve ending in my body sparking to life, and I surrendered to his skilled touch, reveling in the way only he could make me feel. Higher and higher he drove me, his tongue working magic as he lapped at my clit then drove his tongue deep inside of me.

He took his time, driving me wild with need until I didn't think I could take it anymore. I gripped his head, threading my fingers in his hair, arching up into him as my orgasm rushed toward me like a tidal wave, knocking me back with the sheer force of its power. I dug my fingers into the sheets, his name a prayer on my lips as I came hard.

When my body was limp and satisfied, floating on a cloud of blissed-out pleasure, Ben climbed up beside me and held me close. As I drifted off once more, a smile on my face, I cuddled up to him, feeling safe and secure in the arms of the man I loved, pretty sure that nothing could be better than this.

BEN

It wasn't a dream.

I opened my eyes, the sunlight filtering through the curtains in Morgan's bedroom, and looked at the most beautiful woman on Earth. She was still asleep, her red hair splayed over the pillow, and her chest was rising and falling steadily. It was perfect.

She was perfect.

If only I could stay there forever, hiding under the sheets with Morgan without a care in the world. But that wasn't possible—somehow, the woman I loved was at the center of a supernatural conspiracy, and her life was on the line. Hell, judging by what I'd seen in that cavern, all of our lives were on the line.

Careful not to make a sound, I slipped out from the bed, threw some clothes on, and padded into the kitchen. Life was far from perfect, but I was hellbent on letting Morgan know I'd always take care of her...even if that meant doing something as simple as cooking her breakfast.

I was rummaging through the refrigerator and cabinets, looking for some eggs and a pan, when my phone started ringing. I grabbed it from my back pocket, half-expecting to see Tevin's name on the screen, but that wasn't it. The caller ID was blocked. Frowning, I unlocked the screen and held the phone against my ear.

"Mr. Sage," a smooth and ethereal voice said, "it's a pleasure to be talking with you again. I'm calling because I think it's time I've met Morgan officially. My colleagues and I need to know about everything she has learned."

I tightened my fingers around the phone.

It was the woman from last night—Nala. She had finally offered us a tiny glimpse of what was going on, but I still wasn't sure what to think. They wanted to speak to Morgan personally, to let her decide for herself if she would help them. I didn't like that one bit. After all, these damn supernaturals weren't to be trusted. I was certain they weren't telling me everything. But what choice did I actually have when it came to their interest in my mate? I couldn't hide Morgan from the world. She was important to these creatures, and they would just keep on coming until she deciphered everything in that fucking book.

"Your silence is telling, Mr. Sage," Nala said. "I will say it again: the last thing we want is for Morgan to get hurt. We just want to discuss what's happening with her. She deserves to know the truth, wouldn't you agree?"

"Fine." The word came out as a growl, but I didn't care. I could agree to a meeting, but that didn't mean I had to be polite about it. "Can you be here in two hours?" That'd give me enough time to call my men. If a supernatural was going to come visit, I wanted to have some muscle around.

"I will be there."

"Good." I jabbed my thumb against the screen, ending the call, and chucked the phone onto the couch. I had a bad feeling about this, but I was running out of options. As much as I wanted to raise a shifter army and unleash hell upon all of them, maybe there was a more peaceful way to resolve this. If all they wanted was for Morgan to transcribe the book, then maybe they'd leave her alone when she pulled it off.

I fired my men a quick text and, knowing breakfast would have to be postponed, I returned to the bedroom and sat beside Morgan. I brushed her hair away from her face and laid gentle kisses on her forehead and cheeks; it broke my heart a little to wake her up this soon, but it couldn't be helped.

"Ben?" She groaned softly, rolling onto her back. "What time is it? Isn't it early?"

"It's *too* early," I agreed, "but Nala—the woman I told you about—is coming here. It's time we know what's really happening here, Morgan." While I hadn't wanted to put a damper on our perfect night last night, I'd had to tell Morgan what happened—and that we hadn't seen the last of these creatures.

"Nala?" She knitted her eyebrows together, a shadow of concern in her eyes. With a frustrated groan, she pinched the bridge of her nose. "I wish I

didn't have to deal with any of it. I wish I could sleep the madness away."

"I wish I could help with that," I whispered, "but I can't. What I can do, though, is help you take a shower. A very long shower."

"I like that." She sat up, threw her arm over my neck, and pulled me in for a kiss. "I like that a lot."

Our shower was as long as I'd promised her it'd be, and it was only cut short by my men's arrival. Just a few minutes before Nala's arrival, we all gathered in the kitchen, the mood so heavy you'd think war was coming.

Morgan sat at the head of the table, quietly munching on scrambled eggs and pancakes, and I was leaning against the counter. Scott and Fenrin were by the door with dour expressions, looking like nightclub bouncers, and Tevin paced the room while muttering under his breath. He wasn't a fan of Nala, and he wasn't pleased I'd invited her in.

"If she tries something," he told me suddenly, "that's going to be the end of her. I'm not going to tolerate tricks or—"

"We're all here to keep Morgan safe," I interrupted him, "and none of us is going to let that woman get away with anything. Morgan just needs to hear what she has to say. Once that's done..." I shrugged. "Well, we'll see what happens then." I rolled my shoulders back, to try to ease some of the tension that had settled there and turned on my heel. "How about I make us some coffee? That woman shouldn't be long."

I'd barely finished saying it when someone knocked. Scott and Fenrin exchanged a nervous glance, and they opened the door after I nodded. Standing on Morgan's doorway were Nala and a man I didn't recognize, his features as unblemished as those of the other supernaturals.

"I know that man," Morgan whispered, straightening her back. "He was the one who first brought the book to the library." The color fled from her cheeks, and I could tell she wasn't pleased to see him here.

I was already thinking of kicking him out when the man smiled, showing us the palms of his hands. "We come in peace," he said. "It's just like Nala has told you. We mean you no harm. I mean...why would we want to hurt Morgan when she's the only one who can help us?"

"Let them in," I ordered Scott and Fenrin, and the two shifters stood aside. Their eyes, though, never left the newcomers, and I couldn't help but notice that Fenrin kept his hand on his Glock, ready to draw it at a moment's notice.

I got the book from the kitchen counter, laid it in front of Morgan, and sat

beside her.

“Speak,” I commanded our guests. “You told us you wanted to come tell us the truth together...so do it.”

“Very well.” Nala smiled and turned her attention to Morgan. “You’re probably wondering *what* we are.”

“I am,” Morgan agreed.

“We are fae,” Nala said.

Fae. I narrowed my eyes. As far as I knew, there were no fae remaining on Earth. But that would explain a lot about these mysterious people and their ethereal nature. I knew enough about the historic creatures, though, to know they spoke in riddles, and that what they said wasn’t necessarily what they meant.

“Magical and powerful creatures,” Nala continued. “Far more ancient than the human race. We’re endangered, though, and prefer not to draw any attention to ourselves. Even so, the humans still tell stories of us, our ancient existence a part of their myths and tales. Our world, though, is a thing of the past. Our population is dying, and it won’t be long before we go extinct.” She pointed at the book. “That right there...it’s all that’s left.”

“I don’t understand...” Morgan brushed her fingers over the cover, tracing the inlaid design with a careful gesture. “Why is an old book so important?”

“That book holds ancient knowledge,” Nala replied. “Knowledge that is essential to our survival. The problem is, it was written in a magical ink that only allows creatures with the sight to read it. Some humans and supernaturals can have the sight, such as you, but the trait has died out in fae a long time ago. There’s not a single fae who can read the words in that book.”

“I...I still don’t understand,” Morgan whispered. “Why me? There must be other people who can read it.”

“I could read parts of it,” I agreed, “and so could Tevin. Why go after Morgan? It’s not like she’s the only one who can decipher that stupid book.”

“Yes, there are more people with the sight,” Nala admitted, “but Morgan’s special.”

The man beside Nala cleared his throat, as if to stop her, and they exchanged a momentary glance. The assholes were debating just how much to tell Morgan, it seemed. Well, that was bullshit, and I wasn’t going to let that stand.

“You said you wanted to come here and tell Morgan the truth,” I growled. “So fucking do it.” I cracked my knuckles. “Or I will make you do it.”

“Very well.” Nala sighed, her eyes back on Morgan. “There’s fae blood running through your veins, Morgan. It’s diluted, so much that you don’t have any other powers except the sight, but it’s there.”

“That...” Morgan shook her head. “That’s not possible.”

“But it is,” Nala whispered, a smile dawning on her lips. “We can feel it.”

“But how could I not know?” Morgan’s voice dipped, becoming almost a whine, and I laid my hand on top of hers. “I’m normal! I’m just like any other woman you meet on the street. There’s nothing special about me!”

“But there is,” Nala insisted. “Not only do you have fae blood, but you have the sight as well. That’s why we need your help, Morgan. Fae and humans can coexist and procreate, and that book holds the key to it. If we learn what’s in it, the fae will survive. If we don’t...”

“Then why do the others want to steal the book away?” Tevin asked, his voice thick with frustration. He didn’t want long-winded monologues—he wanted to crack skulls. “It doesn’t make any fucking sense. They should want Morgan to translate it as well, right?”

“Not exactly.” Nala’s companion stepped forward. “They’re a part of a faction that hates the thought of fae coupling with humans, and they want to stop it at all costs. Even if that means the fae are wiped out as a result.”

“They’re crazy,” Nala said, “and we can’t let them win. That’s why we’re here to ask for your help. See, we know a woman can get pregnant from a fae...but we’ve lost many babies over the years, and I’ve never seen a mother survive. That book contains the spells that can help both the mother and the baby. And we need Morgan to identify them.”

Fuck, I thought. I didn’t know if I believed all this bullshit, but I could tell this sob story had won Morgan over. But before she could agree to help those fae, I had to say my piece.

“Before we do anything here,” I said, “I need to know if this is going to put Morgan in danger. I won’t risk her life over a book, no matter how important it is to you. And what are the implications here for my pack and my territory?” If these fae thought they could just come in and settle in my territory, they had another thing coming. They were a potential threat to everything I held dear. “The area surrounding Brightenville is already spoken for.”

“Trust me, Ben.” Nala’s smile widened, her pearly teeth showing. “We’re

not interested in your territory. And there's no way we'd risk Morgan's life. She's too precious. If need be, I'll protect her with my own life, and the rest of the fae—at least those who are sane—stand with me. So, Morgan, tell me...will you help us? Our survival depends on it.”

I looked at Morgan.

More than anything, I wanted to hear a ‘no’ coming from her mouth, but I knew that wasn't going to happen.

“Whatever you decide,” I said, “I'll support you.”

Morgan sucked in a deep breath, closed her eyes for a second, then nodded.

“I'll help.”

“Then you must come with us.” Nala lowered her voice, her unblinking eyes never leaving Morgan's. “We'll keep you safe while you translate the book.”

“Morgan isn't going anywhere without me,” I growled.

Nala just smiled.

“So be it.”



NALA'S LAIR wasn't what I expected.

The fae didn't live in a palace, nor had they built quaint little houses on treetops. Instead, Nala's little community had chosen an abandoned factory on the edge of town, the ancient brick facade more than a few decades old. As derelict as the place looked, though, I had to admit it was a good choice—no one would think to look for them here. This industrial zone had been abandoned ages ago.

The simultaneous growl of our bikes died down as we killed the engines. The moment I said I'd accompany Morgan, the rest of my men all volunteered to join me, and the four of us had ridden here as Morgan's escorts.

I helped Morgan from the bike seat, then looked back to the old factory, my wolf suddenly feeling agitated. Could this be an ambush? I couldn't think of a better place for it...

“Relax,” Nala said, stepping out from her car. It was as if the damn woman could read my thoughts. “You're our guests here, and you're safe.”

She clapped her hands together and the metallic door at the front of the building slid aside to reveal at least a dozen other fae. Tall, with long flowing hair and bright eyes, they all had that otherworldly look to them.

It was fucking eerie.

“Come.” Nala waved at the entrance. “Let me show you around.”

The building looked terrible on the outside, but that seemed on purpose—inside, the factory had been fully renovated. It wasn’t a luxurious place to live in, but it wasn’t bad either. Nala showed us to a room at the back of the building and offered it to Morgan. The furniture was sparse—there was only a bed and a desk—but Morgan still offered her thanks. When Nala tried to offer the rest of us a room, I cut her short with a wave of my hand.

“My pack stays together.” I stared the fae down, but she didn’t try to argue the point. “Just remember this—as soon as Morgan is done with that book, we’re out of here.”

Nala smiled that creepy fae smile of hers.

“Of course,” she whispered. “How could it be any other way?”

MORGAN

I pushed the book away and took off my glasses, rubbing my eyes and glancing at my watch. Nearly five hours had passed, and I still wasn't any closer to finding the spells Nala wanted. How much longer could I keep at this?

I glanced around the room at the four wolf shifters, all waiting on me to find the answer so we could get out of here. It wasn't that the place was bad. Just the opposite, in fact. It was rather cozy and comfortable with all the updates the fae had made to the old factory. But none of us really wanted to be here.

"How's it going?" Ben asked softly, coming up behind me to rub my shoulders.

I sighed, leaning back and rolling my head around, trying to loosen some of the tight muscles. "Still nothing. Honestly, now that the history portion is out of the way, it looks like the rest of this book is more of a personal journal of sorts."

It was strange, not at all what I'd expected. But now that I was deep into the translation, I was seeing it for what it was. Some person, one of the fae most likely, had recorded their studies here in this book. It made me think of journals from the Renaissance period, where scholars kept track of their studies and findings.

"Look, Ben. Here," I flipped back a few pages and showed him the drawings and notations. "And here."

Ben frowned. "Are those...plants?"

"Yeah," I said, baffled. "Whoever wrote this, it appears they were

studying botany and the medicinal properties of plants. There's mention of various sicknesses, too, but—"

"But nothing about the spell to help the fae reproduce," he finished for me.

I shook my head. "None whatsoever." In fact, I hadn't come across any spells yet.

Ben let out a rough, heavy sigh, gave my shoulders another squeeze, then started pacing the room, stalking around with wide strides as he muttered to himself. The other wolves kept a wary eye on him, and I knew none of them wanted to be here. It went against their nature to be confined like this, sitting around waiting. Ben wasn't the only one on edge.

Every last one of us was starting to feel the pressure. Five hours and nothing. How much longer would this take? I was over halfway through the book, but I'd flipped through it multiple times hoping to find what I was looking for. So far, it just looked like more of the same. I was poring over the text with a fine-tooth comb now, afraid I might miss something important otherwise.

"This is starting to feel like an ambush," Scott muttered from where he leaned against the far wall, his face bathed in shadows.

I glanced up at that, watching for the other wolves' reactions to the statement. Ben's jaw ticked as he ground his teeth together, and he exchanged a glance with Tevin. "You think so?"

Scott pushed off the wall and into the light, coming toward Ben, rolling his head and cracking his neck. He looked even more on edge than Ben. "I just feel like the longer we stay here, the better the chances of those other fae tracking us down. That's the last thing we need."

Based on the hushed conversations between the men over the past few hours, I'd gathered that they weren't fully buying Nala's story, even if only because it went against their nature to trust a stranger--especially another supernatural.

Ben nodded tersely. "I agree. It's a little too convenient, isn't it? Having us all crowded into this room with no way out except the one door." He rolled his shoulders, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

That's when I realized just how hard this must be on all of them. They were used to the boundless freedom of the outdoors. They probably felt like caged animals at this point, five hours in. I stood to stretch, then redoubled my efforts. I had to find the spell, and soon.

But by the time the sun started to set, its autumn rays shining weakly through the single window in the late afternoon, I still hadn't found anything worthwhile. More herbal remedies and the like, but no spells.

Not long after the sun dipped below the horizon, Nala reappeared with a food cart and wheeled it into the room, pushing it right up against the wall inside the doorway before stepping back out to stand on the threshold.

"Any luck, Morgan?" She offered me a smile. "I figured you guys might be hungry for some dinner."

Charles and Scott moved closer to the cart, eyeing it suspiciously before Tevin stepped forward. "We'll just wait and get something ourselves when we leave."

Nala's smile disappeared. "That might be a while. None of you are going anywhere until Morgan has uncovered the spell."

A low, menacing growl filled the room, and I realized it was coming from Ben. He advanced on the fae, his face a mask of fury, his body shimmering like it did just before a shift.

Rage radiated off him like a force of nature. If I didn't trust him with my life, I would have been terrified. It was a wonder the fae stood her ground, staring back at Ben with a cool, calm expression. His wild energy was infectious, and within seconds, Scott and Charles looked ready to shift at a moment's notice.

The air in the room seemed to thicken as tension strung tight between the pack mates, waiting for their Alpha's command. Only Tevin remained stoic, his expression neutral as he went completely still, watching the situation unfold.

My heart pounded when Ben spoke, his voice deep and raw, tinged with wildness that could only be his wolf riding him hard. His canines lengthened as he demanded, "Let us go. Now."

I gasped, sure he was about to shift right then and there. And with his anger so close to the surface, who knew where that would leave us.

"I'm sorry," Nala said smoothly, as if she weren't fazed at all by the idea of an alpha wolf tearing her to pieces. "But I simply can't do that. This is just too important."

Suddenly, a bright light flashed. When it faded, I was stunned to see a nearly invisible shield in the doorway, separating us from the one and only exit. It shimmered lightly, so faintly one almost wouldn't notice it.

Ben growled, the sound savage and menacing, as he advanced on the fae,

but she stood calmly on the other side of the shield. Ben lifted a fist, his hand now shifted into a massive paw with lethal claws protruding from the tips, and slashed at the shield, but to no avail. We were trapped as securely as if we'd been behind a steel door.

"I hate for it to come to this." Nala made a taking sound. "But this is vital to the survival of our species. Please, help yourselves to the food." Then she turned and strode away, leaving me gaping. Had that really just happened? Unease gripped my chest. There was no question about it—we were definitely prisoners. I sucked in a deep breath to calm myself. Ben would get us out of this. He had to.

Ben turned, another feral growl ripping from his chest as he upended the food cart with a clatter that had me flinching.

"Ben..." I rose to my feet, wanting to soothe him, to let him know it would be okay, that I would find the spell and get us out of here, but Tevin was right there in front of me in under a second, ushering me back into a corner and placing himself between me and my mate. Scott and Charles looked between the alpha and his enforcer, ready to step in where needed.

"Stop it, Tevin." I shoved at his back. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Keeping you safe," he growled, his eyes fixed on Ben. "Don't move. Don't speak. If the alpha shifts and loses control, your life could be in danger. I won't allow it."

"Oh, for goodness' sake." I scoffed, shoving at him again. "Ben isn't going to hurt me. I'm his mate."

I edged out from around Tevin and moved toward Ben, who rushed toward me and scooped me up in his arms, holding me tightly against his chest. If I hadn't trusted him with every fiber of my being, I might have been scared.

Half-shifted, he looked even more terrifying than in wolf form. Sharp fangs, protruding claws, wild eyes. And...was that fur sprouting on the back of his neck, trailing down into his shirt?

"Ben," I breathed. "It's going to be okay. You need to calm down so you can think rationally here."

"I can't calm down." His voice was deeper, more ragged, and slightly harder to understand in his half-shifted state. "I'm scared, baby. I'm scared what might happen to you. I *have* to keep you safe."

"I'm okay. I'm fine." I reached up and stroked his cheek, trying to soothe him, despite the fact that my own panic was just below the surface. We were

stuck in here until I found the spell. Had we willingly walked into a trap?

Ben shook his head, his eyes full of torment. “It’s not that. You aren’t fully mine yet.”

I frowned, confused. “What do you mean? I’m all yours, Ben. I’m not going anywhere.”

“No, I mean I haven’t claimed you yet, as my mate. You don’t have my mate mark, which connects you to my life force, giving you enhanced protection if you were to be injured.” His voice wavered, and for the first time ever, I saw true fear in his gaze. “Without it, you could die.”

The way he said it, so tortured and heartbroken, had me making my decision in a heartbeat. “Then mark me. Claim me. Do it now. If it will keep me safer, what are you waiting for?”

He hesitated. There was something he wasn’t saying, and I could see an internal debate at war in his mind. He reached up and cupped my cheeks, lowering his forehead to mine. “Is that really what you want? Not just because of your safety. It has to be more than that, Morgan. When a wolf claims his mate...it’s forever.”

I nodded, no doubts in my mind. “I want you, Ben. Forever. Go ahead and mark me now.”

He let out a humorless laugh. “Well, typically it’s a highly intimate moment that wouldn’t be shared with others. It’s usually done during sex. And...well, we have an audience.”

I’d nearly forgotten about the others in the room, but now I noticed they were exchanging glances as they slunk to the far side of the room. I ignored them, keeping my focus on Ben. “I don’t need it to be private or intimate. I don’t need sex to know how significant this is—for both of us.”

I meant it, too. This was what I wanted, whether it was now or a month from now in a situation of our own choosing. Especially if it would keep me safer. I wanted a long life ahead of us, not one cut short because we didn’t take the precautions we could have.

Ben stared into my eyes, searching for something I didn’t quite understand, and all I could do was stare back at him and hope he saw the trust, the love, the unwavering commitment I had for him. He must have found what he was looking for, because he nodded once.

“Okay,” he breathed, barely audible as he stroked my cheeks with his thumbs. “But fair warning, I have to bite you for the mate bond to be completed, and I can’t guarantee it won’t hurt.” He gave me a small smile.

“That’s probably why it’s typically done during sex. Pleasure to soothe the pain, and all that.”

I nodded, licking my lips nervously, but then I forgot everything as Ben brought his mouth to mine and kissed me fiercely, as if I were the source of life-sustaining breath. I kissed him back with everything I had, wrapping my arms around his neck.

Then a sharp prick to my lip had me gasping, my eyes flying open. He’d grazed my lip with a razor-sharp canine. The taste of metallic blood on my tongue had me a little freaked out, but I simply reminded myself that I trusted Ben. He would never hurt me, not for real.

He met my gaze once again, gauging my reaction, and I realized that had been a little test. For him or for me, I wasn’t sure, but I didn’t want him to have any doubts.

I nodded. “I’m ready.”

Pulling me even tighter against his chest, even as his hands were soft and gentle as they traced soothing circles on my back, Ben trailed hot kisses along my jaw, down my neck to where it met the sensitive skin of my shoulder. My breath came in shallow pants as he grazed his teeth along my flesh. Then he paused once more. Waiting for my confirmation.

“Do it,” I breathed. “Claim me.”

He bit down, his canines piercing my skin, and I cried out in shock as they sank deep into my flesh. Almost instantly, though, the pain was followed by a soothing balm that began where he bit me and spread out through my body, as if something *alive* was coursing through my veins.

I hadn’t fully understood the mating bond until this moment, but suddenly I was deeply aware of a connection to my mate that defied logic and explanation. It was as if some of Ben’s magic were seeping into me, winding its way through the very essence of my being, binding us together in a way that was permanent and everlasting.

I sighed in contentment then as I felt his consciousness brush up against mine, a supernatural thread connecting our souls. I could feel his love in a way I’d never experienced, an all-consuming awareness of the essence of who he was.

When Ben pulled back, licking my wound gently, I stared up at him, mesmerized by this gorgeous creature who was all mine. And what I saw staring back at me—a reflection his deep inner peace that I could *feel*—assured me that this was exactly where I belonged forever and always. With

Ben. With my mate.

I smiled up at him, and he smiled back, his canines retracting as he finally gained control of his wolf.

Then the intimate moment was interrupted by whoops and catcalls from the three men on the other side of the room.

“Congratulations!” Scott cheered.

“That’s my boy,” Charles hollered.

Tevin laughed. “About damn time.”

I giggled, my cheeks heating as I remembered we’d had an audience the entire time. Then it hit me all at once.

I’d just been claimed. In human terms, I’d basically just married a werewolf.

Threading my fingers in Ben’s hair, I brought his mouth back to mine. So what if we had an audience? In a wedding, it would be time to kiss the bride, so I figured what better way to seal the deal than kiss my mate senseless.

BEN

We remained prisoners.

Two days after I'd claimed Morgan, and she was still working on that damn book. Not that her hard work had produced any results. The book was ancient, the writing archaic, and it was almost impossible to decipher the meaning of some passages for all that they appeared to her in English. Despite her lack of success, she didn't lose hope—she just kept at it, and I never heard a complaint from her once. Then again, why was I even surprised? This was the woman I loved, and she was *strong*.

"I'm going crazy here," Fenrin muttered. He was sitting on the floor, his legs crossed, and he was looking at the walls with a vacant gaze. "Wolves aren't supposed to be caged like this."

"Be patient," I told him, even though I agreed with everything he'd said. To be trapped inside these four walls was driving me absolutely crazy, and the only thing that offered me any solace was knowing that my mate was right here. "Sooner or later, these bastards have to let us out, and when they do—"

"Oh my God." Morgan raised her eyes from the book, her jaw hanging open. Slowly, she turned on her chair and looked at me, her eyes wide with shock. I could tell she'd found something, but she knew it was too dangerous to say it out loud. More likely than not, the fae had this place bugged—either with tech or a spell.

I walked up to her and leaned in, my lips against her ear. "What is it?" I whispered. "Have you found something?"

"We've been lied to," Morgan replied, her voice so low I could barely

hear it. “They told us they wanted to find a spell that could help them mate with humans and produce healthy offspring, but that’s not it.”

“Then what?”

“This spell...it has a different purpose.” She tapped the yellowed pages with one finger, and the drawings came to life and danced around the edges of the book. “What it does is turn other supernaturals into fae. According to what it says here, fae are really weak during their youth, and they’re vulnerable to other supernaturals. But it’s different with a hybrid—if he’s turned during adulthood, he doesn’t go through a vulnerable stage. He can already access his full powers, which means he can fight.”

“Then that means...” I clenched my fists. “They’re not trying to ensure their species’ survival. They’re trying to build a fucking army.”

“But it doesn’t make any sense,” Morgan continued. “Why would they lie to get us to read the book? They have to know we would never give them this information. It’s just too dangerous.”

“That’s because they never intended to let us go,” I growled, my wolf’s anger becoming my own. If only I could put my hands around Nala’s neck... oh, how I’d love that. “We have to get out of this place, one way or the other. We can stall them for a time, but they’ll eventually figure out we know about the spell.”

“We need to move fast,” Morgan agreed. “Next time they bring in the food, I’m going to tell them I’ve discovered the spell. We can lure them into the room, and when they deactivate that force field...”

I kissed her, feeling as proud of her as I’d ever been of anyone. My woman was as strong as she was smart. I nodded, agreeing to her plan, then filled the rest of the guys in so we could fine tune the details. The energy in the room shifted almost at once—boredom and frustration gave way to excitement, and Tevin even managed a grin.

“What are we going to do once the force field is down?” he asked, rubbing his hands together, anticipating lighting his eyes. I knew the feeling. I was itching to take down some of these bastards.

I walked over to the one window in the room and looked down. “This window is too small, but I remember another one that we passed on the way in. It would be the quickest way out.”

Morgan came to stand by my side, her eyes wide. “You mean jump?”

I wrapped my arms around her and kissed the top of her head. “I’ll protect you at any cost.”

“I know you will,” she murmured against my chest. “I’m just worried about you.”

I chuckled. “Don’t be. We’re going to make it out of this. I have no doubt.”

“So what do we do now?”

I held her tight. “We get back to the book, and we wait.”

We ended up waiting for nearly two hours before anyone came. But when they did...we were ready. When we heard the creak of the food cart being wheeled in, we all took a collective breath.

“Finally!” Morgan shouted, standing up so fast she knocked her chair back. She turned around and looked at the fae standing by the door, his hands still on the food cart. The fae arched an eyebrow, but his expression remained unchanged.

“Have you made any progress?” The fae asked, a hint of curiosity showing.

“Progress?” Morgan laughed. “I’ve cracked it! I have the spell you want!”

“I will inform Nala and—”

“Inform her?” Morgan picked the book up and dashed toward the door. “Do you think I’m going to let Nala learn about this? You’re insane. I’m going to destroy this book, and I’m going to do it now.” Without even looking away from the fae, she grabbed a page as if to tear it apart. The fae’s eyes widened so much they almost jumped out from their sockets, and, with a wave of his hand, he quickly deactivated the force field and rushed into the room.

That was the last mistake he would ever make.

Scott and Fenrin, who had been waiting beside the door, rushed him in a fraction of a second. Fenrin held the fae’s arms and, with unnatural speed, Scott grabbed his head and twisted it. The neck gave way with a snap, and the fae slumped to the floor, his open eyes staring into the void. In the end, his abnormal beauty and strength hadn’t been enough to save him.

“Let’s go,” I whispered, stepping over the dead fae’s body. I led the others out, following the way Nala had taken when she’d brought us here, but I didn’t get very far. A chorus of voices came after a corner, and I stopped and flattened myself against the wall. “The window is just up that way—we need to make this fast.”

Scott and Fenrin exchanged a quick glance and, without needing to be

given any instructions, they shifted right away. Their clothes tore apart as their bodies grew into beastly forms, and the two of them jumped through the window without a second thought. Glass exploded outward, and the chorus of voices we'd heard before turned into a cry of alarm.

"Fuck," Tevin muttered, and he jumped out the window without even bothering to shift. A risky stunt, but I knew he could pull it off. As for Morgan, she was going to need a little help.

"Come." I grabbed her hand, and before she could say a word, I followed after Tevin. I wrapped my arms around Morgan as we fell and turned mid-air so that my body would receive the brunt of the impact. I landed on hard concrete, my bones complaining from the impact, but Morgan was unhurt.

"Ben!" she cried out. "Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine," I groaned, already jumping to my feet. "We need to get a move on. These fucking monsters are going to be here in no time."

"I think they're already here," I heard Tevin say, and I turned on my heels to see that my three men were already locked in battle with a group of fae. Still in his human form, Tevin stood between Scott's and Fenrin's wolfish figures, using his fists against the fae as a weapon of massive destruction.

I was about to join the fray when Tevin shouted: "Just go! We'll hold 'em back!"

I hated to abandon my men, but this was simply too dangerous for Morgan. It had been part of the plan all along, Charles insisting that he could handle it. I just had to trust he would be able to lead the others to safety. Sometimes being a good leader meant knowing when to trust your men.

"They'll be fine," I whispered, hoping that I was right, and dragged Morgan toward the woodlands that surrounded the old factory. I didn't need to look back to know that we were being followed: I could hear branches snapping, hurried footsteps, and the ragged breathing of a dozen fae in pursuit.

"I'm gonna have to change," I warned Morgan, "and you're going to have to ride me."

I gave her no time for questions. I jumped forward, let my wolf free from its cage, and shifted mid-air. My clothes turned into tatters as my limbs outgrew the fabric and, by the time I landed, I was no longer human.

Morgan knew what she had to do.

She grabbed a fistful of my white coat, right on the nape of my neck, and jumped on my back. Together, we fled into the woods as fast as we could,

Morgan clutching the book against her chest while I leapt over rotting logs and ancient boulders. We ran for God knows how long, my heart beating like a war drum, and we only stopped when the inevitable happened.

“I thought you’d come this way.” Nala’s companion, the grinning fae who had crept out Morgan that first night at the library, was perched on a rock at the center of a clearing. He jumped down from it, his landing smooth, and wiped his hands against his trousers. “Stop this nonsense. Hand over the book and tell me what you know about the spell. You do that and maybe I’ll let you live.”

A low growl rose from the back of my throat, and Morgan climbed down from my back. She knew what was going to happen. I stepped in front of her, almost too desperate to protect her, but the fae’s eyes remained locked on mine. He knew he couldn’t get to Morgan without a fight, and I was more than happy to oblige.

We circled for a long time, trying to find a chink in each other’s armor. The fae looked delicate and fragile, but I knew just how powerful these assholes were. I wasn’t going to underestimate my opponent.

“Die,” the fae hissed suddenly, his hand turning into a clawed fist as he jumped forward. He sidestepped me, hit me on the side with the back of his claws, and sent me flying against a tree. Faster than I imagined possible, he dashed toward Morgan.

Our mate! my wolf’s voice surged, like a howling screaming, and I put all of my strength into my limbs. I rushed toward the fae at breakneck speed, and my teeth found the bastard’s leg right in time. He tipped over, meeting the ground face first, and rolled over to his back.

With a blood-curdling scream, he tried to claw out my eyes, but I just lowered my muzzle and stomped on his chest with my paws. Changing gears fast, I dug my fangs into the fae’s thigh and bit as hard as I could, my teeth cutting through muscles and bone like a butcher’s knife.

“You fucking beast,” the fae screamed, producing a knife from his belt. The blade caught the sun as he angled it toward my side, but I couldn’t move out of the way fast enough. The knife grazed against my shoulder, narrowly missing my neck, and I decided it was time to end this fight once and for all.

I let go of the fae’s thigh and went for the neck.

I clamped down hard, warm blood gushing into my mouth, and shook my whole body as violently as I could. Bones broke with a sickening sound, and the fae went mercifully limp.

Beaten and exhausted, I turned away from my opponent and limped toward Morgan. I shifted before I reached her, the pain from all the bruises and cuts I'd been inflicted doubling in intensity, and cupped Morgan's face with my hands.

"Are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

"Are you really asking me that?" she asked, her tone one of disbelief. "Look at the gash on your shoulder. We need to—"

"That'll heal," I said. "I can't say the same of that asshole's wounds, though." Gently, I brushed Morgan's hair away from her face and kissed her. "We need to get out of here, Morgan. It won't be long before they find us."

"But where will we go?" she asked me, biting on the corner of her mouth. "They'll find us, Ben. They'll hunt us down. There's no place we can hide from these monsters."

"Yes," I whispered, "there is."

"Where?"

"My home," I replied. "You're going to pack your bags, and then...then I'm gonna show you the packlands."

MORGAN

I'd said I wanted more adventure in my life. Well, maybe I should have thought that wish through a little better because never in a million years would I have imagined myself riding through the wilderness on the back of a wolf shifter—who happened to be my mate.

It was all so crazy, yet it had become my reality, and there was no turning back now. I clung to Ben's wolf for dear life as he took an unfamiliar path through woodlands I'd never seen, trying to enjoy the feel of the wind slipping through my hair. But there were too many unknowns for me to relax. What if there were more fae waiting for us at my apartment?

Ben must have had the same thought because as we approached the outskirts of town; he slowed his pace, sniffing the air. There was no one around in the early predawn hours, and he must have felt safe enough to proceed through the shadows in wolf form until we were a few blocks from my apartment. Then he stopped and lowered himself to the ground, waiting for me to climb off.

The minute I was on my own two feet, he shifted, then pulled me into his arms, raining down kisses on my head.

"We're okay. You're okay," he murmured over and over again, almost as if he were trying to convince himself.

I buried my face in his chest. Now that the adrenaline of the escape had worn off, I just felt tired. But we couldn't exactly stop now. And Ben was totally naked after his shift. So I forced myself to step out of his embrace and give him the clothes he'd had me carry.

"We need to get your stuff as quickly as possible," he said as he pulled

his jeans and t-shirt on. “Then head straight to the packlands.”

I nodded, my throat constricting. “How long will we be there?”

Ben leveled his gaze on me, his expression somber. “As the alpha’s mate, the safest place for you will always be on packlands where my wolves can protect you.”

I swallowed. That sounded an awful lot like his answer was *forever*. My life had changed so much in the weeks since Ben first walked into my library, and there was no going back. Past me never would have believed any of this, yet here I was. Was I really ready to accept the fact that I might be walking away from my old life entirely?

That kind of change was a hard pill to swallow. I’d built a life for myself in Brightenville. But one thing was certain—I wasn’t willing to give Ben up for *anything*. And if the safest place for us to be together was on the packlands, I would go with him. After all, home wasn’t a place, it was a feeling. And I’d never felt a sense of home like I did with Ben.

“Okay.” I forced myself to be strong, not to let Ben see any of my fear, but of course he saw right through me.

He stepped closer, cupping my cheek in his hand. “I know it’s a lot, Morgan. And I understand that I’m uprooting you from everything you’ve known.”

I shook my head. “It’s okay, Ben. We can discuss it more later. But you need to know I want you—and everything that comes along with it.”

His expression softened, a hint of a smile on his lips. “How did I get so lucky to have someone like you for my mate?”

I went up on tiptoes. “I was just thinking the same thing. Now let’s go get my stuff and get out of here.” After everything that happened, I didn’t want to stick around here any longer than necessary. “Do you think my apartment is safe?”

“We’ll find out,” he said grimly, then took my hand and led me through the dark, quiet streets of Brightenville.

It didn’t take me long to pack up the essentials. I lived simply, and most of my belongings were books. I was sad to have to leave some of my favorites behind, but perhaps we could come back for them another time. The big question was what to do with Peppermint, who was currently hiding under the bed.

“I can’t just leave her here,” I told Ben from where I was lying on the floor, trying to coax her out.

He stared at me. “You really think she wants to live in the woods with a bunch of wolves?”

I shrugged. “If she stays inside, is it really a problem?”

Ben chuckled. “I guess not, but I’m not sure how you plan on getting her there on the back of my bike.”

I jumped up, hit with inspiration. “I have a backpack carrier that I use when we go to the vet. I can put her in that and wear it.”

He cocked a dubious eyebrow but didn’t argue, watching as I rummaged in my closet for the carrier, then found some treats to lure her into it. “Now we leave the room and wait. She’ll go in for the treats, then I’ll run in and close the flap. It works every time.”

“I thought cats were supposed to be smart,” he teased with a wry grin.

“Ha ha. Just watch.” Sure enough, the trick worked like a charm, and the next thing I knew, we were headed outside with the crate and the smallest overnight bag I could find. Ben secured my bag to his bike, I adjusted the carrier straps, ignoring Pep’s meowing, and climbed on the Harley. Then we were speeding out of town down the highway.

I tried not to think about what awaited me, or what the future held. Everything was so uncertain and there was no point in worrying about things I had no control over, so I simply clung to Ben, my head resting on his back, his steady heartbeat keeping me calm.

Soon enough, though, we were off the highway and cruising deep into unfamiliar woods I’d never seen before. The sun would be rising any moment, and the sky was painted a vibrant pink and orange that promised lovely fall weather ahead, but my focus was entirely on the darkened scenery around me as I tried to make out our surroundings.

Deeper and deeper into the woods we went. Nerves twisted my stomach when Ben slowed the bike down. I peered over his shoulder as a large cabin appeared in a clearing. Through the surrounding trees were paths leading to other smaller cabins, but my gaze was fixed on the two-story architectural dream Ben stopped his bike in front of.

“Welcome to my home,” he said when he killed the engine, and for a moment all I could do was stare.

The cabin itself looked as if it had been renovated recently, with a wraparound porch and a second-story deck. I could already imagine myself standing on that deck watching the sunset, Ben’s arms wrapped around me as we sipped a glass of wine. I wanted that more than anything.

Glancing around at the wooded paths leading to the other cabins, I was thoroughly charmed. It was almost like I was in a real fairytale.

Aside from the life-threatening danger that chased us here.

“There you are,” Tevin said, striding out of Ben’s cabin, Serene right behind him. “What took you so long?”

Ben helped me off the bike and grinned wryly, patting my backpack. “Morgan brought along a little addition.”

Tevin sniffed, then wrinkled his nose. “A cat?”

I brought the backpack around to cradle in my arms. “I couldn’t leave Peppermint alone, especially since I don’t know how long we’ll be here.”

Tevin glanced over my shoulder, frowning, and I spun around to find that other shifters, in human and wolf form alike, had gathered at the edges of the clearing. Some stepped from the shadows, clearly trying to get a good whiff of me.

I swallowed hard when one released a low growl, clutching Peppermint tighter. Ben wrapped his arm around me, and called out to his pack, “This is Morgan, and she’s my mate.”

Some gasped, some looked disgusted, and some turned away. But the majority of those gathered just looked happy.

“They can smell that you’re human and don’t like it,” Serene said softly from behind me.

“They can also smell the mating bond,” Tevin added.

Ben lifted his voice. “Every last one of you will respect my mate and protect her as you would your own Alpha. Is that understood?”

Tevin shifted his stance, crossing his arms over his chest and looking so menacing I doubted anyone would question the alpha or his enforcer. Still, I was relieved when Ben swept me up in his arms and carried me into his cabin, calling over his shoulder to Tevin, “Make sure no one disturbs me for the rest of the morning,” before he kicked the door shut.

Then he carried me right past a large, open communal living space and up a wide flight of stairs before I could get a good look at the place. He didn’t stop until he entered what must have been his bedroom. It had a full wall of floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked a private deck and the wooded hills beyond. It was beautiful.

But it paled in comparison to the gorgeous man who stared down at me like nothing else in the world mattered.

“*Welcome home* is what I should have said before.” He cleared his throat.

“I know things are crazy right now, Morgan, and your life has been turned upside down. I mean, hell, you’re mated to a wolf shifter.”

I reached up and cupped his cheek at the rough edge in his voice. “I wouldn’t want it any other way, Ben. And that’s the absolute truth.”

He studied my face, his expression open and raw. “I just want you to be happy, Morgan. I’ve thought a million times what it would be like to bring my mate home, to start our lives together. Never once did I think the claiming would happen under duress, or that we’d be coming home to escape danger.”

I shook my head. “It doesn’t matter. Not to me. I love you, Ben, and I want you. The circumstances don’t matter as long as we have each other.”

His inner torment seemed to settle, then, and a soft smile curved his lips. “I know it’s been a long night...how about we get cleaned up and go to bed?”

He carried me into a massive en-suite bath which also had an amazing view of the rolling hills beyond. Without releasing me, he stepped into a shower big enough for half a dozen people and pressed a few buttons on a keypad. Instantly, steam began to fill the space.

I raised my eyebrows. “Not quite as primitive as I expected.”

Ben laughed. “I’m not sure I want to know what you expected.” Then he began slowly undressing me, staring into my eyes as he pulled my shirt over my head, then removed my bra and tossed it away. His eyes darkened, and lust raced through me, making every nerve ending especially sensitive to his every touch. When he peeled my pants from my body, I shivered in anticipation. I returned the favor, undressing Ben and running my fingers along every ridge of his defined body as I did so. The look on his face told me he was just as hungry for me as I was for him, but still we took our time, and when we were both fully naked, Ben pressed another button on the shower. Warm water sprayed from multiple shower heads, and I groaned at the feel of it on my tight muscles.

It wasn’t until Ben spun me around and began kneading my shoulders that I realized how sore I was. Filthy, too. We’d been in that factory for two days straight.

We took our time in the shower, cleaning each other, soothing each other. Well, mostly *Ben* soothing *me*, because as much as I’d tried to hold it together through all the craziness, so much had happened over the past few days, and I simply had to process. He took care of me, shampooing my hair, washing my body with a gentle caress, paying special attention to where my muscles were tight. Helping me to relax.

At some point, though, the mood shifted, and I became very aware of Ben's hands on body, every atom of my body attuned to his. I turned in his arms, my eyes locking on his, and the raw, unmasked love I saw shining there made my chest ache.

This connection between us, this mating bond, it was something special, something that defied explanation, and I was only truly beginning to see it for what it was. A binding of our souls. We belonged to each other. For me, that was more than I ever would have imagined I could find. Someone so lovely to me wholly and completely for being exactly who I am.

It was magic.

Our mouths crashed together, fulfilling the promise of his claiming two days ago. If I hadn't known it before, I knew it now. *I was his.*

I practically crawled up his body, wanting to be closer. Wanting to fuse my body with his, just like our souls.

His hands came around and gripped my ass, hoisting me up, his fingers digging into my thighs. I wrapped my legs around his waist, trapping his cock between us and grinding myself against him.

"Fuck, Morgan," he growled, ripping his mouth from mine and dragging his teeth along my jaw, my neck, my shoulder. The memory of his teeth sinking into my flesh had my body shuddering, and I ached to be closer still.

Ben backed me up against the shower wall. The tile was cool against my burning skin, and I tipped my head back, giving him better access to my body. Pinning me in place with his hips, he moved his hands to my breasts, squeezing and kneading them until he pinched the taut nipples. I cried out, pleasure coursing through my body.

"Say it again," he growled as he kissed his way down my chest, capturing one of my nipples in his mouth and tugging it gently with his teeth.

I bucked against him, barely able to think through my building need. "Say what?"

He paused, moving back up so we were eye to eye. I would have groaned in complaint and insisted he continue immediately if not for the intensity shining in those crystalline eyes.

"What is it, Ben?"

He cupped my cheeks, his gaze piercing me all the way to my soul. "That you love me."

I smiled. That was easy. "I love you."

He shook his head, marveling.

“Is it really that hard to believe?” I felt our connection, and I knew he did too.

“I guess no harder than for you to believe I’m a wolf.”

He had a point.

“Then I guess it’s a good thing I believe in happy endings,” I whispered, wrapping my hands around his neck and bringing our lips together once more.

He grinned against my lips, a wicked gleam in his eye, then rocked his hips once. Again. I groaned in pleasure this time.

Our gazes locked, our bodies entwined, Ben lowered me down on his cock, and I moaned in bliss as he filled me completely. He moved slowly, taking his time, enjoying the fact that—at least for the moment—nothing else mattered but the two of us here together, expressing our love.

“I love you,” Ben whispered, lowering his mouth to my neck once more. He dragged his tongue over the sensitive skin where a faint mark from his claiming still showed. “You’re mine. Always.”

“And you’re mine,” I breathed. Then I lost myself entirely to the feel of our bodies joined together, my heart overflowing with love for this man who had changed my life forever, for the better.

BEN

I stood on the front deck of my cabin, overlooking the lands and shifters who were my responsibility. The last of the autumn leaves were falling from the trees, and a crisp breeze swept through the clearing, bringing with it the scent of my mate.

Turning my head at the scent, I found her walking along a dirt path towards the cabin, smiling and talking with Serene. They'd been talking recently about finding space in the schoolhouse for a library, and I assumed that's where they'd been this morning while I took care of pack business.

It was hard to believe a month had gone by since I brought Morgan home to stay with me permanently. So far, there'd been no sign of the fae trying to track us down, but we remained vigilant. I'd worked hard to keep the location of the packlands a secret, and we had strict protocols for any comings and goings, but I'd still upped security to an all-time high around the packlands and at the club to cover all our bases; I couldn't be too careful when it came to my mate. If they somehow managed to do the impossible and locate our safe haven, we'd be ready.

I watched Morgan walking, admiring the way the sun glinted off her hair. She tilted her head back as she laughed at something Serene said, and I found myself moving toward the stairs, ready to scoop her up in my arms and make up for the time apart this morning.

Things had gone better than I expected when I brought Morgan here to stay. The pack had welcomed her into the fold, accepting her as the alpha's mate—other than a few dissenters who kept to themselves anyway. But Tevin and I both had made it clear that no one was to harm my mate. Some had

even gone above and beyond, bringing her things to make her feel more comfortable and welcome here, volunteering to help with security to keep the alpha's mate protected. So yeah, overall, life was better than I ever could have hoped for.

Just as I reached Morgan, Serene's phone rang. She dug in her bag and pulled it out, smiling widely when she read the screen, and quickly answered the call. "Melanie? Hi! How are you?"

I looked at Morgan, not knowing who Melanie was, but she just shrugged. Serene held up a finger and walked away a few steps to talk.

"Were you at the school?" I asked Morgan.

"Yeah, I think we've finally figured it out." She beamed up at me. "I might need to enlist some help in tearing down a wall, but I have big strong guy in mind who might volunteer for the job."

I wiggled my eyebrows as she reached up and squeezed my bicep, then I slung an arm around her waist and yanked her up against me, lowering my mouth to hers.

"You know I'll take care of all your needs," I murmured against her lips before capturing them with my own.

I might have lost myself in my mate right there in the middle of the clearing if it weren't for the gasp behind us. We turned to find Serene on the phone, her hand lifted to her gaping mouth. Her eyes were wide, her hands shaking.

I took a step toward her, but Tevin was already coming out of the main cabin, little Pax slung over his chest in that ridiculous baby carrier. I wondered if he realized what a family man he'd become. He strode right up to Serene just as she ended the call.

"What happened?" His voice was sharp, his eyes focused intensely on her face. "What's wrong?"

"It's Melanie." She looked up at Tevin, then at me and Morgan. "A teacher—and friend—from the school I used to work for. She said Brightenville has been taken over recently by a bunch of newcomers." Serene's face hardened. "She said they're all tall and beautiful, and a little eerie."

"Damn it," I growled. I'd known we weren't finished with the fae, but I'd hoped I'd have a little more time with my mate before life got crazy again. "What else did she say?"

Serene's voice shook as she spoke, and Tevin moved closer, wrapping her

in his arms. “I asked Melanie some vague questions, not wanting to alarm her, and I got it out of her that these people are posing as an entertainment company. Telling residents that they’re talent scouting and looking for certain types of people to work with.”

Morgan’s eyes went wide. “How many are there?”

Serene shook her head. “She didn’t say, but enough to garner the town’s attention. It sounds like people are lined up hoping to get a job with the entertainment company—you know, a real American Hollywood dream type of thing. They have the town wrapped around their fingers already.”

Morgan’s breath became shallow, and I pulled her close. “We have to do something. I have friends in Brightenville.”

“So do I,” Serene added, looking pleadingly at Tevin. “And my parents...”

Tevin looked to me, ready to move at a moment’s notice if I gave the order. But I shook my head slowly. “I needed more information before we move. This could be a trap. They might be trying to draw us out so they can try to steal Morgan again.”

“That sounds just like the fae,” Tevin growled.

It certainly did. And after what we’d been through, I wasn’t eager to fall for one of their tricks again. My blood pounded in my head, my wolf clawed at my mind, the instinct to protect my mate stronger than any other.

I pulled out my phone, and my enforcer and our mates stood watching me anxiously. Charles answered on the first ring. He was winding up some club business up north, but I wanted him to be the one to check in on things in Brightenville. As my second-in-command, I trusted him more than any other to properly assess the situation, which was exactly what we needed.

“We have a problem.” I proceeded to tell him everything that was going on. “I need you to go back to Brightenville and check things out for me.”

“I can be there in two days, Ben,” he said. “Three, max. Just as soon as I finish up this job and get the fixers in.”

The contract he’d been assigned was an important one. While I didn’t want to wait two days for answers, Charles was my best man for the job. His thought process closely followed my own, and I trusted his instincts.

“Okay. Two days. Not three.” That was the Alpha speaking, and Charles had no choice but to obey.

“Got it.”

I was about to end the call when Serene grabbed my arm. “Wait!”

“Hang on, Charles. What is it, Serene?”

She swallowed. “Could you have him take a peek at my parents’ house, make sure they’re okay? And Melanie. She...she gets excited by stuff like this, and I’m afraid the fae could manipulate her into something. I just want to make sure she stays safe.”

“Boss?” Charles had certainly heard what Serene said but would wait for me to agree before committing to anything.

I looked down at Morgan, who was waiting expectantly. I nodded. “Okay. Charles, make those checks as well. I’ll send you the addresses and phone numbers along with more specific details. Stay safe.”

“Copy that, boss.”

I hung up the phone, unease settling in my bones. The fucking fae.

“Thanks, Ben,” Serene said softly, worry furrowing her brow as she bent to kiss Pax’s head. Tevin tucked her in tight, and they were the perfect little family unit.

“Of course. Send me the contact info and I’ll forward it on to Charles. In the meantime, we wait. And no one is to leave the packlands. Got it?” I looked pointedly at Tevin. “No more of your funny business. You all stay here where it’s safe until we know more about what the fae are up to.”

“Got it,” Tevin affirmed with no hesitation this time. Good.

“Let’s go inside.” I wrapped my arm around Morgan’s waist and led her back into the cabin, then up the stairs to our private quarters. I held it together until I shut the door to my bedroom, but then my cool facade slipped.

I turned and hauled her up against me, holding her so tightly I knew it was likely crushing her, but I needed her close, needed that reassurance that she was here. That she was safe. After what happened at that abandoned factory...

My entire body shook with barely suppressed rage as I thought about what could have happened to her there, how we easily might not have made it out alive. The idea of losing my mate made me want to annihilate any and every threat to her safety.

“Ben,” she whispered, her voice soft and soothing. “Ben, it’s okay. I’m okay.”

Somehow, she sensed my inner torment perfectly, something she’d gotten really good at since our mating. I forced myself to loosen my grip, but I didn’t let her go.

“I just keep thinking about when we were trapped by the fae.” My voice

was strained. “I’m so grateful we made it out. That you’re safe.”

Morgan reached up and cupped my cheeks. “I am safe. I have you by my side, and I believe in you. Whatever the fae are up to, I know you can take care of it. You’ll protect me and the pack.”

Her unwavering faith in me had my throat tightening, and for the millionth time I questioned how I’d gotten so lucky.

“I love you so much, Morgan,” I whispered, lowering my head so we were eye to eye.

“And I love you.” She brushed a kiss over my lips.

It wasn’t enough. I needed to feel all of her, to assure myself that she was really here and that nightmare was behind us. I vowed then and there that I would keep her safe no matter what.

Winding my hands through her hair, I tipped her head back and kissed her more thoroughly, and soon we were both gasping for breath. It was always like this with us. No matter how many times we had each other, a single kiss could leave us breathless and aching for more.

I bent and scooped her up in my arms, carrying her to the bed. And as I laid her down, I stared into her eyes. “I swear to you, Morgan, that I’ll take care of you until the end of time. I won’t let anything happen to you. You’re safe.”

“I know I am,” she said with a trusting smile that melted my heart. “Now shut up and kiss me again.”

I chuckled, then obliged, pushing all my worries away for now and just enjoying our time together. Charles would figure out what was happening, and we would deal with it. For now, though, I had my mate to satisfy.

And that’s just what I did.

CHARLES

Brightenville. It was a quaint little coastal town, but I'd hoped I wouldn't have a reason to return any time soon. When the Alpha gave an order, though, there wasn't room for questions. You did as you were told.

I revved the engine of my bike as I sped down the freeway under a clear, star-speckled sky, trying to just enjoy the ride and the cool late autumn air.

But I couldn't stop thinking about the fucking fae. It had been too much to hope we'd seen the last of them. When Ben had called a couple days ago, he'd sounded pretty distraught about the whole the thing. It made sense—his mate was a wanted woman by these damn fae. I'd probably be the same way if I were in his fur.

After leaving the last job and all its bloody violence behind—arms deals gone wrong were never pretty—I'd spent the trip thinking of all the possibilities of what I might be walking into back in Brightenville. This was no joke. When we'd been trapped in that factory...

Well, let's just say I would have killed every last one of the fae then and there if I'd known I'd still have to deal with them. Even now, my wolf was riding me hard knowing we were about to be near them again.

It didn't take long to figure out what was going on. Ben had been pretty vague, but as I rode my bike into town, I could scent the fuckers everywhere. The whole town had a sickly-sweet scent to it, like the place had been overrun with fae.

The first thing I did was cruise by Serene's parents' house. I'd called them earlier, letting them know I was a friend of Tevin's and that Serene had asked me to check in on them on my way through town. They'd seemed fine,

telling me there was no need to stop by, but I still wanted to check their place out.

Their house was closer to the outskirts of town, and the scent of the fae was much less noticeable here. I parked my bike a block away and then crept around the perimeter of their property. As far as I could tell, none had been around here.

I went back to my bike and pulled my phone out to call Ben.

“What did you find?” he demanded, picking up on the first ring.

“I can smell the fuckers everywhere, Ben. I don’t know how many are here, but judging by how strong their scent is, it’s a lot.” I raked a hand through my hair. “Serene’s parents’ place is fine. I haven’t scented anything here.”

Ben breathed a sigh of relief. “I’ll let Tevin know. And Melanie?”

“I haven’t been there yet.”

There was a shuffling sound, and Morgan’s muffled voice, followed by Ben saying, “Hang on a sec.”

I leaned against my bike, waiting for Morgan and Ben to finish their discussion. When he came back on the line, he said, “Change of plans.”

“Hit me with it, boss.”

“Instead of just checking on Melanie, Morgan and I want you to pick her up and bring her here.”

I hesitated for a split second. But I knew she was Serene’s friend. Maybe the new information about there being a shit-ton of fae here made a difference in their concern for her safety—I wouldn’t want anyone I knew stuck in this town with those godforsaken creatures.

But the idea of bringing yet another human onto the packlands would set off some of the wolves. That much I was sure of. Still, an order was an order, and I was nothing if not loyal to my Alpha.

“I’m on it, boss. See you soon.” I ended the call, then straddled my bike and revved the engine.

I rode into the town proper just a few minutes later, and the scent became even stronger. Fuck, how many of them were there? As I sped through the small downtown area, there were a few out walking the streets.

Almost as one, they lifted their heads, their gazes fixed on me, nostrils flaring. Scenting my wolf.

I bared my teeth and growled but didn’t bother slowing down. I continued on toward the address Ben had given me for Melanie’s house. I couldn’t

blame the women for wanting me to get her out of here. With all these fae prowling around, I'd get anyone and everyone I knew as far from Brightenville as possible. Especially humans who couldn't defend themselves or even recognize what they were up against.

I just hoped the human woman would come along with me easily enough. I wasn't in the mood for a fight, but I'd throw her over my shoulder and haul her out of this town kicking and screaming if that's what it took.

After all, the Alpha had given an order.



I'll fight to protect her, but I'll never surrender my heart...

I'VE GOT no idea what the Fae want with a human schoolteacher who doesn't know anything about our world, but my job is simple—protect her at all costs.

EXCEPT NOTHING about Melanie turns out to be simple. Her scent destroys me, and her sex appeal has got my wolf battling for restraint. I don't like humans, but I can sense that there's something different about this woman.

THEN ONE OF our own is killed, and the message is clear—the Fae will stop at nothing until they get their hands on Melanie. And it's not just Melanie at risk. The shifters' entire existence hangs in the balance.

I CAN SMELL the impending battle in the air and I'm ready to attack. Especially if they dare to get too close to Melanie...

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TRY TAKEN BY THE VAMPIRE KING



Never make a deal with a billionaire, particularly one who's a vampire . . .

The deal is simple: spend a month with a mysterious billionaire who is the owner of Louisiana's La Petite Mort Casino, and he'll forget my father's gambling debts. If it means saving our family home and business, I'll do anything.

With his strong, sexy, take charge arrogance, Nicolas Dupont is a mystery to me. But it doesn't matter how hot he is. This is purely a business

arrangement. Nic can have any woman he wants and it makes no sense that he'd be interested in a virgin like me. I'm certainly not about to fall for a guy who thinks he can own me.

So I go hunting for a way to free myself. When I discover I'm the hunted, and there are those who want my blood, Nic claims he can protect me. But can I trust one of his kind?

When this began, I thought I might lose everything. Now I'm not sure if I'll make it out alive...

*Taken by the Vampire King is 66k words, is the first book in a trilogy, and ends on a cliffhanger. It's recommended for 18+

Try it out [here!](#)

DOMINATING ALPHA WOLF

DEMON HOLLOWERS MOTORCYCLE CLUB: BOOK 2

Skye Wilson & Lindsey Devin

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