



THE  
PHOENIX PACK  
SERIES

FIERCE  
OBSESSIONS  
SUZANNE WRIGHT

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# FIERCE OBSESSIONS

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SERIES

SUZANNE WRIGHT



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Published by Montlake Romance, Seattle  
[www.apub.com](http://www.apub.com)

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ISBN-13: 9781477848753

ISBN-10: 1477848754

Cover design by Janet Perr



*For Rhys and Paige—I adore you both.*

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# CHAPTER ONE



**W**aking up to find yourself sweating tequila was not fun.

Riley Porter groaned. She was dying. She had to be. Everywhere *hurt*. Her head was throbbing, her stomach was spinning, and it felt like someone was jabbing her eyeballs with a dull blade. It would seem she'd spent the night exploring the wonder that was tequila, and now she'd descended into a black hole of pain.

The hum of the ceiling fan was like nails on a chalkboard, but the breeze felt good on her heated skin. She swallowed, wincing at how dry her throat was. That bitter taste in her mouth was foul. Water. She needed water.

No, she needed to throw up.

Since she couldn't feel her legs, both needs would be hard to answer. That was bad, because her senses were drowning in the pungent smell of tequila and wouldn't be able to take much more of it.

Flashes of fuzzy memories came to her. Music. Dancing. Laughing. Party poppers. Mojitos. Shots.

Ah yes, the Phoenix Pack had thrown a party to celebrate the birthday of one of their wolves.

When she came to the pack for sanctuary six months ago with two young lone shifters, Riley hadn't once thought that the Alphas might offer her a permanent place. It wasn't such a surprise that they'd adopted Savannah and Dexter, given that the kids were so utterly lovable. But Riley was a lone raven shifter who'd refused to give them an explanation for why she didn't live within a flock. Despite that, and despite the fact that she hadn't accepted or declined their offer to stay, the pack still treated her as one of their own—well, *most* of them did, anyway.

The snippets of the party she could remember had been fun, but most of the night was pretty much a blur. God, she detested tequila. In fact, while every part of her ached and death seemed so close, she detested everything. Except Tylenol. All she needed in her life right then was Tylenol. Or maybe to just crawl into a hole and crash.

Forcing her heavy eyelids open, Riley winced as the sunlight stabbed her eyes. It shone through the glass balcony doors, casting shadows across the smooth, light-cream sandstone walls. It had been one hell of a surprise to find that the Phoenix Pack inhabited a modernized cave dwelling. The place made Riley think of a giant ant colony with all its tunnels and levels. There were dozens of bedrooms, and this particular one was more like a luxurious hotel room with its plush carpet, modern furnishings, canopied bed, and lush linens.

Speaking of the bedding . . . she was guessing the black smudge on her pillow was mascara. That meant it was probably smeared all over her face—great. She clumsily reached over to grab her phone from the nightstand, intending to check the time. She frowned. Where the fuck was her phone? Probably in the gutter, right alongside her dignity.

See, this was why she was single.

On the upside, getting smashed had helped her sleep the whole night through. That was something that very rarely happened, thanks to her good friend Insomnia.

She shifted slightly and groaned as a sharp pain lanced through her head. She was going to have to somehow manage the impossible and get up so she could find some painkillers. She took a centering breath, nose wrinkling as she picked up something else beneath the overwhelming scent of tequila—something that didn't belong. Was that . . . ? She tensed. Oh God, no. No. Even her drunken self couldn't be *that* stupid.

Clamping her lips to stop herself from retching, she stiffly rolled onto her other side. Waves of nausea rose up, but she was more hung up on the fact that, yep, she was *that* stupid. The proof was sleeping right beside her on his stomach, smelling of sex and his signature scent—harvest spice, warm apple, and wood smoke. Honest to God, she was looking at six and a half feet of solid muscle, olive skin, and raw animal energy.

Tao Lukas, the pack's Head Enforcer.

Riley closed her eyes, silently cursing herself as it all came flooding back. Oh yeah, she remembered it now. Remembered his cock stretching her,

his teeth digging into her neck, his tongue licking into her mouth. Remembered coming hard as she clawed at his nape and shoulders while he hammered into her. She opened one eye and winced at the sight of her brands on his sleek skin, raking over the tribal tattoo on his upper back.

Damn, this was bad. While Riley didn't have any hang-ups about one-night stands—shifters needed touch, social and sexual—she did have *some* standards, believe it or not, and she at least required that any guy she took to her bed actually like her. Tao might want her, might even act possessive of her, but he didn't like her. And yeah, that kind of chafed.

His attitude might not have bothered her if she hadn't been stuck in the grip of a wicked, sensual need since they first met. Her raven wanted him with that same primitive intensity, not at all hung up on the fact that he didn't like her. The avian was much too intrigued by him to care, which was understandable. Tao had a very warrior-like mentality: he was fearless, brutally blunt, action oriented, and forceful, and he had no time or patience for diplomacy.

Many seemed to find his outspokenness off-putting, but Riley admired his refusal to tailor his judgments to placate others. She liked people who were up front and didn't dance around what they thought or believed. That didn't mean she liked waking up in bed with him after a one-night stand.

Well, as far as she was concerned, if they'd been drunk, it didn't count. Nope.

Now what to do . . . The best option would be to wake him up and send him on his way. But there was nothing wrong with enjoying the view for a few minutes, right? It was an incredibly hot view, with his smooth jaw, prominent cheekbones, and broad shoulders. And then there was all that taut, toned skin . . . She hadn't before noticed the caramel ribbons streaking through his tousled brown hair that made her think of liquid milk chocolate.

Asleep, he looked peaceful. Awake, he was constantly alert and watchful. Like those dangerous, menacing guard dogs that eyed strangers with suspicion and a snarl that said, "Fucking try me."

When she'd first arrived, he'd looked at Riley with that same distrust. But after a month or so, things had shifted between them. The distrust in his gaze had been replaced by something else. Something just as intense that made her tingle in places that had no business tingling. That intensity made Riley a little wary, because she had super-bad judgment when it came to guys and didn't always make good decisions—case in point.

And now she'd need to do something to address that dumb decision. She slowly and carefully eased out of the bed. The room spun and pain spiked through her head, wrenching a soft moan out of her. Tao's eyelids fluttered open, revealing golden-brown orbs that reminded her of tigereye stones with their silky, lustrous quality. His gaze locked with hers and he stilled in surprise. Then those eyes drifted over her and, just like that, tension—thick, electric, and hotly sexual—snapped the air taut.

She probably should have grabbed her dress from the floor to shield her naked body, but there seemed little sense in trying to rescue her dignity now. That ship had sailed *hours* ago.

Riley swallowed, and there was an audible click of her tongue. "You should go." No, it wasn't a nice thing to say, but really, *was* there a nice way to kick someone out of your room?

One dark brow slowly lifted, but he said nothing.

"I say we agree to forget it happened," she proposed.

"Forget it?" he echoed, voice deep and gruff with sleep. It made her a little tingly.

"No one has to know. We're adults. We can have a one-night stand and not make a big deal out of it." Even if she would have to look at him every day and remember how it had felt to have him inside her. It was fine. Riley totally had this. Really.

He looked at her through narrowed eyes for a moment. "All right," he finally said. "We forget it."

His easy agreement disappointed her, though she'd expected it. Her raven didn't like it either. "Fine," she clipped.

"Fine."

Riley ran a hand through her hair. "Savannah and Dexter will probably be here soon. Be gone by the time I get out of the shower."

Before he could say another word, she turned and headed into the bathroom, closing the door behind her. She fairly staggered to the counter, tripping over thin air. Apparently walking would not be her strong point today. God, she needed to lie down. Forever.

Riley cringed at her reflection in the mirror. Her mascara was everywhere, her eyes were bloodshot, and her hair looked like a bird's nest.

She was never drinking again. *Never*. And she totally meant it this time.

Fumbling through the cabinet, she dug out the Tylenol and swallowed two with the help of the tap water. Staring at her reflection yet again, she

frowned. Where had the bruises come from? And wait, had Tao actually marked her neck? Damn, he really must have been wasted.

Knowing that water alone would not get off all that mascara unless she was interested in rubbing her skin until it was raw, Riley plucked a makeup remover wipe from the pack. Cleaning off the mascara, she cursed herself for being such a—

The door hit the wall with a thud that made her jump. Riley whirled around so that the room spun once again, causing her knees to buckle. Tao stood in the doorway, his jeans on but unbuttoned.

For a moment they just stared at each other. Tao had an intimidating predatory stillness about him, exuded an unshakable confidence and too much smoking-hot badass-ness for Riley to deal with—yes, she did know that “badass-ness” wasn’t a word, but it sure did fit.

She waved her hand, ushering him out, as she said drily, “Nothing to see here.”

Jaw tightening, Tao kicked the door shut and stalked right to her, making lots of muscles ripple and clench deliciously in his shoulders and hard chest. “Now, if you’re done talking bullshit, let’s have a real conversation,” he rumbled, planting his hands on either side of her, caging her in against the counter. “You don’t want to forget last night, Riley. You want to do it again. Over and over. Which is a good thing, because that’s exactly what I want.”

Um, she *might* have been down with that plan if the guy didn’t dislike her so intensely. A girl had her pride. Even her raven had her objections, despite how much she wanted him. “Look, it was fun and all—”

“It was more than fun.” He nipped the fleshy part of her lower lip. “I swear I can still taste you. Still feel you squeezing my cock. If you expect me to walk away and forget what it’s like to be in you, tasting you, exploding deep inside you, you’re out of your mind.”

Well, considering that was the last thing in the world she would ever have expected him to say, just maybe she *was* out of her mind. “You were supposed to regret it.”

He scowled, looking incredulous. “I was supposed to regret it?”

“That was what I figured you’d do.”

“Well, you figured wrong. I don’t regret it, and I don’t intend to forget it.” He went nose to nose with her. “And I won’t let you forget it either.”

## CHAPTER TWO ◊



**T**ao gripped the marble counter hard, fighting the urge to touch and taste and *take*. His cock was so hot and hard it was uncomfortable to walk. Well, of course it was. The object of his every fantasy stood before him, deliciously naked. The air hissed and crackled with a sexual energy that beat at his control. It was a struggle not to let his eyes stray down to those pretty breasts.

He'd wanted Riley Porter from the very moment he laid eyes on her. Wanted to taste that gorgeous mouth, bunch all that dark iridescent hair in his hand, and see her violet eyes glaze over as she came with a scream. Wanted to explore those sweet, lush curves and high breasts that made him long to take a bite. Her fantasy mouth was full and sultry—he'd wanted to take a bite out of that too. And last night, drunk out of his mind, that was just what he'd done.

He had no idea how either of them ended up in her room, but he remembered whipping off her dress and throwing her on the bed. Remembered the feel of her pussy hot and tight around his cock, her hands pulling at his hair, her claws practically shredding his skin, her heels drumming into the base of his spine. And what a birthday treat that had been.

The memories made his cock throb painfully. Even now—while his stomach churned, a sour taste coated his tongue, and it felt like someone had smacked his head with a slab of concrete—he wanted nothing more than to shove himself inside her and fuck her raw. Hell, just her scent alone could do that to him. The blend of dark-red fruit, coconut milk, and black lace was like a magnet to him and his wolf.

In the beginning the wolf hadn't liked her at all, since she continually



toyed with his patience and refused to recognize anyone's authority but her own. But she'd charmed both Tao and his wolf over time and earned their respect with her wit, her fearlessness, and the protectiveness she displayed toward the young.

"They're just tits, Tao."

He hadn't realized he'd been staring at them until then. Tao forced his eyes back to hers. "Your nipples are hard."

"So is your cock."

Fuck, he'd walked right into that one.

She rubbed her temple. "Can we do this later? I really don't think I can function well enough for a conversation."

Good. That would give him an advantage of sorts. "No, we're going to do this now. Last night was no mistake, Riley. It was always going to happen. You know it. I know it." He breezed his thumb over the bite mark he'd left on the curve of her shoulder. His wolf released a soft, contented growl, liking the sight of his brand on her skin. "The hell of it is you're not even my type."

Bristling, Riley lifted a brow. "Because I'm not inflatable?"

"Because you're trouble. You might look harmless enough, but I know crazy when I see it." He tapped her nose. "You, little raven, are far from sane."

She smiled. "I think that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

Tao ground his teeth. It seemed impossible to offend her. It was probably a good thing, really, because it wasn't wise to upset a raven. They were fierce, vengeful creatures with a wicked temper who always went for the face in a fight. Riley's temper seemed to be hard to trigger, but he knew it would be a sight to behold if she ever lost it. A perverse part of him wanted to see it.

"For the record," she began, "you've already told me that I'm trouble. Multiple times, in fact. It's why you've been a shit to me since day one."

"I'll admit that I don't handle change well, and my natural reflex to strangers is to reject them. I also have a problem trusting lone shifters, which is pretty common." Most loners had been banished from their pack by their Alphas for a serious crime, and they often became guns for hire to earn money and protection, hence their particularly negative reputation. "You wouldn't tell me why you'd become a loner, which didn't help. So, yeah, I was a shit to you. But once I was satisfied that you mean no harm to this pack, I eased off."

“But you still don’t trust me, do you?”

“I can’t say I fully trust you—I don’t know you well enough for that.” Tao wasn’t sure if *anyone* knew Riley that well. She was as elusive as quicksilver and kept most people at an emotional distance. “But be honest, baby, whose fault is that? You’re locked up tighter than Fort Knox.” It galled his wolf that he knew so little about this female he craved.

“I’m not that bad. I told you that I’d been lying when I said I needed sanctuary,” she pointed out.

“Actually, you didn’t ‘tell’ me,” he clipped. “You *admitted* it when I said you’re not the kind of person who’d hide from anything. I *guessed* that you claimed to need sanctuary just so you could accompany the kids here to be sure they were safe.” It had seemed obvious, given how protective she was of Savannah and Dexter, that she’d have wanted them far away from her if there was a chance she could bring danger to their lives.

“Stop scowling at me, it’s mean.” She sniffed haughtily. “I’m thinking I shouldn’t have bothered getting you a gift for your birthday.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have. What the hell am I gonna do with a hot sauce home brewing kit anyway?”

“Duh, brew hot sauce.”

Tao sucked in a calming breath. “Too early for this shit, Porter. Too early.” He scrubbed a hand down his face. “You were put on this earth to test me, I’ll swear to it.”

“Aw, poor you. Maybe you should go find Grandma Gretchen,” she said, using her nickname for the Alpha male’s bitchy grandmother, Greta. “I’m sure she has your bottle all heated up for you.”

“Careful, Riley.” It was a lethal whisper. “You don’t want to keep pushing me. And don’t think I haven’t noticed that you’re trying to change the subject. We’re not going to ‘forget’ what happened last night, and we’re not going to leave this at a one-night stand.” To punctuate that, he pivoted on his heel and strode into the bedroom.

Riley stalked after him, snatching her robe from the back of the bathroom door as she went. Slipping it on, she glared at him. “Do I get a say in any of this?”

“Not if you’re going to spout more bullshit, no.” He buttoned his fly and then sat on the bed, where he began to tug on his socks and shoes. “I won’t let you lie to me or yourself about this. I won’t let you lie and say you regret it either—that insults us both.”

“I didn’t say I regretted it.”

“If you don’t regret it, why backtrack? Why?”

Exasperated, she asked, “Why do you care? You don’t even like me.”

“No, I let you *think* I didn’t like you. When people get close, you retreat into a shell.” Tao had needed to make her believe he presented no danger to her defenses. “I wasn’t going to let you shut me out.”

Riley’s mouth dropped open. Her raven too was stunned. “You’ve been playing me. That’s brilliantly devious.” Riley actually admired and respected the cunningness of it. Her raven did a metaphorical bow.

“I wouldn’t have to play you if you’d just let me past that wall you have up between you and most of the population.”

On one level Riley was an uncomplicated creature, he thought. She didn’t wear a social mask, seemed at ease with her flaws, and could be quite laid back—even in the face of conflict. But she was uncomfortable talking about herself and stuck to surface-level topics of conversation. At first he’d assumed she was hiding something, possibly something that would lead danger to his pack. But he’d soon come to realize it was much simpler than that. “Only ‘the chosen’ get close to you—right now that’s Makenna, Savannah, and Dexter.”

“Then why bother bugging me?”

“Because I don’t like that wall you have up, Riley. It’s in the way of what I want.”

Her heart slammed against her ribs. “I don’t understand why you’re pushing this. As you persistently point out, I drive you insane.”

“You deliberately rile me to hold me at a distance,” he corrected. She challenged him. Argued with him. Snorted at him. Poked at him. And yet Tao wanted her more than breath. She got his blood running in a way that no one else ever had. “No more, Riley.”

Tao knew he was going about this all wrong. A guy needed to approach Riley the same way he would a full-blooded raven. Carefully. Slowly. Not making any sudden movements. Trying to appear as nonthreatening as possible, as if he had no real intention of trying to catch it. Otherwise the bird would take flight and he’d miss his chance. But he just didn’t possess the patience or subtlety for such a careful approach.

Besides, giving Riley the time and space to make her way to him wouldn’t work. She’d spend that time reinforcing the wall between them by pissing him off at every given opportunity. That wasn’t something he’d

allow.

They both stiffened at the sound of a cell phone chiming. Tracking the sound, he squatted and pulled her phone out from under the bed. He saw the name flashing on the screen. “Lucy,” he drawled. Riley held out her hand, jaw set, and he handed her the cell. “Wanna tell me why someone from your old flock is calling?”

“I wouldn’t *need* a phone if I knew stuff like—hey, wait a minute, how the hell do you know that Lucy’s from the flock?”

He pulled on his shirt and gave her a sympathetic smile. “Baby, do you really think I’d let a perfect stranger into my pack without knowing about their background?” Finding out where she came from and the details of her flock hadn’t been easy. He’d had to dig deep and use a lot of his contacts. It had taken months and he still didn’t have all the facts.

Riley tensed, wary. “Just how much did you find out about my past?”

He gave her an enigmatic smile. “Enough.”

What did “enough” mean? Riley didn’t exactly have deep, dark secrets, but she had as much dirty laundry as the next person. Knowing Tao could be fully aware just how dirty that laundry was . . . it made her feel vulnerable. Exposed.

“I wasn’t prying, Riley, and I didn’t do it to hurt you. I was making sure my pack mates were safe—that includes you. Of course, I would never have had to go to such measures if you hadn’t kept your past one great big secret.” He settled his hands on her shoulders. “I didn’t uncover anything you’d consider personal, just basic facts about the flock. I don’t want to find out about your life from other people. I want to hear it from you. Okay?”

No, it wasn’t okay, because she wasn’t sure she completely understood what he was asking for—a bed-buddy? A fling? A relationship? Riley swallowed. “What exactly do you want from me?”

Tao traced the delicate line of her jaw. “I’m not asking for anything serious, baby. Relationships don’t work for me, they never have.” His past relationships had been stressful and complicated—mostly because he was an asshole with no idea how to make another person happy. “But we both know we’d be kidding ourselves if we thought this could end here, so I say we just let it play out. *And* I want you to let me in a little, because I’m not interested in anything cold and impersonal.” He watched her carefully as she stared back at him, eyeing him warily and deliberating on what he’d said. No doubt she’d fight him on it, but—

“All right.”

He blinked, unsure he’d heard her correctly. “All right?”

She shrugged. “I like sex, and, from what little I remember of last night, you’re pretty good at it.”

He’d been expecting a fight if for no other reason than that she could be a pain in his ass when she chose to be. Her reactions didn’t always make sense to him, and it really did make him wonder what went on in her pretty little head.

Satisfied by her response, his wolf relaxed. Tao, however, felt a little wounded by her assessment. “I’m better than ‘pretty good.’”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Next time I have you under me, I’ll prove it to you and—”

The bedroom door flew open and two small children scurried inside. They both froze, eyes dancing from Riley to Tao.

She forced a breezy smile for them. “Morning, guys.” Bending, she gave both kids a peck on the cheek. “You’re all washed and dressed, I see. Good.”

Savannah’s brows met. “You smell funny. And you have black stuff on your face.”

Hmm, thought Riley, apparently she hadn’t wiped off all the mascara after all. “I know, which means I need to go shower.” At that moment her cell began chiming again. “I’ll meet you guys in the kitchen soon, okay?”

Dexter gave a reluctant nod, and she ruffled his mop of blond curls before turning away.

Tao watched Riley quickly retreat into the bathroom. He’d like to stick around and eavesdrop on her call. Instead he turned to the kids looking up at him. Savannah’s gold, unblinking eyes were staring at him steadily. The impish viper shifter might be only four, but she was a fearless little thing. She also considered him the enemy, which was kind of understandable. He hadn’t been what anyone would call welcoming when they first arrived.

It wasn’t that he didn’t like kids. Tao had worried that they might hurt the Alpha pair’s son, Kye—especially since Dexter not only was a cheetah cub but could already partially shift. But the kids had quickly grown on Tao and, honestly, he felt like a bastard for initially being such an ass toward them.

Clearing his throat, Tao said, “Morning.”

The cub pulled a crumbling half of a cookie out of his pocket and held it out. Dexter was a hoarder, so heaven only knew how long that cookie had been in his pocket. Still, Tao took it to be polite. “Thanks, little man.”

Dexter just nodded; he didn’t say much in general. Unlike Savannah, the two-year-old had warmed up to Tao.

“Why are you in Riley’s room?” asked Savannah suspiciously, cocking her head and making her little caramel pigtails bounce. She was mightily protective of Riley.

“I just needed to talk to her about something. Why don’t you go wait for her in the kitchen? I’ll bet Grace has made your breakfast by now.” But Savannah continued staring at him, her gaze unblinking. “I’m not going to hurt Riley.”

“You growl at her. And you do it a lot.” Her little nose wrinkled. “That’s mean.”

“Only because she purposely drives me . . . You know what? Never mind. Let’s just go have breakfast. Riley won’t be long.”

Tao hustled them out of the room, closing the door behind them. Shooting him one last suspicious look, Savannah took Dexter’s hand and walked ahead of Tao as they moved to the ladder at the end of the tunnel. Incredibly agile, the kids easily scrambled up the black metal ladder. Once on the first level, the kids then turned down the tunnel that led to the kitchen while Tao went down a separate tunnel toward his bedroom. He didn’t pass any of his pack mates along the way, which meant it was likely that they were already in the kitchen.

After taking a quick, refreshing shower and some much-needed Tylenol, Tao pulled on some clothes and made his way to the kitchen. As he entered, his stomach rumbled at the sight and smell of the delicious spread on the dining table—scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, fruit, cereal, and biscuits and gravy were among the selection. Grace, the pack’s cook and mother hen, stood at the stove while the rest of the pack sat around the table.

Sinking into a chair, Tao loaded his plate with food as he scanned the room. Riley hadn’t yet arrived, which made him frown. He saw that many of his pack mates looked as if they were suffering from serious hangovers, especially Ryan’s teenage cousin, Zac; he’d been allowed only one beer, yet the kid looked dead to the world.

Makenna in particular, who was filling Savannah’s and Dexter’s plates, seemed badly hungover with her puffy face and the bags under her eyes. She

knew the kids well, since she worked at the homeless shelter where they'd stayed before coming here with Riley for sanctuary. It was only later that Tao had figured out that Riley didn't need sanctuary at all.

Lilah, Grace and Rhett's pup, giggled loudly and clapped at something Kye said. Pretty much everyone at the table winced at the sounds.

Jaime slapped her hands over her ears, looking close to tears. "Sound is pain."

Dante began massaging her temples. The Beta pair were an extremely tight couple, most likely because they'd known each other since childhood. "Did you have a good birthday?" he asked Tao.

Tao nodded. "Thanks to all of you for the party and presents."

His pack mates gave him strained smiles, with the exception of Jaime's brother, Gabe. Leaning his head on the table, the submissive male lazily lifted his hand to acknowledge Tao's words. He'd most likely meant to give him a thumbs-up or something, Tao couldn't be sure.

Gabe's mate, Hope, said, "I hope you liked the cake that Grace and I made."

"There's still some left," said Greta.

Marcus's head snapped up. "There's cake left?" The male enforcer ate like a horse and, like his mate and fellow enforcer, Roni, he was obsessed with cake.

"You already ate most of it," Lydia complained.

Marcus tipped his chin toward Cam. "He okay there?" Her sleeping mate had sunk so deeply into the chair he looked close to slipping right off it. Lydia just shrugged as if too tired to help him.

As Tao chatted with his Alphas, Taryn and Trey, he listened for Riley's approach. It was at least twenty minutes before she arrived, and he tracked her every move as she headed to the table. He really did love to watch her walk. She had a fluid, predatory grace that said she was confident, capable, and not to be fucked with.

As she took the seat beside Makenna, Tao studied her carefully. He'd watched her often enough to be able to read her moods—much too often, really—but nothing in her expression gave away anything about her phone call.

Had it been bad news? Was someone hurt? Had she been asked to return to the flock?

More and more questions sailed around his head, none of which he

would ask her at that moment in front of the pack. The news was for her to share or not. And if he knew Riley like he thought he did, it would be not.

Riley poured herself coffee and met Tao's gaze across the table. She'd felt the burn of it on her skin as she entered the room. She warned him with her eyes not to question her now about Lucy's call—and he *would* question her about it sooner or later—but there was really no getting Tao Lukas to do anything he didn't want to do.

"I'm never drinking again," said Taryn, eyes closed. The blonde might be small, but she was *all* Alpha. She had an aura of authority and dominance that Riley's raven highly respected.

"I promised myself that same thing twenty minutes ago," said Riley, shaking her head when Makenna offered her some toast; her stomach protested the idea of food. Turning to the only female enforcer, she griped, "It's not fair that you look so fresh."

Roni buttered her toast. "It's only because I didn't drink as much as you did."

"You were more interested in the cake," said Jaime.

Roni frowned at Jaime. "I'm mated to Marcus. If you don't get to the cake fast, you don't get cake." Marcus smiled, eyes dancing with amusement.

Jaime raised a hand. "Girls, I say we make a pact here and now *never* to even touch a bottle of tequila ever again."

Makenna nodded. "It would be for our own good." Ryan grunted at his mate in what might have been agreement—Riley didn't know. Mostly mute, he often communicated with grunts that only Makenna seemed able to fully translate.

"Don't kid yourselves into thinking you won't break that pact," said Trey. Unlike his mate, he was powerfully built. The two Alphas might be very different in size, but they were both equally crazy, in Riley's opinion.

"Dexter, you can't!" said Kye.

Riley turned her attention to the cheetah cub, who was stuffing food in his pockets again, and groaned. "Dexter, please don't do that." She smiled in approval when he put the bacon back on the plate. "Thank you." Of course, she knew he'd slip it into his pocket the moment she looked away.

Zac pushed away from the table. "The smell of food is killing me. I need a dark, quiet room so I can die in peace." As he left the room, he passed Trick—another enforcer, who happened to be more deliberately annoying



than even Riley—and bumped fists with him as he entered.

Seating himself at the table, Trick looked around, and his mouth quirked. “You all look like extras from *Dawn of the Dead*.”

Taryn glared at him. “Why don’t you have a hangover?”

Trick shrugged. “I rarely ever have them.”

“Lucky bastard,” said Riley, raking a hand through her hair. “I wish I could say I look rougher than I feel, but I don’t.”

“You don’t look rough,” insisted Dominic with a mischievous grin. “You look beautiful. You make me think of fast food—I want to take you out and then eat you in my car.”

Jaime chuckled, Tao growled, and the others groaned.

Dominic had an idiotic habit of dishing out cheesy pickup lines, and often used them on females who were either mated or dating; that aggravated their partners, given that shifters were very possessive. All that aside, Riley thought the cute blond enforcer was pretty funny.

When Dominic opened his mouth to speak again, Tao snarled, “Dom, don’t.”

Surprised at the vehemence in his tone, Riley met Tao’s gaze. “Cheer up, Fenris,” she said, knowing he hated that she’d nicknamed him after the wolf from Narnia. Exasperation glittered in his eyes, which tickled her raven something fierce.

“You’re a pain in my ass, Porter,” he growled.

Riley just smiled.

“Don’t tolerate that behavior, Tao,” said Greta. The woman didn’t dislike Riley just because she was a raven. It was also because Riley was unmated. Greta didn’t like unmated females around her “boys”—Trey, Dante, Tao, and the four male enforcers—and did her best to scare them off. Tao, Trick, and Dominic were unmated, so Greta wanted her long gone.

“She’s a raven, she shouldn’t be here,” complained Greta. “She’s rude and disrespectful, just like those three hussies,” she added, pointing at Taryn, Jaime, and Makenna. She was as rude to them now as she had been when they were unmated. Roni had somehow tricked Greta into liking and accepting her, which most of the pack found plain hilarious.

Riley took another sip of her coffee. “I would have thought you’d be in a better mood these days now that you have yourself a boyfriend.”

Greta gasped. “Allen is *not* my . . . my . . . boyfriend,” she insisted, stumbling over the word. “He and I just enjoy each other’s company.”

“Right,” drawled Riley, winking at her. Allen was Cam’s uncle and, for some unknown reason, thought the sun rose and set with Greta. Riley struggled to understand how the guy could be attracted to Greta, but to each their own.

Mouth tightening, Greta narrowed her eyes. “Don’t think I don’t know you were the one who first suggested he take me for a meal.”

Riley’s mouth curved. “Like I told him, I just want you to be happy.” What she wanted was to make Greta feel awkward as revenge for her being so awful toward Savannah. The little girl had bitten her once—*once*—and she hadn’t even pierced the skin, but Greta persistently whined about it to make Savannah feel bad. Having Allen around, flirting and trying to charm her, wasn’t something that Greta was very good at handling without blushing like crazy—probably because she was a terrible prude.

“You might have him fooled, but I see you for what you are,” sneered Greta. “Common through and through.”

Riley put down her cup. “Look, Gretchen—”

“*It’s Greta.*”

“I don’t care.”

As Greta proceeded to rant, Makenna leaned into Riley and asked, “Will you ever refer to her by her real name?”

“It’s unlikely,” replied Riley. Not when not doing so was the easiest way to annoy the old crone.

Savannah hissed at Greta, which made the other kids laugh.

Greta dramatically put a protective hand to her throat and turned to Riley. “Do you have no control over that child? She’s vicious.”

Riley sighed. “Are we back to this again?”

“I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised by her behavior since she has *you* for a role model,” sniped Greta. “I mean, look at you. You’re supposed to be taking care of them, but you were drinking all night like you’re not responsible for anyone but yourself.”

Riley snickered. “Lady, you have hair sticking out your nostrils—you don’t get to judge me.”

Taryn nearly choked on whatever she was eating, and Greta instantly turned all that bitchiness onto the Alpha female, calling her one name after another.

“Good one.” Makenna smiled at Riley. “But she still hates me more than she hates you.”

“Really? Bummer.” Noticing Tao leave the room, Riley leaned into Makenna and asked, “Is there any chance you could watch over the kids for me for a couple of hours? I need to get a few things done.” She didn’t add that she was leaving pack territory; Makenna would insist that she take someone along for protection, and she wanted to have her meeting in private.

“Of course,” Makenna agreed easily. “I love spending time with them. And they love climbing Ryan like he’s a fence post.”

Yeah, they sure did, but he didn’t complain. Nope, the poor guy often just stood there, quiet and stoic . . . which was pretty much how Ryan *always* looked, really.

Once she was done with her breakfast, Riley told the kids to be good for Makenna and Ryan and then headed through the network of tunnels. Out of the mountain, she jogged down the steps carved into the cliff face and into the concealed parking lot. There were several pack vehicles for everyone to use at their leisure. Riley headed for the nearest SUV . . . only to find Tao leaning against it.

He opened the passenger door for her and asked, “So, where are we headed?”

She sighed. “I don’t need you to come.”

“You can’t go off alone, Riley. None of us do anymore. The anti-shifter groups are getting more problematic. Just a few months ago they were here calling for Dexter’s death, remember.”

How could she forget? The two-year-old cub had been living alone on the streets for a while, surviving on scraps. No one was sure just how long he’d been homeless; he came to the attention of Social Services only when video footage of him partially shifting was uploaded on YouTube. That footage had also captured the attention of the human anti-shifter extremists, who had called for him to be “put down” like a rabid dog. Instead Social Services had taken him to a shelter for lone shifters.

“Don’t tell me I’m staying behind,” said Tao. “You know I won’t.”

“Look, it’s not that I’m being stubborn. Lucy didn’t explain what she wants to talk about. If it’s personal, she’s not going to tell me in front of you.”

“Probably not, but her feelings aren’t more important than your safety.” Tao wasn’t budging, and he let his determination show in his expression.

Riley sighed again. “You can come *only* if you agree to wait in the SUV. That way she can talk to me in private and you can be sure I’m safe.

Everybody wins.”

He twisted his mouth, considering it. “All right, I’ll wait in the SUV.”

Eyeing him curiously, she walked to the vehicle. “You’re being uncharacteristically cooperative.”

“I can be cooperative . . . when I’m getting what I want.” And right now, the very thing Tao wanted most was sliding into the passenger seat. Life was good.

## CHAPTER THREE



Nestled in the booth against the window, Riley drummed her nails on the scratched tabletop as she stared out through the glass. From there she had a clear view of the street and the diner's parking lot. So far there was no sign of the person she'd agreed to meet.

Maybe they should have chosen a different venue, she thought as she rubbed at her aching temples. The sounds of country music, burgers sizzling, and cutlery clinking were aggravating her hangover headache. Really, she had only herself to blame.

True to his word, Tao had remained in the SUV. Proud as any dominant female, she couldn't help but bristle a little at his insistence on accompanying her to protect her, but she knew it was a wise move. There didn't seem to be any anti-shifter groups loitering around, but not all the radical humans carried banners and chanted bullshit. Some kept a low profile. The majority, however, were openly violent and destructive.

They called for shifters to be confined to their territories, electronically chipped, prohibited from mating with humans, limited to only one child per couple, and placed on a registry like damned sex offenders. Many went as far as bombing packs, prides, and flocks in an effort to "cull" the shifter population.

Shifters had retaliated by forming The Movement—people who hunted extremists and fought violence with violence. They had eliminated many of the radical groups and forced others into hiding. Humans rightfully feared them, but the prejudiced assholes didn't seem to be smart enough to back down. It was an ongoing battle.

Hearing her phone beep, Riley dug it out of her pocket. There was a

message from Jaime, but she didn't open it. She'd read it later when—

Her head snapped up as the bell over the door rang and three familiar ravens entered, letting in a brief blast of traffic noise. The one in front did a quick scan of the diner. Spotting Riley, she smiled and made a beeline for her booth. No sooner had Riley risen to her feet than she was pulled into a tight hug. "You're freakishly strong for someone so small," said Riley.

Laughing, Lucy pulled back. "It's so good to see you. Video chatting just isn't the same." She had almond-shaped eyes, high cheekbones, and dark, straight hair—traits she'd inherited from her Native American ancestors.

Lucy gestured at the two indomitable-looking males behind her. Like Lucy and Riley, they had a slight blue tint to their hair that was typical of raven shifters. "Hugh and Duncan are my assigned bodyguards for the day," said Lucy. As the daughter of the Exodus Flock Alphas, she never went anywhere without protection.

Riley smiled at the Beta and his son as they each gave her a brief hug. Drawing back, she asked, "How are you?"

Hugh patted her shoulder. "Good, thanks. Mad at you for staying away for four years, though."

Duncan's mouth curved. "I'll be better when I'm home." He'd never much liked leaving his territory. "But it's good to see you, Riley."

"Good to see you both too." Her raven was also glad to see them; she'd missed the flock, especially Lucy, who'd been a close friend since childhood. Riley slipped into the booth and gestured for Lucy to sit opposite her.

"We need a little privacy," Lucy told Hugh and Duncan. The males took a booth that was out of earshot, but they didn't look happy about it.

Before Riley could speak, the waitress appeared and asked, "What are you having?"

"Just coffee, thanks," replied Riley. Any other time she would have found the meringue pie inside the glass dome mighty interesting. But thanks to the aftereffects of the tequila, the smells of meat grilling and onions frying were churning her stomach rather than giving her an appetite.

"I'll have the same," said Lucy.

The waitress disappeared with a nod, the soles of her shoes squeaking on the checkered tile floor.

"So . . . what's it like living with wolves?" Lucy asked.

"Fine, I guess. You'd like them. They're good people."

"But you're coming home at some point, right? Dammit, I promised

Mom and Dad I wouldn't pressure you. Honestly, I'm not here to bug you to come home . . . though I won't lie and say I wouldn't do it if I thought it would work—peer pressure doesn't work on your stubborn ass.” Lucy rested her elbows on the table. “As I'm sure you know, the anniversary of your uncles' mating is coming up.”

Riley nodded. She'd already bought them a gift and a card, fully intending to post them soon.

“My parents have organized a last-minute surprise party for them to honor it,” Lucy continued. “It would be great if you could come. Your uncles would be overjoyed.”

Riley tensed, feeling mentally cornered.

As if sensing that, Lucy leaned back a little to give her space. “They miss you, Riley.”

“And I miss them.” Riley absolutely adored Ethan and Max Porter. Ethan was her mother's brother and had mated Max before Riley was born. After her parents' death when she was just four, her uncles had taken her in and raised her. She'd kept in contact with them since leaving the flock. They did a lot of video chatting and even met up occasionally, but she hadn't seen them in over ten months. Her raven missed them as badly as Riley did. “The surprise party is a good idea, and I'm sure they'll be thrilled about it.”

Lucy smiled, as if assuming Riley was consenting to attend.

“But I'm not sure my being there would be the best idea.”

Lucy's smile faded. “Why not?”

“A party should be fun and exciting. If I waltz in there, it would stir up old memories.”

“Yeah, but not in a way that would ruin the party. Everybody's missed you. They'll all be ecstatic to see you.”

Riley shot her a skeptical look. “Everybody? Really?”

“Look, four years ago, when emotions were running high, there were a few people who blamed you for what happened—no, they *wanted* to blame you; they needed someone to take out their grief on. But a lot of time has passed; they realize that they were wrong. Shirley will probably always blame you purely because it relieves her son of any wrongdoing, but I don't think she truly believes you're at fault. Not really.”

Riley wasn't so sure about that.

“The only other person who won't be particularly welcoming is Cynthia. You two have never seen eye to eye and she might worry that you're

back for Sawyer.” Lucy snorted, adding, “As if. But this isn’t about them. This is about you and your uncles.”

The waitress appeared with their coffees, and the smell thankfully didn’t upset Riley’s stomach.

Once they were alone again, Lucy lifted her cup. “Come to the party, Riley. Come for the weekend and have a proper visit. If you were honest, you’d admit that you miss all of us too. Not only that; you miss home.”

Shaking the packet of sugar, Riley sighed. Like her raven, she did miss her flock, and she did miss Sedona; the flock’s territory had been Riley’s sanctuary, her safe place . . . right up until the end, anyway.

“Just a weekend. Then you can come back here to be with the wolves if that’s what you want.”

Riley sprinkled the sugar into her coffee and stirred it. “I don’t know, Luce.”

“I talked to Sawyer. I told him I was coming to see you today.”

“And?”

“He said he figured someone would invite you and that I shouldn’t take no for an answer.”

Well, that was a surprise. “Did you point out that his girlfriend wouldn’t like it?”

“I wouldn’t go as far as to say that Cynthia’s his girlfriend. One of the things that made you and Sawyer eventually gravitate to each other was that you were both the most dominant unmated ravens in the flock. Without you around, Cynthia’s the most dominant; I’d say that’s all the appeal she holds for him. But Cynthia’s set on keeping him because she knows he’s next in line to be Beta. She’s always wanted to be Beta female.”

Riley blew over the rim of her cup. “Does she know you’re here?”

“Hell no. If she knew, she’d tell your uncles and ruin the surprise just to be a bitch. I haven’t told many people because I was worried your uncles would find out and get their hopes up that you’ll come. I’ve sworn Sawyer to secrecy—he won’t break a promise.” Lucy put down her cup. “Did you plan to never come back to Sedona?”

“Of course not.”

“Well, then, if you would have returned at some point, what better time than for your uncles’ party? They’d love it. It’s been four years since you were home, Riley. That’s too long to stay away.” The sticky fake leather cushion squeaked as Lucy leaned forward and grabbed her wrist. “Please



come.”

The bell over the door rang once again. Riley looked up and stiffened as none other than Tao strolled inside. *Motherfucker*. He flicked Hugh and Duncan a brief assessing look, and then the son of a bitch stalked straight to her. He didn't speak. He bent down, curled a hand under her chin . . . and kissed her. *Kissed* her kissed her.

Utterly shocked, she didn't fight him. Didn't move. Then the shock gave way to anger and she drew back, ready to hiss a reprimand. But as his eyes flared with a warning, instinct stayed her hand. Tao would have no problems with causing a scene. Hugh and Duncan would no doubt intervene, which could lead to fighting.

“Hey, baby.” Tao slid in the booth beside her. “I was driving by and saw you in the window.” Taking a sip of Riley's coffee, he flicked a glance at Lucy. “Everything okay here?”

It took all Riley's self-control not to pour the hot liquid all over his head. “Fine.”

Tao sensed her irritation and, admittedly, felt the urge to smile. Instead he studied the female sitting opposite them. He'd watched their conversation avidly through the window, seen Riley's conflicted expression and Lucy's pleading one, and he'd worried she was trying to coax Riley into returning to the flock. Tao wasn't good with that.

He also wasn't good with the fact that two male ravens had had their hands on her, so he'd been sure to make a possessive display. She might not be his, but he didn't want anyone else thinking she could be theirs. “Introduce us, Riley.”

Gritting her teeth, Riley tried to shift a little away from Tao, but his hand clamped on her thigh. It was her body's reaction that made her freeze. Raw need pooled in her lower stomach. “Tao, this is a good friend of mine, Lucy. Lucy, this is Tao—he's the Phoenix Pack's Head Enforcer.”

“Ah, you're the Alphas' daughter,” said Tao. “Riley's told me about you.” The lie fell easily from his mouth and seemed to make Riley bristle. “She said you've been friends a long time.”

Wide-eyed, Lucy said, “We have. Sadly, she hasn't mentioned you to me, which is very disappointing.” Her eyes slid to Riley. “I'm assuming you haven't mentioned him to your uncles either, because a little thing like this wouldn't have slipped their minds.”

“And how are Ethan and Max?” asked Tao. “Bored after retiring from

their enforcer roles?”

“I think they might be a little bored,” Lucy replied with a smile. “Other than that, they’re fine. Although they miss her like crazy.”

“Well, considering they raised her, I’m not surprised.”

Riley fairly goggled at him. He’d said he knew only “basic facts,” but he was reeling off plenty of details.

He put down Riley’s cup. “You’re a long way from Sedona.”

“I came to invite Riley to the surprise party we’re throwing to celebrate the anniversary of her uncles’ mating. You should come too.”

“Thanks, I’d be happy to go with her.” Tao squeezed Riley’s thigh when she opened her mouth, most likely to object. She snapped it shut, so he stroked her thigh in reward.

“Great.” She patted Riley’s hand. “Your uncles will be thrilled to hear you’ve met someone, even if he’s not a raven.”

“*Lucy,*” Riley drawled.

“You want them to hear it from you, I get it.” She took a long gulp of her coffee and then rose. “I’ll try to remember not to mention it, but I may just forget if you miss the party.”

“That’s mean.”

“That’s me.” Edging out of the booth, Lucy said, “The party takes place on Friday; that gives you a little time to think on it. You could arrive that day so your presence is as much of a surprise as the party. Then you could stay for the weekend. Seriously, Riley, they’d love to see you. It would make their year.” Her eyes slid to Tao. “It was good meeting you. Take care of her for me.”

Hugh and Duncan said their goodbyes to Riley as they followed Lucy out of the diner—sparing Tao only a curious, unfriendly glance. With a sigh Riley let her head fall back and rubbed her aching forehead.

“Going by the way you were so easily invited to a party that’s taking place on your flock’s territory, I’m guessing you were never banished.” Tao had suspected as much, but he’d never been able to find out for sure. “Did you officially leave the flock?” It was one thing to leave for a little while and a whole other thing to become a lone shifter.

“Check your nose, Tao, because I’m pretty sure it’s in my business.”

His mouth kicked up into a smile. “It was a simple question.”

“You seem to know plenty, so I’m surprised you have to ask.”

“I won’t apologize for looking into your background, not when I did it

to be sure that you and the rest of our pack are safe.”

“*Your* pack, you mean.”

Tao snorted. He didn’t believe for one second that she’d leave. She’d found a place for herself there and she was also too attached to Savannah and Dexter. “Don’t insult my intelligence, Riley. Even before you were offered a place in the pack, you had no intention of returning to your flock. If you had, you wouldn’t have gone to the homeless shelter. You wouldn’t have asked Makenna to help you get a job and an apartment so you could blend in with humans. Now lower your hackles—all I’m asking is if you officially left the flock.”

Knowing he’d keep bugging her, she sighed. “No, I haven’t.”

With a tone as sensitive as he could manage, he asked, “What happened to your parents?” He hadn’t been able to uncover the cause of their deaths. “It would be best to have the details, since I’m going to this party—”

Her head snapped around to face him. “You’re not going to the party.”

“I was invited. It’ll be nice to meet your family.”

“You *hate* outsiders.”

“I don’t hate outsiders. I just have no time for them. They’re none of my concern. But you are. Come on, you’re not going to make me go alone, are you?”

She growled. “You’re not going. And I’m done talking about it.”

“Pity for you that I don’t give up so easily.”

“You should. My past isn’t as interesting as you seem to think it must be. And neither am I.”

Tao wrapped a strand of her gorgeous hair around his finger. He fucking loved her hair. “I think you are, but I won’t know for sure until you drop that guard of yours.” He put his mouth to her ear. “I’m getting around that wall you have up, Riley. Just letting you know so you won’t be surprised when you find me there.”

“Go floss your teeth with your itty-bitsy cock, Fenris.”

Tao tilted his head. “You know . . . I just realized I’m not the one who’s riled for once. I feel funny.”

“You are *such* an asshole.”

“Yeah, I know.” He dug out some cash from his pocket, set it on the table, and got to his feet. “Come on, let’s get out of here before your head explodes.”

She pushed out of the seat, eager to get away from the scents and

sounds of the diner. She didn't bother complaining when he linked his fingers with hers as they walked to the door. There seemed little point when he wouldn't release her hand anyway.

Outside, he guided her across the lot. Just as they neared the SUV, the doors of a black Lexus parked beside it swung open. Four humans exited the car—all big and well dressed, with hard faces. There was something very shady about them that made her raven release a low, guttural rattle.

Tao came to a halt, suddenly radiating menace. "There a problem?" he drawled. His wolf pushed against Tao's skin, watchful and prepared.

The tallest and leanest of the group gave a surprisingly charming smile. "Not at all. I'm Ramón Veloz. And you're Tao Lukas, the Phoenix Pack's Head Enforcer." Eyes the color of dark lead cut to Riley. "And you are Riley Porter. I've recently made it my business to know as much as I can about your pack." His gaze slid back to Tao. "I'd like a meeting with your Alphas."

The expectation of obedience in his tone rubbed Tao's wolf the wrong way. From the dark pinstriped suit to the shiny leather shoes, this human had "mobster" written all over him. "Not sure why you think that would interest me."

Ramón's face hardened. "It should interest you. This meeting is necessary."

"My Alphas won't consent to it without good reason." And they'd want to check the guy's identity and history before even considering it.

"I'm not an extremist, if that's your concern." Ramón smoothed a hand down his tie. "In fact, I have a proposition for your Alpha female. One I think she will be happy to accept."

Tao had to admit he was intrigued. He hid it, though. "What's that?"

"My brother, Dion, is ill. Very ill. The doctors can't do anything for him. I need the services of a healer. I've heard that your Alpha female is quite a powerful one. She will be paid well, of course."

"What do you mean by 'ill'?"

"He has an inoperable brain tumor," Ramón replied, voice surprisingly dispassionate. "He's been given just four months to live."

"I'm sorry to hear about your brother," said Tao, "but my Alpha female can't help him. She heals wounds, not fatal diseases."

"I've heard differently."

Tao had no idea what the guy meant by that, since, as far as he knew, Taryn had never healed an illness.

Ramón fished a shiny business card from his pocket and held it out to Tao. “Here is my card. Pass it on to your Alphas and explain my situation.” His expression turned grave. “Be sure to impress upon them just how serious a situation this is, Mr. Lukas. I’m relying on you. Can I do that?”

Tao took the card. “You’re not part of my pack, so no.”

Ramón smiled. “I think I could like you.” Turning, he slid back into the rear seat of his car. “I look forward to hearing from your Alpha female.”

“She can’t help your brother,” Tao told him.

“We’ll see.”

With that, one of the other humans closed Ramón’s door and the three of them hopped into the vehicle.

Watching them drive off, Riley said, “Well, that was unexpected. Did you notice they were all armed?”

“I noticed,” said Tao.

“I don’t like his arrogance or sense of entitlement. He’s fully *expecting* Taryn to do exactly what he wants without question. Think she will?” Personally, Riley didn’t think so.

“I strongly doubt it. Let’s go find out.”

One look at their faces and Taryn knew something was wrong. Frowning, she straightened on the recliner at the end of the sectional sofa. “What is it?”

Others from the pack were scattered around the living room; some were seated on the huge, bulky sofa while others sat in armchairs. Like their Alpha female, they switched from relaxed to alert in a single second.

Tao came to a stop in the center of the room, glad when Riley stood beside him rather than finding herself a seat. “Just as we were coming out of Mo’s Diner, we were approached by a human named Ramón Veloz.”

Muting the TV, Trey said, “Who?”

“Ramón Veloz,” Tao repeated.

Taryn pursed her lips. “Never heard of him.”

“Well, he’s heard of you,” Tao told her.

Her brows raised. “Me?”

“His brother’s dying of a brain tumor,” Tao explained. “Ramón wants you to heal him. Says he’ll pay you.”

Jaime, who was perched on Dante’s lap, looked at Taryn. “Could you even do that?”

“Not without killing myself in the process,” Taryn replied.

“Even if you could, it wouldn’t be advisable to help,” said Rhett, who was tapping away on the keys of his laptop. “I heard of a healer who helped humans in exchange for money. She had people lining up, which would have been profitable for her except it drained her to the point that she became seriously weak and sick herself. That didn’t stop humans from harassing her for help.”

“What did you tell him?” Trey asked Tao.

“That she wouldn’t be able to help,” Tao replied. “He didn’t believe me. Someone’s told him that Taryn can help, and their word seems to mean more to him than mine. He’s expecting your call.” He handed Ramón’s business card to Dante, who then passed it along to Trey.

“I’ll call,” began Trey. “I’ll inform him that we can’t be of any assistance.”

“Shit,” hissed Rhett.

Trey frowned. “What?”

“Ramón Veloz,” said Rhett, eyes on the screen of his laptop. “The guy’s allegedly a drug lord. He’s also suspected of having his hands in gun smuggling, human trafficking, and prostitution rings. The police have never been able to pin anything on him, though.” He paused as he tapped a few keys. “He has a brother, Dion; the guy works for Ramón and is a person of interest in several murder cases.”

Taryn raised a brow. “Well, now I don’t feel bad that I can’t help him.”

Dante drummed his fingers on Jaime’s thigh and said, “This Ramón guy could be a problem if he proves persistent. People like him don’t like being denied what they want.”

“I don’t give a shit what he does or doesn’t want,” said Trey, expression hard. “Taryn can’t help him. It’s as simple as that.”

Jaime looked from Tao to Riley. “What were you guys doing at Mo’s Diner anyway? Was it a date? Tell me it was a date.”

Riley rolled her eyes at the little matchmaker. “I was meeting someone from my flock.”

There was a short silence as people exchanged glances.

“You didn’t say your *old* flock,” Trey observed.

“I never really left it. And I never once implied that I had,” Riley reminded him.

After a moment Trey said, “True enough. What flock is it?”

“The Exodus Flock from Arizona.”

“I’ve heard of it,” said Trey. “Are you going back?”

“Only for the weekend. The Alphas are throwing a surprise party for my uncles. I want to be there.”

“You talk about them with affection in your voice,” said Dante. “Yet you don’t live within the flock. Why?”

Not at all eager to revisit the past, Riley hesitated. But these people had been good to her, she reminded herself. They’d been patient when she refused to speak of it all these months. Most importantly to her, they were good to Savannah and Dexter. She could share the truth with them. It would also be a lot easier to talk about while Greta, Zac, and the little ones weren’t in the room. Greta would make snide comments, and the story would only upset the younger pack members.

“I got along fine with most of the kids in the flock, but my closest friends were Lucy and Wade.” Riley licked her lips. “Sadly, Wade was one of those people destined to go through life being emotionally bruised over and over. He was extremely sensitive, so he felt things deeply, *too* deeply. He was also thin-skinned and highly introverted, which made him socially anxious. To add to that, he was the most submissive raven in the flock—he was particularly submissive for a male. All that made him the butt of a lot of jokes. Growing up, I spent a great deal of my time defending him from others, mostly his cousin, Alec.”

“There was a boy like that in my old pack,” said Taryn. “The other wolves made his life hell.”

“Most of the kids in the flock did the same to Wade,” said Riley. “He didn’t get tougher as he got older. He became more and more withdrawn until he eventually stopped talking to me or Lucy. He stayed in his cabin most of the time, playing video games. We suspected he was depressed and told his mom about it, but she shrugged it off.

“One night I was at a house party. It was Alec’s twenty-first birthday and pretty much everyone in our age-group was there—no parents, no Betas, no Alphas, no enforcers; just a bunch of kids celebrating that they could legally drink. I was supposed to meet Lucy there, but I couldn’t find her inside. The music was loud, so I went into the kitchen to call her cell phone. I hadn’t even dialed her number when I heard it.”

“Heard what?” asked Jaime.

“Bang.” Riley swallowed hard. “I’m not entirely sure where Wade got the gun, but he shot and killed every kid there. It all happened so fast. I

should have shifted and flown off, but I heard one of them shout Wade's name and I thought that meant he'd turned up at the party—that made me freeze, wondering what the fuck I could do to help. I didn't think for a single second that he was the one holding the gun. Not until he came into the kitchen. His eyes . . . they were dead. No rage, no thirst for violence. I swear, it chilled my blood.”

Riley paused in surprise as Tao's hand squeezed hers. “I tried to talk Wade into putting the gun down, I asked him not to shoot. He frowned at me as if I was stupid, said he'd never hurt me, and then he just walked out the back door. People came to help, but by then he'd shifted and flown off into the mountains.”

“Did they track him?” asked Trick, leaning forward.

“The Beta, Hugh, found his dead body a couple of days later,” said Riley. “It looked like he'd died from dehydration, according to Hugh. He could have survived if he'd stayed in his avian form, but I think he wanted to die.”

Makenna wrapped her arms around herself. “God, that's horrible.”

“There's more,” Tao sensed. “I can understand you leaving the territory while the memories are too fresh, Riley, but not why you'd stay away for four years. There has to be more.”

She rubbed at her nape. “A lot of people were grieving. They'd lost sons and daughters. And as much as they were glad that I was okay . . .”

“They resented you for it,” Makenna finished.

Riley lifted one shoulder, asking, “Who could blame them? Of course they'd be wishing their own child survived. I could understand that. But Wade's mother, Shirley . . . well, she didn't want to face what her son had done. And you know what? I can understand that too. But she went too far—she accused me of putting him up to it. She said I must have taken advantage of his depressed state and made him act against his nature.”

Jaime gasped. “That's crazy.”

“She made it sound very believable. I mean, I was the only survivor. Why shoot the others and not me? She implied I could have taken Wade there, watched while he did it, and then helped him get away. Some of the grievors were angry enough to *want* to believe that so they could have a living, flesh-and-blood person to rail at. Ravens are extremely protective of their young—it's in their bones. Those deaths rocked everyone, made the parents feel like they'd failed their children. They wanted a whipping boy,



someone they could project all that guilt onto.

“I was worried it would come to a point where someone finally did choose to believe it, so I left before things were said that couldn’t be unsaid.” And because she’d needed the time and space to deal with her own grief. “I’d always wanted to do a little traveling anyway. Most avian shifters do.”

Dominic tilted his head, asking, “Why didn’t you go back?” It was odd seeing him without his usual impish grin.

“Every time I thought about it, it just didn’t feel right,” said Riley.

“Of course it didn’t feel right,” said Taryn. “A shifter’s territory is their safe place. That event tainted it for you. And you no doubt felt betrayed by the very people who should always support you. I wouldn’t be in any rush to return either.” She blew out a breath. “You’re truly ready to go back, even if it’s just for the weekend?”

Riley nodded. “It’s time.”

After a moment of silence, Taryn asked, “When do you need to leave?”

“Friday.”

Makenna winced. “Can’t you leave on Saturday instead?”

Riley frowned at Makenna’s worried look. “Why?”

“Taking a trip on Fridays leads to misfortune,” Makenna said sagely.

Ryan closed his eyes, sighing. Makenna was incredibly superstitious and saw signs everywhere. Ryan, however, was a very practical person who believed superstitions were completely illogical.

“Sorry,” said Riley, stifling a smile, “the party’s Friday.”

“I’ll text Shaya and ask if there’s any chance you can borrow Nick’s friend’s private jet,” Taryn said, referring to the Mercury Pack Alphas. The packs were very close, especially since Roni had originally been a Mercury wolf, and so they shared Roni and Marcus. “We’ve done it a few times,” Taryn added. “Where in Arizona does the flock live?”

“Sedona, Arizona.”

Trey rubbed at his jaw. “The question is . . . who do you take with you to Sedona?”

Riley frowned. “I don’t need anybody to come along.”

“None of us go anywhere alone, Riley,” said Trey. “You know that.”

“I was invited,” announced Tao. “Lucy asked me to come.”

“Ah, well, then it makes sense for you to go,” Taryn said to him.

Shaking her head, Riley insisted, “I really don’t need protection.”

“Like Trey said, we don’t go anywhere alone,” said Dante. “The ravens

aren't going to like having a strange wolf on their territory. Tao's a Head Enforcer—that's a position people take note of, and it would make anyone very reluctant to fuck with him."

"What about Kye?" asked Riley. "Tao's his bodyguard."

"And I take that position very seriously," said Tao, "but someone else can take over for a couple of days. You can't go there without protection, and you know full well I'm not going to hang back here while you leave our territory for the weekend, so why are we wasting time discussing it?"

Turning to fully face him, Riley folded her arms. "Lucy might have invited you, but I didn't."

Tao gave a careless shrug. "Doesn't change the fact that I'm going."

"Tell me honestly, how much of that story did you already know?"

"Most of it," Tao replied. "I didn't know you'd been at the shooting or that anyone had even *thought* to pin the blame on you, but I did know there was one."

Trick frowned at Tao. "You knew . . . and you didn't tell us?"

He shrugged again. "It was Riley's story to tell."

Dominic arched a brow. "So it was okay for *you* to know, but not the rest of us?"

"I dug up her story because I needed to be sure that everyone—including Riley—was safe from her past. I wasn't going to turn her story into a subject of gossip; she didn't deserve that." Tao turned to Riley. "Someone's got to go with you. I want it to be me. If that isn't what you want, I'll stay behind."

"Really?" asked Riley.

"No, but it seemed like a nice thing to say."

She did her best to fight a smile, but she knew her lips twitched. "I'm done here." Riley could argue with him all she wanted, but it wouldn't make a damn bit of difference. The stubborn wolf wasn't going to relent. "Where are the kids?"

"Baking cookies with Grace and Lydia," said Makenna. "They got bored with me." She pouted, making Riley laugh. All the pack members enjoyed spending time with the kids, but Makenna was always the most eager to do so.

Riley walked out of the living room and through the tunnels until she came to the spacious and modern kitchen.

Savannah looked up and grinned, her hands covered in dough. "Riley,

look, we're making cookies!"

"Cool, I want to help." Riley spent the rest of the day with them, baking cookies, drawing pictures, and going for a run near the river.

Later that evening she guided them into their small bedroom, smiling as she breathed in the scents of baby powder, fresh linen, and crayons. What had once been a plain guest room was now a charming children's room. Colorful posters of cartoon figures were tacked to the walls, books were stacked on the niche in the cave wall, and paper, crayons, and coloring books were scattered on a small desk.

As per their usual routine, she helped them change into their pajamas and then switched on the closet light and left the door ajar. Savannah grabbed a stuffed wolf from the overflowing toy box and Dexter chose a small red car before they crawled into their narrow beds.

Riley pulled the soft comforters over them and then knelt on the rug between the beds. "On Friday I need to leave here for a few days." It would be best to tell them now before they heard it from someone else. It would be the first time she'd been away from them since first meeting them at the shelter, and she suspected it would be hard for all of them.

Savannah clutched the stuffed wolf tight to her. "Leave?"

"Only for the weekend. That's not long."

"Why?" asked Dexter, voice low and wary.

"I'm going to see my uncles," said Riley. "They're having a party and I'd like to be there."

"I like parties," declared Savannah. "Can I come?"

Riley gave her a rueful smile. "Not this time, baby."

Savannah pouted. "You won't go alone, will you? Taryn says we shouldn't go places alone."

"Tao's coming with me."

Savannah's cute little face scrunched up. "But he's mean to you."

"And I'm mean to him."

Savannah chuckled. "Me too."

"You'll be back?" asked Dexter, fiddling with his car.

Riley nodded and said firmly, "I'll be back."

The cub held her eyes. "You *promise*?"

Her chest ached at his plea. "I promise," she vowed. And that right there answered the question of just how hard it would be for them and for Riley if she left the Phoenix Pack for good. It would be agonizing.

She'd loved the kids since the moment Dexter offered her a stale cookie while Savannah touched her hair, seeming mesmerized by the color. People tended to be wary of ravens, but they hadn't shown any such wariness. Only curiosity and a loneliness she could relate to. She'd bonded with them in a way she hadn't with anyone other than her uncles.

Leaving them to sleep, Riley gently closed their bedroom door and headed to her own room. God, she was tired. Dog tired. But for her there was a super-big difference between tired and sleepy. She could be absolutely exhausted and in serious need of rest, but that didn't mean she'd feel sleepy. Often she lay there for hours, staring at the ceiling and praying that sleep would take her, but she'd be wide awake.

She'd had idiopathic insomnia since childhood, so she was kind of used to it. That didn't make it any less of a pain in her ass. Since she felt far from sleepy now, she didn't bother hopping into bed. Instead she stripped naked and went out onto the balcony. Opening her arms wide, she shifted. Bones cracked and popped while her body shrank and her raven surfaced.

The avian shook, settling into her feathers. Then she opened her wings wide and flew.

## CHAPTER FOUR



**F**riday afternoon Tao slung his bag over his shoulder and stalked out of his room to find Dante waiting. Locking his door behind him, Tao tipped his chin. “Hey.”

“I’m driving you to the airport,” said Dante.

Tao nodded in thanks. Nick’s friend was presently using the private jet, which meant Tao and Riley would be taking a commercial flight. “I’ll get Riley and meet you downstairs.”

“You know . . . maybe you could use this weekend to smash down her barriers. Don’t try to tell me you don’t want her, that would be a damn lie. You might argue over everything and nothing, but it’s part of the chemistry between you. Like some weird kind of foreplay. It’s been hilarious watching the two of you circle each other like wary predators. If you want the truth, I think she would be good for you, and I think you would be good for her.”

Given that the Beta was big on control and demanded respect, it truly did surprise Tao that Dante had warmed to her. Riley lived by her own rules and resisted all attempts at control. “I didn’t expect you to like her.”

“Why?”

“She’s impulsive, unimpressed by authority, and her raven keeps shitting on Greta.”

Amusement lit Dante’s eyes. “Ravens have a vengeful streak, and Greta does enjoy giving Riley shit. I guess her raven’s just returning the favor.”

Tao snorted. “Whatever. I’ll meet you in the lot.” Clutching the strap of his duffel, Tao stalked through the tunnels.

He hadn’t actually seen all that much of Riley over the past few days. He’d been working the late shifts, guarding the territory’s perimeter, so

they'd only really seen each other at the evening meals. He'd deliberately sat beside her every time, keeping his thigh pressed to hers and occasionally toying with her hair—a subtle possessive gesture that didn't go unnoticed by anyone.

Reaching Riley's room, he rapped his knuckles on the door. She opened it, looking tired. He wasn't surprised, having once overheard her telling Makenna that she suffered from insomnia. "All packed?"

"Yeah," she replied. "I just need to get my bag and—what are you doing?" She frowned as he pushed his way into the room, kicking the door shut behind him.

"We need to get a couple of things straight. First of all, I know you'd rather do this alone, but you know that going anywhere alone is not a good idea. You wouldn't want me out there without protection any more than I want you to be."

"Don't bet on it."

"So let's drop that, shove aside the issue, and concentrate on making sure this visit goes well for you and your uncles."

She poked her tongue into the inside of her cheek. "All right."

"Good. Now on to the next thing: where's my watch, Riley? I had it yesterday morning."

She raised an imperious brow. "Oh, I see, because ravens like to collect shiny things, you think *I* took it?"

"No, I think you took it because you took it. You always steal my shit." He pointed to the iPad on the dresser, proving his point.

"*Borrow*, I borrow your stuff."

"Without my permission, *which makes it stealing*."

"Only if you want to get technical about it."

Looming over her, he growled, "Do you have to be such a pain in my ass?"

"You really should learn to control your anger better. Eighty-eight percent of men with bad tempers end up with high blood pressure and die an early death."

"They do not."

"They could do."

He closed his eyes for a moment, seeking patience. She made up statistics all the freaking time. He did not know why, just like he didn't know why she stole his shit. It was just something Riley did. "I can't do this. The

conversation needs to end now.” Opening his eyes, he found them drifting to the mark he’d left on her neck. “That sure faded fast.” His wolf didn’t like that at all. Honestly, Tao didn’t like it much either.

“I’m a fast healer.”

The hint of smugness in her tone made his wolf growl. “Oh, you are?” Tao backed her into the wall. “Then we’ll have to do something about it.”

Knowing exactly what he intended to do, Riley grabbed his arms. “Don’t you—” He closed his mouth over hers and licked the seam of her lips. She resisted. For all of three seconds. Then lust bloomed deep in her core, shocking her with its intensity, and her body took over.

Tao plunged his tongue inside her mouth, groaning as the exotic taste of her burst on his tongue and raced through his system. It was as addictive as any drug; he couldn’t get enough of it. Couldn’t stop. He kissed her hard, feasting and gorging himself on her.

He shoved his hands into all that glorious, silky-smooth hair and pulled. She moaned, gripping his arms so hard he felt the prick of her talons. He wanted to lick and bite her neck, wanted to taste her skin, but he couldn’t bring himself to release her mouth. His cock was thick and heavy, needing more. Needing her. And as he shoved his cock against her and she moaned, he thought he might just fucking explode.

Somewhere at the back of her mind, Riley panicked. He’d done exactly what he’d done the night they were drunk—done the very thing she’d always suspected he’d do if they ever acted on the sexual tension that throbbed between them. He’d taken control, taken *her* as if it were his right.

There was possessiveness in every stroke of his tongue, every tug on her hair, every nip of his teeth. It scared her, but the fear was drowned out by the lust that was heating her blood and ignoring rational thought. His mouth was sheer fucking magic as it consumed and dominated. She arched into him, rubbing against him like a cat in heat and grinding against his cock.

With a growl he tore open her fly, shoved his hand inside her panties, and thrust one finger into her pussy. He groaned. “Ah, baby, you’re soaking. Stay still.”

He drove his finger into her pussy hard and fast, keeping his mouth pressed to hers so he could taste every moan. When her pussy began to quiver and tighten, he plunged yet another finger inside her and sank his teeth over her pulse. She came hard, rippling around his fingers. His cock twitched in envy, and it was a struggle not to lift her and bury himself inside her.

A little embarrassed by how easily and shamelessly she'd responded to him, Riley kept her eyes closed. "You can move your hand now."

He could, but the feel of her inner muscles fluttering around his fingers as she came down from her orgasm was just too good to give up. Instead Tao licked over his mark. Masculine satisfaction fired through him, heightening the need that scorched him just as her hot pussy scorched his fingers. The possessiveness he'd already felt seemed to swell inside Tao until it filled every part of him. He figured he should probably worry about that, but it was hard to care while the scent of her need was playing with his senses.

He reluctantly withdrew his hand, almost groaning as her pussy sucked at his fingers, trying to keep them inside. "Look at me, Riley. Open those eyes, come on." Glazed eyes met his, and he almost shoved his fingers back inside her. "Next time, I won't stop there." It was a warning and a promise. "I'll fuck you in every way I can have you. And then I'll do it again and again."

She was *not* happy about the flutter of excitement in her stomach. "Oh really?"

"Really. I'm letting you go now because we have to leave. But tonight, that pussy is mine." Her eyes narrowed dangerously. It had to make him weird that her anger made his cock twitch.

"Actually, it's mine. As for whether or not I let you use it . . ." She shrugged. "It does help your case that you've got as much dick in your jeans as you have in your personality."

Smiling, he watched as she went to pick up her duffel. "I'm going to fuck that attitude right out of you, Riley; trust me on that." The look she gave him was hard as stone.

"You better hope you're never on fire, Tao, because I'm more likely to relax and pull out some marshmallows than help you."

Chuckling, he snatched the duffel from her and strode to the door.

Waiting in the gate terminal, Riley leaned her head against the floor-to-ceiling windows, watching the luggage trains, the ground crew, and the planes speeding along the runways. Beside her, Tao was idly flicking through a newspaper that she doubted he was actually reading. Others lounged around, reading and chatting to pass the time.

Some were also passing the time ogling Tao—one human in particular was pretty obvious about it. Incensed, Riley's raven aggressively flapped her



wings at the little bitch. She was a territorial creature and she felt somewhat possessive of the male who'd marked her. Wasn't that special.

Riley rolled the shoulder that was stiff with carrying her duffel. Tao had repeatedly snatched it from her, but she kept snatching it back just to poke at him. Honestly, being in an airport with Tao wasn't so bad. She was used to being jostled, having wheels clip her heels, or having perfumes sprayed in her face the moment she stepped into the duty-free store. No one got in Tao's way. They parted for him and, by extension, for her.

The only downside to having him there was that it was stopping her libido from cooling down. The damn bite seemed to throb almost as bad as her pussy. The memory of what had happened in her room kept replaying in her mind. She couldn't believe she'd come that hard from just his fingers; it was almost embarrassing.

Catching movement in her peripheral vision, she noticed that the blonde ogler had angled her body toward Tao. A low guttural sound rattled up Riley's throat before she could stop it—the warning came from the raven and made Tao's head snap up. He glanced around, looking for the threat, sparing the blonde only a passing, disinterested glance. That kind of made Riley feel better.

“What is it?” he asked. His minty breath blew into her face, washing away the array of perfumes, colognes, and baked goods that felt like an assault on her senses.

“My raven's just on edge,” she told him quietly.

Tao rolled back his shoulders. “I can relate.”

Riley almost smiled; he always looked so uncomfortable surrounded by humans. It was almost cute. “What is it about humans that bugs you so much? It's not just the prejudiced ones that annoy you.”

“I don't like what I don't understand, and I just don't get the human race. They do the weirdest fucking stuff. Dress their pets in little outfits. Lie that they walked on the moon. Vote for Donald Trump. None of that makes sense to me.”

Her mouth twitched. “I'll bet we're as strange to them as they are to us.”

Tao grunted, not bothered one way or the other. He didn't hate humans or wish them gone from the earth, but he had no time for them either. “Tell me about the Exodus Alphas. I know about the flock, but I don't know *them*.”

“What *do* you know?”

He stretched his legs out and crossed them at the ankles. “The Alphas are Sage and Ruby Everett. They’ve been mated for almost thirty years and they’ve run the pack for almost as long. They have twin daughters, Cynthia and Lucy.”

Riley nodded. “That’s right. Sage is a good Alpha. Fair. Wise. Strict without being too restrictive. Ruby’s good at her position. Supportive, compassionate, and a wicked fighter.”

“You like them a lot,” he sensed.

“I do. And I admire how tight a unit they are. Out of all the imprinted couples in the flock, they’re the most solid.” Shifters that weren’t true mates could still have a mating bond through the process of imprinting. Plenty of couples took that route, since there was no guarantee a person would find their true mate.

“Are there a lot of imprinted couples in the flock?” asked Tao.

She nodded. “The ravens in my flock believe in fate and destiny, but they don’t necessarily believe that their fate lies with their true mate. They believe that if they find someone else they care for or who suits them, it’s possible that their fate lies with them.”

Tao figured it made a strange kind of sense. Unlike most shifters, he wasn’t completely sold on the true mate deal. His brother had spent years searching for his true mate. Given what Joaquin had found, Tao often wondered if his brother had ever wished he hadn’t bothered looking. It perfectly showed not only that true mates could be unhappy together but also that sometimes a person could spend so long daydreaming about their intended mate—building them up in their head into the perfect person—that they were disappointed by the reality. Joaquin’s mate had expected a white knight and found herself with a guy who was almost as much of an asshole as Tao. And she never let him forget just how far from perfect he was.

Many of the mated pairs in Tao’s pack were deliriously happy and devoted to each other—perfect examples of how true mates complemented and completed each other. But Gabe and Hope were just as close and well suited, and they were an imprinted couple.

“Back to the Alpha family,” he said. “I’ve met Lucy; she seems nice enough. What about the other daughter, Cynthia?” He smiled as Riley’s upper lip curled. “You don’t like her.”

“We clash in a major way. She’s slightly below me on the dominance scale and she’s always hated that—probably almost as much as she hates

me.” Riley’s chest tightened as two children ran past, making her think of Savannah and Dexter. Damn, she was going to miss the little buggers.

“So it’s fair to say that she won’t be so happy to see you.”

“It would indeed be fair to say that. Then again, she might relish that she can show me she’s now dating my ex-boyfriend. She always wanted Sawyer and she’s petty enough to be smug that she has him.”

“You jealous?” Tao rumbled, claws almost slicing out at the idea. Riley barked a laugh, and the tension left him.

“No. I was the one who ended the relationship. But Cynthia will believe I still want him if it makes her feel better about herself.”

“Personally, I doubt she’ll want you in his line of sight.”

“I’m not the only one in the flock that he dated.”

“Does she hate the other females as much as she hates you?”

Riley shook her head.

“Then it’s got to grate on her that you’ve had her male.” Tao didn’t want Riley near Sawyer either. His wolf growled at the idea. “What’s your favorite day of the week?”

She did a double take. “What?”

“Your favorite day. What is it?”

Baffled, she asked, “Why does that matter?”

“It just does. I told you, I want—”

“You want me to let you in a little, yeah, I know. I just told you all that stuff about my flock.”

“Yes, about your *flock*,” he pointed out gently. “Not you. It’s *you* I want to hear about. I’m not asking you to bare your soul, Riley. It’s just an itty-bitty question.”

She thought about it for a moment. “Friday. It’s the start of the weekend. I like weekends.”

Satisfied, he nodded. “So, do you think Cynthia will cause a scene at any point this weekend?”

Blinking at how swiftly he’d returned to their previous subject, she said, “I don’t know.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if she does.”

“She might feel reassured by my bringing you along.”

“Don’t be so sure.”

“Well, you’ve left a mark on my neck where it’s easy to see. That’ll convince her I have no designs on Sawyer, won’t it?”

His eyes drifted to the bite. His cock, hard and heavy, throbbed at just the sight of it. “If you were my ex, seeing another guy’s mark on you would piss me the fuck off . . . but it wouldn’t stop me wanting you. And if she’s worried he might still want you, she won’t be reassured by my mark.” Tao gently fingered the bite, asking, “Coffee or tea?”

“Huh?”

“What do you prefer to drink, coffee or tea?”

She didn’t know whether she wanted to laugh or grab him by the throat. It seemed easier to just answer him. “Tea, but I like the smell of coffee better.”

He frowned. “Tea’s a girly drink.”

“I am a girl.”

“But you’re not a girly girl, so that surprises me.”

When the attendant announced it was time for them to board, Riley grabbed her duffel and got to her feet. Tao took the duffel from her, easily carrying both hers and his own, as they joined the line to board. Finally stepping onto the plane, she stayed behind Tao as they walked down the narrow aisle, passing rows of fabric seats and pausing while passengers shoved their bags into the white overhead compartments.

When they reached their designated row, she was grateful to see there were only two seats. She didn’t like sitting with strangers on airplanes, particularly since she always seemed to be seated by the chatty ones who liked to take off their shoes.

Having placed their bags in the overhead compartment, Tao turned to her. “You can have the window seat.”

“That’s okay. You have it.” She would prefer not to be stuck between him and a wall.

Shrugging, Tao took his seat. It was as he clicked on his seat belt that he noted her flushed cheeks and stiff muscles. “You don’t like airplanes?”

“I don’t like being cooped up, that’s all.”

Tao fussed with the controls overhead until the air conditioning was blasting down on them. “Better?”

Riley nodded. “Thanks.” She watched as he examined the fold-down tray, fingered the selection of in-flight magazines and safety manuals, tapped the TV screen on the seat back, and pushed the buttons on the armrests that controlled the channels and volume of the TV. He wasn’t fidgeting, she knew. He was studying. Getting a grip on his surroundings. Leaving his scent

on everything—it was a dominant male thing.

Frowning at the sound of the seat creaking as he adjusted it, she glanced around and saw that the passengers finally seemed to be settling into their seats; most seemed to be reading, playing games on their iPads, or listening to music. Annoyingly, her sensitive hearing picked up their audio just as it easily picked up all the chatter, laughter, and rustling of bags. There was just too much sound in such a small, contained space.

“Since you lost your biological parents,” began Tao, “I need to know if there’s anything I should or shouldn’t say in front of your flock. I don’t want to hurt your family by bringing them up. But if there’s something it would be better for me to know so there’s no confusion, it would be best to tell me.”

She supposed that was true. “They died when I was four. My mom was killed by a bald eagle when in her raven form. My dad died a few days later.” Not many mated pairs survived the breaking of the mating bond, and her father simply hadn’t hung on.

Several questions leaped to the tip of Tao’s tongue. Did she remember them well? Had they been good parents to her? Did she think the trauma had triggered the insomnia or had that come first?

She was tense as a bow, as if braced for an interrogation. He snapped his mouth shut, holding his words inside. Piling sensitive questions on her all at once would only put her on the defensive. She was steadily opening up to him and he didn’t want to mess that up. So instead he asked, “What are your uncles like?” He knew he’d made the right decision when her shoulders relaxed.

“Ethan—he’s my mother’s brother—is reserved and taciturn, but he has a mushy center. His mate, Max, is more expressive and fun loving, but he also takes things as seriously as Ethan does. They’re both solid and reliable. They’ll like you. Sort of.”

“Sort of?”

“You’re a wolf—you’ll lose points for that. But you’re walking onto raven territory just for me; they’ll like that.”

Tao stretched his legs out as far as he could, which wasn’t much. “Are any of your other family part of the flock?”

She shook her head. “My grandparents died before I was born; both my parents were only children.”

“If you had to survive on just one type of food, what would it be?”

“Would you stop that!” she burst out.

“Stop what?”

“Asking me dumb questions.” The repeated shifts in subject were throwing her off balance.

“Come on, Riley. Humor me.”

She sighed. “Peanuts.” A long pause. “What about you?”

He was insanely pleased that she’d asked him the same question in return. It felt like a game. Tao liked to play. “Pizza.”

“Awesome,” she said drily. “Will you stop this now?”

“I’m just trying to learn stuff about you.”

“You can’t honestly say you know nothing about me.”

“True. I know that you’re smart, confident, tough, and independent.” A combination that would draw any dominant male shifter. “I know you don’t sweat the small things or take yourself too seriously. Even though you’re fairly laid back, you brook no bullshit—something I like and respect. You sometimes come across as aloof because you’re not bothered by what people think of you, but you’re a person who cares deeply.” A person who would go to a place where she’d be distrusted just to protect two children she wasn’t even distantly related to.

Riley swallowed, taken aback by the glossy assessment.

“But I want to know more.”

With a growl of exasperation, she spoke quickly. “I like puzzles, Halloween, peanuts, rock music, and dragonflies. I seriously dislike bats and complications, and I think toupees should be outlawed—they’re just plain weird.”

“There,” he said with a smile. “Was that so hard?”

No, not really. Relaxing back in her seat, Riley closed her eyes. “Q time is now over.” She really hoped she slept through the need to pee, because she detested using the tiny bathrooms on airplanes. As Tao’s arm curled around her and pulled her close so that her head rested on his shoulder, she frowned. “I can sleep sitting up.”

“That’s just stupid. You’ll wake up with a kink in your neck.”

“Fine.” Against her better judgment, she relaxed into him. As his fingers toyed with her hair, she drifted off to sleep.

Neither the flight to Arizona nor the drive from the airport to Sedona was very long. However, given that Sedona was a place where traffic was heavy and slow, it took a little while to reach the outskirts, where the Exodus Flock

resided. Tao would have lost his patience long ago if it hadn't been for the picturesque view.

He wasn't a person who was moved by scenery, but Sedona was truly a beautiful place. Surrounded by red rock formations, it was situated at the mouth of the Oak Creek Canyon. As he took in the rustic valley boasting cacti, pine trees, bushes, and rocks of various colors, he felt as if he were in an old Western movie or something. His wolf liked it.

"The town's not very well lit," he observed. There weren't even any streetlights. If it hadn't been for his shifter's enhanced vision, he might not have been able to truly appreciate the scenery around him.

Riley kept her face angled toward the partially open window, enjoying the breeze on her skin. "No, but it makes the view of the red rock landscape look even better when the sun sets. We've missed it."

"A lot of tourists here," Tao noted. A lot of commercialized businesses too.

"Sedona is pretty popular. It's considered very spiritual because of the vortexes; a lot of people believe that the energy fields can sort of heighten psychic ability and even raise their self-awareness. People often come here to 'find' themselves. Boynton Canyon, which isn't far from where we're heading, is thought of as the most sacred in the Red Rock Country. Sage told me that many American Indians consider Sedona so sacred that they won't live here. The Exodus Flock, however, are regarded as guardians."

He gave Riley a sideways glance. "You told me that you and Cynthia clash. Do you think there's a chance you two will end up battling at some point?"

"If we did, it wouldn't be the first time," said Riley. "We've had plenty of fights over the years. They were battles for dominance, really. Our mutual dislike goes right back to childhood. We're just very different."

"Different how?"

"She's smart and she always worked hard during lessons—the regular star student. I was never academic, I just wanted to be outside in the sun, so she thought she was very superior to me. She was also an awful snitch who cried whenever she didn't get her way, even for simple stuff like if she wasn't picked first for sports.

"Still, she wasn't a major problem until she grew tits and boys started looking her way; then she turned into a complete nightmare. Brash, bitchy, fashion-conscious, and totally obsessed with the male gender. Seriously, she

gave away more pussy than a cat rescue center.”

He chuckled. “You have a way with words.”

“There honestly wasn’t much she wouldn’t have done to get a guy’s attention. I would have felt sad for her if it was because she was secretly insecure and trying to compensate for it, but I once heard her tell her friend that she was going to have every boy in the flock so that whoever they later mated would always know she’d had them first.”

Tao shook his head. “Sleeping with them all was a form of domination to her.”

“Yes. She wasn’t just using them; she was marking every one of them in her own weird way. I think Sawyer knew that, because he never once touched her. Not until after I left, anyway.”

“Really?”

“I think that was part of his attraction for me. But enough about them.” Riley sat up straight. “We’re not far from Exodus territory. Two minutes away, at most.” That was a good thing, because, according to the text messages she’d received from Lucy, the party was in full swing.

“You nervous?”

“A little,” she admitted. “It’s been a long time since I was last here. I don’t really know what to expect, and I don’t *like* that I don’t know what to expect.”

“Your uncles will be happy to see you. That’s all that matters, right?”

She nodded. “Right.” Soon enough they reached the border of the flock’s territory. Riley smiled. “There’s Lucy.” Duncan was also there, obviously in on the secret.

At Lucy’s urging, Tao whipped the rental car into a mostly full parking lot.

Lucy immediately pulled open the passenger seat, smiling like a loon. “I’m so glad you’re here! Duncan will take your bags to the guest cabin—I’ve put you in the one near the waterfall. It’s the prettiest.”

While the two females hugged, Tao took the duffels out of the trunk and handed them to the male raven. His wolf took an instant dislike to him simply because he didn’t know him; Tao sensed the distrust was mutual. Still, the males managed not to snarl at each other.

When Riley grabbed a small gift-wrapped box and pink card and held them against her chest like a shield, Tao squeezed her shoulder and shot her an encouraging look.



Lucy opened the trunk of another car and said, “Tao can carry the card and gift. You need to carry this.” She picked a white box out of the trunk and lifted the lid, revealing a large, rectangular cake covered in white icing and some kind of edible photo—Tao couldn’t quite make it out. Obliging he took the card and present from Riley, who then carefully took the cake.

Guiding Tao and Riley quickly toward a forested area, Lucy said, “The party’s taking place in the clearing.”

Tao didn’t need her to point it out; he could hear the music blasting.

Lucy paused. “I never thought to ask if you need to freshen up.”

“I probably should,” said Riley, “but if I hang around there’s a good chance I’ll be seen.”

“True,” said Lucy. “Then our efforts would have been for nothing.” Lucy paused midway through the woods. From there Tao could see lights twinkling up ahead. Balloons and streamers were tied to trees and bobbing with the breeze.

“How many people know Riley’s coming?” he asked.

“Me, my parents, Sawyer, our Beta, and Duncan. I couldn’t trust the others to keep it quiet. If Cynthia found out, she’d have told Riley’s uncles out of sheer spite.” Turning to Riley, she gripped her arms. “You ready?”

Riley took a deep breath. “I’m ready.”

“Good. Listen for a cheer. That’s your signal to light the candle and get moving. By the time we start singing ‘Happy Anniversary,’ you should be entering the circle.” Lucy handed Tao a lighter and gave Riley a nod of approval. “You did the right thing.” The female then jogged away.

Tao blinked at Riley. “They sing ‘Happy Anniversary’?”

“In the same rhythm that they sing ‘Happy Birthday,’” she confirmed. “Cheesy, I know.”

Getting a good look at the family photo on the cake, he said, “It’s pretty.”

“It’s a picture of me and my uncles.”

“You were a cute kid. What happened to you?”

She huffed at him. “I’d ram my elbow into your ribs if I wasn’t worried I’d drop the cake.”

“Your heartbeat is racing. Calm down, it’ll be fine.” Tao wouldn’t allow anything less.

Hearing the cheer, she tensed. “Here goes nothing.”

“Happy anniversary to you . . .”

Tao lit the candle and followed Riley as she walked through the trees, singing along.

“Happy anniversary to you . . .”

Entering the clearing, he saw a happy couple smiling beneath a huge congratulatory banner. Their eyes landed on Riley. And they gaped.

“Happy anniversary to Max and Ethan . . .”

As the others finally spotted Riley, the singing, laughing, and cheering stopped. Her stomach churned, but she ignored it. Lucy, the Alphas, and Hugh sang along with her, drawing out, “Happy anniversary to you.” A little sheepishly, Riley then added, “Surprise!”

# CHAPTER FIVE



All that could be heard was the lanterns clinking and the streamers fluttering. Tao sensed Riley's anxiety and thought about stepping in, but then her uncles came forward. Eyes prickling with tears, the taller of the two blew out the candle, handed the cake to his mate, and wrapped his arms around Riley.

After a heartbeat of silence, people cheered and clapped. Many then came forward to greet her, taking their turns hugging her one at a time. Tao stood back and watched the reactions of those around him. They were all so focused on Riley that they barely noticed him.

Everyone seemed pleased to see her and touched by her uncles' joy . . . with the exception of two females. One was a middle-aged redhead who he guessed was Wade's mother; she was glaring at Riley with a mixture of pain and contempt. The other female looked a little like Lucy and, scowling, was digging her nails into the arm of a tall, dark male who was staring at Riley curiously. Tao assumed they were Cynthia and Sawyer.

He could tell which ravens had lost children in the shooting just by their expressions; they either looked at Riley with a sad glint in their eyes that said they were remembering their own deceased children, or they looked at her with remorse and an awkward smile.

Tao watched Ethan and Max Porter fuss over Riley, and it became infinitely clear that they worshipped the ground she walked on. They both would have her back there in a heartbeat if they thought it was best for her.

Riley suddenly turned to face Tao and grabbed his arm to pull him toward her. "Max, Ethan—this is Tao, the Phoenix Pack's Head Enforcer. Tao, these are my uncles, Ethan and Max."

Not particularly comfortable in social settings outside his pack, Tao simply said, “Riley speaks highly of you.” There was nothing effeminate about either male. They were both tall and muscled and moved like they could handle themselves. With his stylish pants and shirt and his well-groomed appearance, Max looked like a predator in corporate clothing. Ethan, on the other hand, had a cowboy style with his checked shirt, jeans, and boots.

Max regarded Tao through eyes that twinkled with both curiosity and surprise. “Riley, sweetheart, you’ve been holding back a few things.”

Ethan scrubbed a hand over his jaw, gaze narrowed in suspicion. “Head Enforcer, huh?” he said gruffly. “You brought my girl here?”

“I did.”

“Then you’re welcome.” Ethan held out his hand, and Tao shook it.

Riley cleared her throat and clipped, “Um, Riley brought herself.”

Ethan gave her a mock frown. “Don’t sass me.”

“But I’m so good at it.” Taking the card and gift from Tao, she held them out. “We brought you a little something.”

Max cradled her face. “Stupid girl, *you’re* our gift. Lucy, could you please put these on the table with the others?” Lucy obligingly added the box and card to the stack of neatly wrapped presents and envelopes on a nearby table.

Riley gestured to the pair sidling up to her uncles. “Tao, this is Sage and Ruby, the Exodus Flock Alphas. Tao’s the Phoenix Pack’s Head Enforcer,” she told them.

Ruby gave Riley a quick hug and, much like Max, regarded Tao with curiosity as she said, “Aren’t you a pretty one?”

Sage shot his mate a mock glare. “I hope you’re not thinking of leaving me for a younger model.” Turning to Riley, he smiled. “I’m pleased you made it. It’s been too long since you’ve been here, and don’t think I’m not upset with you for not coming sooner. But since I’m in such a good mood, I’ll skip the lecture on the evils of making us wait so long to see you again.” His eyes slid to Tao. “I’ve heard of your pack. As Ethan said, if you brought Riley to us, you are welcome here—wolf or not,” he added with a smile.

Respecting that the Alpha male didn’t engage in any dumb posturing to make his dominance clear, Tao nodded. “It’s good to meet you.” The pair were old enough to be Riley’s grandparents, yet they radiated strength and the same heavy dominance typical of born alphas.

“Now that the introductions are done,” said Riley, “I’d like to get some food.”

“You both need to eat. Come.” Max led Riley and Tao to the buffet table, where bowls and platters of finger foods were spread out, including chicken, chips, crackers, and cake. They each helped themselves to a plate, and then Ethan and Max led them around the flock, introducing Tao. He always remained within touching distance of Riley, standing either at her side or at her back, protective and possessive.

When Ethan and Max finally left her side, Tao drew her against him, careful not to crush her plate between them. “I’ve noticed that neither Cynthia, Sawyer, nor Wade’s mother have come forward to greet you.”

Riley had occasionally caught wisps of Shirley’s scent, so she knew she was close. “I didn’t really expect them to. Shirley—that’s Wade’s mom—was glaring at me earlier.”

“It’s probably only a matter of time before she approaches you.”

Riley found it kind of hard to concentrate on his words while he was whispering in her ear, making the hairs on her neck rise. “Disappear for a few minutes.”

Tao’s brows snapped together. “Excuse me?”

“Give her the chance to get her crap off her chest so we can get it over with. I’m quite safe, Tao, I’m surrounded by people.”

He knew that, but walking away from her still went against his protective instincts. His wolf was tense, not liking that he was surrounded by strangers. The knowledge that a male was nearby who’d once touched *their* female . . . yeah, his wolf wasn’t coping too well with that.

Riley’s nails dug into his chest. “I’m a big girl, Tao.”

“That doesn’t mean I like leaving you alone, especially when I’m around a bunch of people I don’t know.” It was making him antsy.

“I’ll be fine without you for just a few minutes. Look, it’s better if I speak to Shirley now. The longer she stewes, the more likely it is that she’ll make a scene.”

Tao sighed. “I’ll go get us both another Coke.” They had both chosen not to drink alcohol, wanting to be fully alert in the event of any problems. “I need you to stay here. Can you do that?”

“I can do that.” She gave his chest a gentle nudge when he didn’t move. “Go. No one’s going to hurt me.”

“Of course they won’t—I’d never let them.” Tao tapped her ass and,

going against every protective instinct he had, walked away from her.

Riley was chucking her half-empty paper plate in the trash can when the scent of fresh citrus and pine bark swirled around her.

“Hello, Riley,” rumbled a familiar voice.

She turned. And there was Sawyer, leaning against a tree, smiling. “Sawyer,” she greeted him flatly.

“You look well.” He tilted his head slightly as he studied her closely. “Tired, but well. Still have trouble sleeping?”

“Sometimes. How are you?”

“I’m good. Very good.” His smile was warm, intimate. “It’s been four years, Riley. I didn’t think you’d stay away that long.”

“I didn’t think you’d ever even dream of touching Cynthia. People can surprise you that way.”

His mouth quirked. “I guess they can.” His attention was snagged by something over her shoulder, and his smile faded a little.

Tao’s scent wrapped around her, drowning out that of the male raven, mere seconds before he pressed against her back and dangled an open bottle of Coke in front of her. “Here, baby.”

“Thanks.” She took a long drink, enjoying the cold and sparkling taste.

Sawyer pushed away from the tree and took a casual step forward. “Who’s your friend, Riley?”

She quickly made the introductions, and she didn’t miss the hard glint in Sawyer’s eyes. Much like Tao, he didn’t trust outsiders or like having them in his territory.

“It’s always a pleasure to meet a friend of Riley’s,” said Sawyer with false politeness.

“Where’s Cynthia?” Riley asked.

“She’s around here somewhere,” Sawyer replied vaguely.

Tao’s wolf unsheathed his claws and took a swipe at the male. He didn’t like the way the bastard looked at Riley. There was no desire there, but his gaze was intent. Knowing. Lingered on her too long. He got the feeling the raven was trying to goad him.

“We appreciate your pack watching over Riley.” The message was clear: in Sawyer’s opinion, she wasn’t part of the Phoenix Pack.

“We take care of what’s ours,” Tao told him. His wolf liked it when Sawyer’s mouth tightened.

“There you are,” said a female who was fast approaching—the same female Tao had guessed was Cynthia. She stopped beside Sawyer, her smile fake and tight as she spoke to Riley. “It’s quite a surprise to see you here.”

“I’ll bet,” said Riley.

She turned that fake smile on Tao. “I’m Cynthia. And, if the gossip is to be believed, you’re the Phoenix Pack’s Head Enforcer.”

“That’s right,” said Tao. His tone didn’t invite further questioning. He could practically feel Cynthia’s unease as she stood very still, clearly making a conscious effort to seem relaxed. She cast a worried look at Sawyer, whose eyes were fixed on Riley. She either suspected or knew that the male felt, at the very least, a hint of possessiveness where Riley was concerned.

“You’ve made this a perfect day for your uncles, Riley.”

Smiling, Riley said, “I’m glad.” Just in case the female said anything to tempt Riley into smashing the now-empty Coke bottle into her face, Riley slung it in the trash can.

“How long will you be staying?”

“A couple of days.”

Disappointment clouded Cynthia’s eyes. She offered Riley a weak smile. “It’s a shame you can’t stay a little longer.”

Riley was surprised the female didn’t choke on her words. “I’m just here for the weekend.”

“Well, I’ll leave you to enjoy your evening.” Cynthia turned to Sawyer. “Ruby’s looking for you.”

It was a few seconds before he actually met Cynthia’s gaze and said, “She hasn’t looked very far.”

Cynthia gave an awkward laugh and looped her arm through his. “I think she’s by the buffet table.”

Sawyer looked at Riley. “It’s good to have you home, even if it’s only for a few days.” Then he and Cynthia walked away.

Tao twirled Riley to face him and snaked his arms around her waist, settling one palm on her ass. “I think we can safely say he’s still a little possessive of you.” It made his wolf want to rip out Sawyer’s throat. “Cynthia was well behaved.”

“Maybe she’s matured some.”

“Maybe.” Tao wasn’t startled by the sound of a throat clearing behind him; he’d already scented her uncle. Tao glanced at him over his shoulder, brow raised.

“I was hoping I could have a dance with my girl before the party ends,” said Max.

Tao’s grip on her ass involuntarily tightened, but he reluctantly released her. Watching Max and Riley on the manmade dance floor, Tao could tell that they’d done this many times before. She laughed as Max spun her one way and then another. Much as he hated being surrounded by strangers, Tao was glad he’d brought Riley here to see her uncles.

“I noticed you’ve marked Riley,” said Ethan, appearing at his side. “You must be a brave guy to take her on.”

Tao’s mouth twitched. “She does like to be a trial.”

“That she does,” Ethan agreed. “I saw you talking to Sawyer. He and Riley were together for a short while, but you don’t need to worry about him. He’s no threat. Riley’s moved on.”

“I know that, but does he?”

“That I don’t know. Sawyer’s a complicated creature. One thing he’s never been good at is sharing. That’s why he doesn’t want a mate—he intends to be Beta and he has no wish to share the power that comes with the role. I think part of the reason he pursued Riley was that he knew she had no interest in power. Their relationship wasn’t serious, but that suited both of them. Suited Sawyer a little *too* much, so he wasn’t pleased when she ended it. Not pleased at all.”

“What you’re saying is that he doesn’t care for Riley, but—”

“I didn’t say that. He’s known her all his life, after all. I think he cares for her as you would for a flock mate; her safety’s important to him and he’d rather have her back here. But even if he doesn’t still want her, he won’t like seeing her with you. As I said, he doesn’t like to share. If he can cause a rift between you two so that he can, at the very least, have her home, he will.”

“If he has any sense, he won’t try it,” said Tao. Time would tell just how much sense Sawyer had.

It was another half hour or so before the party ended. The entire flock helped tidy the mess, so it didn’t take long. After Riley said a final good night to her uncles and Lucy, she urged Tao in the direction of the parking lot so they could drive to their allocated guest cabin.

They were almost at the lot when they heard footsteps hurrying their way. Turning, they found Cynthia and Shirley striding toward them like women on a mission. Apparently they’d joined forces against Riley. Tao wondered if maybe one had egged on the other.



Glaring at Riley, Shirley began, "You and I . . ." She paused at Tao's growl and shot him a wary look. "We'd like to speak to Riley."

Tao planted his feet. "Don't let me stop you."

"In private," Shirley bit out.

"Now, see, if I thought you wanted a pleasant conversation I'd grant you that privacy. But it doesn't seem to me like either of you has anything pleasant to say to Riley, and that's a problem for me."

Cheeks flushed, Cynthia looked at Riley. "Are you going to let him dictate what you do?"

"He's not dictating what *I* do," said Riley. "He's dictating what *you* do."

"This isn't your business," Shirley said to him, nostrils flaring.

His wolf snapped his teeth. "*Riley's* my business. Unless you'd like to find out what lengths I'd go to in order to protect her, you'll step away and calm the hell down."

Cynthia inhaled deeply and took a step back. Shirley followed suit, though she stepped back only slightly.

Riley folded her arms. "Now let's get this over with. What do you want?"

"It was good that you attended your uncles' party," said Shirley. "I might have my issues with you, but I've always liked Ethan and Max."

That was true, Riley knew.

"You said you were only here for the weekend," continued Shirley, "but most of the flock seems to think you're back for good. Is that true?"

Riley sighed. "No, it's not. Maybe there are some who *hope* they can convince me to stay, but it won't happen." Hearing Cynthia let out a relieved breath, Riley turned to her. "I don't want Sawyer, Cynthia. I'm not here to try to win him back."

Cynthia's eyes flared. "You say that as if you have any chance of winning him back. You don't. You're no one. Nothing but a dumb little orphan."

*There* was the Cynthia that Riley remembered. The Cynthia who had bullied her throughout childhood; the Cynthia who had pulled out a chunk of her hair during a fight; the Cynthia who had once shoved her into the lake, laughing. Not that Riley had ever been an innocent party. She'd retaliated every time.

"I've yet to work out what Sawyer ever saw in you," Cynthia continued. "Fortunately, he no longer sees whatever the hell it was."

Riley looked her up and down. “Don’t act like you’re better than me, Cynthia. What have you ever done? Besides every guy in the flock, that is. You know, there are names for people like that.”

Cynthia’s body went completely still. “Are you calling me a whore?”

Riley snorted. “No one’s ever going to *pay* you. Now I know that neither of you wants me here, but there’s nothing you could say that would make me leave. There’s really no point to this.”

“You have no *right* to be here,” sneered Shirley. “You lost that right when you manipulated my poor boy into—”

Tao stepped in and snapped, “Don’t even start that shit. The shooting was a tragedy that I’m sure has affected the entire flock, and it’s natural that you’d find it hard to accept your son caused it, but he did cause it. You can harp on at Riley all night long, but it won’t change the truth.”

Shirley’s upper lip curled. “You know nothing.”

“I know that I won’t allow you to use Riley as a scapegoat,” he said. “Deal with your issues and stop trying to make them hers.”

“I know my boy,” said Shirley, voice unsteady. “I know that what he did that night was something my boy would never have done unless someone manipulated him somehow. He was depressed—”

“So you’re finally acknowledging that,” said Riley. “Shame you didn’t do it when Lucy and I went to you for help. Look, I’m sorry that you lost your son—”

“I don’t need your pity,” Shirley spat.

Riley sighed. “Nothing I say right now could make any difference to you. You’re determined to hate and blame me.”

“You’re an easy person to hate, just like someone else I could mention.”

Like that, Riley lost every last bit of sympathy she’d had for the woman. “Don’t go there, Shirley. You get a free pass just this once. But do not confront me or speak of my mother again.” Riley turned their back on them, communicating her lack of fear, and walked with Tao to the rental car. After hopping in, she clicked on her seat belt and watched as the two females walked sharply out of the lot and into the trees.

“You okay?” Tao asked Riley.

“I just wanted to have some time with my uncles, that’s all. It shouldn’t be a big deal.”

“No, it shouldn’t.” He slid a hand under her hair to massage her nape. “What was that comment about your mother?”

“Shirley hated her. No, ‘hate’ isn’t a strong enough word. It was a bone-deep loathing. No one seems to know why. I figure something must have happened between Shirley and my mother at some point, but I’ve no idea what it could be.”

Tao gave her nape a comforting squeeze. “Come on, it’s late, let’s get to the cabin.” He followed the directions she gave him, driving up rocky trails and going deep into Exodus territory. When they finally arrived at the cabin, they found their duffels waiting on the porch swing. The small log cabin was framed by crooked trees and thickets. Beneath the sounds of crickets and leaves rustling, he could hear the soothing burble of a brook somewhere in the near distance.

“Has a certain charm to it, doesn’t it?” said Riley.

“It does,” he agreed. “Especially with the view.” The backdrop for the cabin was the Red Rock Country.

He followed her up a small set of stairs onto the wraparound porch, crushing the dead leaves that littered it. Riley grabbed their duffels from the swing before he could, making him frown. She just flashed him an impish smile and led him inside.

He was instantly hit by the smell of wood, furniture polish, laundered sheets, and citrus potpourri. His wolf found the citrus slightly calming. Tao scanned the den, taking in the wall-mounted TV, bookshelves, and stone fireplace complete with a pile of logs, shovel, and poker.

The floorboards creaked beneath his feet as he walked farther into the den, looking at what were clearly antique furniture pieces—there were plenty on Phoenix territory, so he knew antiques when he saw them. They should have looked out of place in a guest cabin. Instead they added to its charm, just like the handcrafted cushions with their tribal markings.

“One of my chores was to keep the guest cabins clean,” said Riley, sliding her hand over the back of a leather sofa that had a throw blanket folded over the arm.

“Not often you see antiques in a guest cabin,” said Tao, holding an antique bronze candlestick, surprised by the weight of it. Putting it back on the cabinet, he turned to see Riley carrying some kind of black, winged ornament out of the den. “What’s that?”

Riley opened the front door, dumped it on the porch, dusted off her hands, and shut the door. “A sculpture of a fruit bat.” And probably a joke. Lucy was such a bitch.

Smiling, Tao followed Riley into the kitchen. “Oh yeah, you mentioned on the plane that you don’t like bats. You weren’t kidding, huh?”

“Not kidding at all.” They were ghastly-looking creatures, in Riley’s opinion. Opening the refrigerator, she said, “Someone—probably Lucy—has stocked the fridge for us.” There were several cans of Mountain Dew, to her delight, and coffee. The hinges creaked as she opened a cupboard and retrieved two mugs before filling and switching on the coffee machine. “Well, what do you think of the flock?”

Tao leaned against the doorjamb. “I think your uncles couldn’t love you more if they tried. I think the majority of the ravens here are genuinely pleased to see you. I think Cynthia, however, would happily rip out your kidneys and slap me around with them, and that Shirley would applaud her the entire time. The parents of those who died in the shooting no longer place any blame on you, and they regret that they ever did.”

She tilted her head. “Very observant, aren’t you? My raven’s impressed.”

“Yeah? What about you?”

“Maybe I’m just as impressed. Maybe.”

Smiling, he said, “Wait here. I’ll be back.”

Her brow creased. “Where are you going?”

“My wolf’s going crazy knowing his territory isn’t marked, so I’m going to fix it.” Stalking through the kitchen, he slipped out of the patio doors and onto the rear deck. His wolf pushed against his skin, wanting to be free to explore. First Tao had a call to make. He dug out his cell phone and called Trey.

The Alpha quickly answered. “How did it go?”

“The party went smoothly and she was welcomed just fine by the flock,” said Tao. “Wade’s mother, however, confronted her after the party along with Riley’s archenemy—who also happens to be dating Riley’s ex. Both females want her gone.”

“What about the ex himself?”

“He seems to mistakenly still believe he has rights to her.” It grated on his wolf’s possessiveness to no end.

“How is Riley doing?”

“Okay. The confrontation with the females annoyed her, but she’s tough.”

“She is,” Trey agreed. “Keep me updated on everything.”

“Will do.” Tao slipped his phone back into his jeans pocket, shed his clothes, and shifted.

The wolf stretched, scratching at the floorboards and marking them. It was a warning to any who approached. He padded around the surrounding land, clawing at trees and rocks and leaving his scent to mark his temporary territory.

Only when he was satisfied that his space had been well claimed did the wolf return to the deck. And there was his female, waiting. The wolf rubbed against her, licking at her hand.

Smiling, Riley crouched down and sank her hands into the wolf’s coal-black fur. It was thicker than she’d expected, but not coarse. She’d encountered Tao’s wolf a number of times and watched as he ran with his pack, but she’d never been this close to him before. In general his wolf was playful and upbeat. But she’d seen the wolf fight from afar, seen him viciously and savagely rip into enemies.

He was powerfully built, standing proud and tall as she petted him. “I’ll admit it, you and your human side are pretty impressive in more ways than one.” She knew the wolf wouldn’t understand the words, but his human side would. And maybe that was why Tao immediately began the shift.

Riley stood and backed away as bones cracked and popped. But even when the shift was complete, she continued to back away, holding golden eyes that gleamed with masculine intensity. She wasn’t fleeing, she was teasing. He sensed it and slowly advanced on her with his smooth, predatory walk.

She was so caught up in the sight of those muscles rippling and flexing that she forgot to be aware of her surroundings. Her back met the kitchen counter, stopping her retreat. In two steps Tao was on her.

“Are you going to fight me, Riley?” He fisted a hand in her hair and tugged hard enough to make her scalp prickle. “Are you?”

“I don’t think there’d be any point.”

His mouth curved. “You’re right. There wouldn’t.” Out of his mind with need, Tao slammed his mouth on hers, plunging his tongue inside. Digging her nails into his shoulders, she kissed him back. With his grip on her hair, he angled her head how he wanted her as he possessed and ate at her mouth. He took everything she had to give, and maybe that was why panic rose up sharp in her scent.

He sucked hard on her pulse until she melted into him. “Good girl.”

Pinning her still with his hips, he ripped off her shirt and bra. A pink flush covered full breasts he ached to mark. He sucked one taut nipple into his mouth as he cupped and squeezed her breast. It filled his hand just right, like it was made for him.

“Tao.” It was a protest, but Riley wasn’t sure what she was protesting against. Did she want him to stop? No. Not at all. But he’d taken over again. One part of her got off on it a little. Still, it made her feel powerless. She needed a minute to think, to get back some control. She tried to push him back, but he growled and sucked her nipple deeper into his mouth—hard enough to hurt.

He bit her nipple. “Don’t tell me you don’t want this, Riley. It would be a damn lie.”

She didn’t bother to deny it. What was the point, especially when he could smell how much she wanted him?

“But if you want me to stop, I will. You just have to say it.”

She believed him. If she really told him to let her go, he would. He might not like it, but he’d walk away if she asked. And that realization made her feel not quite so powerless. “Make me come.”

Rumbling a contented growl, Tao clawed off her jeans and panties and took her to the floor. Draping himself over her, he warned, “I’m not going to stop this time, Riley.” He sank two fingers inside her and swallowed her gasp. “Damn, you’re tight.” He thrust his fingers in and out of her, groaning at how hot and slick she was, but it wasn’t enough. He needed to taste her.

Riley made a noise of complaint when those very talented fingers withdrew, but then his tongue slid through her folds and she no longer had a problem. He pretty much wrecked her control as he licked, nipped, suckled, and bit. Her pussy throbbed and ached for more, so when he stabbed his tongue inside her, Riley almost sobbed in relief. She knew she wouldn’t last long, not when—

His mouth was gone. “Hey!” she complained. But he’d already risen above her, shoving her legs farther apart and tapping her clit with his cock.

“I want in you.” Tao needed to ride her hard, bury himself so deep she’d never be free of him. “Now.”

That was fine with Riley. What wasn’t fine was the teeth that dominantly locked around her shoulder. With a defiant hiss, she bucked and struggled. He just slipped an arm under her, tilted her hips, and rammed himself deep. Her mouth fell open in a silent scream. He was long and thick

and, God, it burned as he stretched and filled her. But the pain barely registered because Tao was slamming in and out of her; the arm curled around her hips held her exactly how he wanted her. She couldn't move. Couldn't seem to get her breath.

Tao snarled against her mouth. "Do you know how long I've wanted to get inside this pussy, Riley? Months. Since minute fucking one." He thrust harder, faster. He couldn't get deep enough. Couldn't get enough of those little moans she made. "That's it, let me hear you."

She grabbed his hair. "Stop talking and make me come." Her raven wanted to mark him, wanted to rake his back and shoulders to leave her brand all over him. Riley closed her eyes against the temptation. No. No, she wouldn't make her raven's possessiveness worse than it already was. But it was hard to fight the urge when it wasn't just the raven who felt it, wanted to see him all marked up, wanted to bite and scratch and brand.

Holding on to her self-control would be a whole lot easier if he weren't wild. One minute he had her flat on her back, pounding into her. The next he'd rolled them both over and was slamming her up and down on his cock. Just when she thought she'd come, he rolled them again, hooked her legs over his shoulders, and began powering into her once more. It was almost too much. "Tao, I'm gonna—" She gasped as his teeth raked her neck, and her pussy clenched.

He groaned. "Yeah, baby, squeeze me." Tao didn't need her to tell him she was close to coming; he could feel her getting hotter and tighter by the second. And he didn't have it in him to hold back any longer. "Come, Riley." He sank his teeth over his mark, and her pussy clamped down so tight on his cock it almost fucking hurt. She screamed, rippling and squeezing him. He exploded with a curse, shoving himself deep as he came.

## CHAPTER SIX



**B**eing an insomniac, Riley didn't often wake to rays of sunlight shining in her eyes. Yellow beams slashed across the bedroom—it was a damn nice bedroom that took up most of the loft space.

After taking her on the kitchen floor the previous night, Tao had carried her up to bed and they'd both fallen instantly asleep. She'd woken around 3:00 a.m., her mind active. She'd tried to edge out of the bed, but Tao had dragged her to him and literally dropped her on his cock. She'd ridden him until she was boneless and couldn't do anything but collapse at his side and fall right back asleep.

He was currently sprawled on his stomach, his breathing deep and even. At some point he'd kicked the covers down until they bared the length of his back. Hunger pricked at her as she stared at all that solid muscle and sleek skin. More of her marks now spanned the tribal tattoo on his upper back and shoulders. Her raven liked them a hell of a lot. She was also rather smug that he'd returned the favor. Riley could feel the slight sting of claw marks on her hips, and she remembered his gripping her tight as she rode him.

Knowing there was no chance she'd fall back asleep, Riley peeled back the coverlets that, like the red rug, had the same tribal markings as the cushions in the den. She ever so slowly edged out of the king-size sleigh bed, careful not to jolt the mattress, and—

“Sneaking out, baby?” he rumbled without even opening his eyes.

Startled, she almost jumped. “No, I just didn't want to wake you.”

“Come here.”

“Why?”

His eyes opened, and those golden orbs speared her. “Just come here.”



With a sigh of sufferance, she knelt on the bed. “What?”

Gently tangling a hand in her hair, he pulled her down and kissed her. “Now you can go.”

“Well, thank you,” she said tartly.

“You’re welcome.”

She grabbed a T-shirt and sweatpants from her duffel and headed to the bathroom. A sound rumbled out of his throat—a sort of contented growl. Halting, she glanced at him over her shoulder. He was completely still, but his eyes were hot on hers. “What?”

“I love to watch you walk.”

She blinked. “Um, why?”

“You have a very feminine, graceful, confident walk. Makes me hard every time.”

Not really knowing how to respond to that, she just drawled, “Okay.” Walking into the bathroom, she closed the door. There was a freestanding bathtub and a walk-in shower—both of which she intended to enjoy while here. Plush towels hung from the chrome bars near the sink counter, on which there was a tray of complimentary hygiene products and plastic-wrapped water glasses. It was like being in a hotel.

Once clean and dressed, she returned to the bedroom to find Tao still in bed, eyes closed. It occurred to her that it was little wonder he was so tired, given that he’d been working late shifts all week. “I’ll be downstairs.”

“I won’t be long,” he said drowsily.

Riley suspected he’d fall back asleep, but she didn’t say so. She simply grabbed her cell from the nightstand and made her way downstairs. In the kitchen she pulled a can of Mountain Dew out of the fridge. It was simply too hot for coffee. Slipping out of the patio doors, she squinted at the bright sun. The air was dry and the breeze was light, but Riley had never minded the heat.

Crossing the deck, she happily settled on one of the sun loungers and called Makenna.

“Morning,” Makenna greeted her.

“You sound surprisingly chirpy.”

“I’m going shopping with Jaime today, so all is good.” There was a grunt in the background, and Makenna sighed. “Stop whining, Ryan, no one’s forcing you to come.”

Riley smiled, knowing how much Ryan hated shopping. He hated

leaving Makenna's side even more, however, so he often accompanied her.

"One day," began Makenna, "you really do have to come with us, Riley."

"I prefer shopping online; you know that."

"Yes, but I strongly believe I can make you see the sheer joy of physical shopping."

"Never gonna happen. Now, are they there?"

"Sure." There was a short pause. "Savannah, it's Riley."

"Hi, Riley," said Savannah through a mouthful of food.

Chest tightening, Riley smiled. "Hey, sweetie. How are you?"

"Okay, but Dexter keeps stealing my bacon and putting it in his pocket. He put a crayon in my porridge."

Riley did her best to keep the smile out of her voice. "Well, that's not nice." Though Riley suspected that Dexter had given Savannah the crayon in exchange for the bacon, figuring it was a good deal.

"When are you coming home?"

"I'll be back sometime tomorrow. Hopefully not too late."

"Dexter, stop trying to snatch the phone!" hissed Savannah.

"Let him talk to Riley, Savannah," said Makenna.

Savannah huffed. "Fine."

After a moment there was another voice—this one soft and angelic. "Riley?"

"Hey, big guy, you haven't been putting food in your pockets again, have you?"

"No."

"You sure?"

"Sure."

"Well, that's good to hear." Having drained the can of Mountain Dew, Riley placed it on the table beside the lounge. "I'll be back tomorrow, okay?"

"Kay."

Riley heard Makenna's voice in the background, asking Dexter for the phone. There was a sort of shuffling noise and then Makenna spoke. "Always quite the chatterbox, isn't he?"

Riley chuckled, but that chuckle died when she heard feet rustling in the trees up ahead. Whoever was approaching wasn't trying to hide; they were making plenty of noise so as not to take her by surprise.

A tall, lean figure was soon strolling toward her. Honestly, she wasn't feeling up to conversation yet, but she was curious about whether he'd come to reprimand her for arguing with Cynthia. So she sat up and crossed her legs, half lotus, on the lounge. "I'll speak to you again tomorrow morning," she told Makenna.

"Okay, have fun with your uncles."

"Will do." Ending the call, Riley looked at her visitor. "Morning, Sawyer."

He stopped in front of her, his smile strained. "Can we talk?"

"Sure, why not?"

He sat on the edge of the other sun lounge, leaning forward with his hands clasped. "A wolf, Riley. Really?"

She rubbed at her temple. "Please tell me you haven't come to moan about Tao being here. Wolves aren't so bad, you know." But Sawyer had never liked them. "The Phoenix wolves have been good to me."

"I know. I'm grateful that they took you in. I heard about the shelter and the bastard wolf from another pack who tried to take it over. I'm glad the Phoenix wolves gave you a place to stay so all that shit didn't touch you."

"How exactly did you hear about all that?"

"Max keeps me updated on how you're doing."

That ruffled her raven's feathers. Her business was her own. Max shouldn't be repeating it.

"Like I said, I'm grateful to them, but you don't belong with them. You belong here. And I don't like the guy, Riley. Not just because he's a wolf." Sawyer rolled back one shoulder. "Something about him just rubs me the wrong way."

"You mean because he doesn't feign respect if he doesn't feel it? Don't be so arrogant that you think you should be awarded respect for being an enforcer, Sawyer. Tao won't care what position you hold. If he doesn't like you or have any regard for you, he won't pretend to."

"And you like that," Sawyer guessed.

"I like that there are no guessing games with him."

Sawyer was quiet for a few moments. His eyes bored into hers, as if he were trying to read her mind. "You know nothing can really come of this thing you have with the wolf, Riley. This is your home. And I doubt he'll want to move to a flock. You've stayed away long enough. It's time to come home."

She loved Sedona, she truly did. She loved spending time with her uncles and taking in the views around her. But living here . . . she wasn't sure if she could do that. She also wasn't sure she could truly leave Savannah and Dexter. And then there was the other thing. "Shirley and Cynthia would hate it, Sawyer, and you know it."

He shrugged. "They'd get used to it." He cocked his head. "Cynthia told me about the little confrontation you had last night."

"Hmm. I wonder just how much of her story was true."

"Forget about them." He put his hand on her knee. "Riley, you can't let Cynthia, Shirley, or memories of the shooting keep you away from your own home."

Hearing the creak of the patio door, she looked over her shoulder to see Tao slowly stalking toward them, his scowl locked on Sawyer. No, locked on the hand Sawyer had rested on her knee. She moved her leg, making the hand fall away, but Tao's scowl didn't fade even slightly.

She widened her eyes at Tao, pleading with him to not make a big deal out of it. If he fought with Sawyer, it would give Cynthia and Shirley grounds to have him removed from the flock's territory—something they'd eagerly do, knowing Riley would leave with him.

Tao's scowl eased into a frown, which was better than nothing, she supposed. Reaching her lounge, he bent and dropped a kiss on her mouth. It was brief, yet still hard, possessive, and drugging. And as a searing hunger roared through her, she was thinking it wouldn't be such a bad idea to fuck on this lounge.

*It wouldn't be such a bad idea to fuck on this lounge,* thought Tao. Reluctantly breaking the kiss, he smiled. "Morning, baby. Ethan called the cabin landline; I put him on hold." He helped her get to her feet and nuzzled the crook of her neck, glaring at the male in front of him. "Sawyer," he greeted him stiffly.

Tao was so close to punching the prick. When he'd seen the raven's hand on her knee, he'd seen red. His temper was hot and easy to trigger at the best of times, but it was so much worse when he was on unfamiliar territory where there was someone who wanted the female he'd marked. It made him edgy and moodier than usual.

Mouth turned down, Sawyer inclined his head the tiniest bit. There was no envy in his expression, but his muscles were bunched as if he'd tensed to

spring.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” Riley told Tao, rolling her eyes at the possessive nip he gave to her lip. Male posturing was so boring. “Be good.”

Tao watched her go, not looking away until she was safely inside the cabin. At that he raised a brow at Sawyer, who’d risen to his feet. “There a problem that brought you here?”

“No.” The word was hard as stone. “Riley and I were talking.”

“Ah, and here I thought that you were here on behalf of Cynthia. Don’t tell me she didn’t run straight to you about their little dispute.”

“She told me about it, yeah.”

“Maybe if you just assured Cynthia that you have no intention of trying to take Riley from me, she’d feel a whole lot better.”

Sawyer’s lips twitched. “Take Riley *from* you?” he echoed, amused. “Riley will never belong to anyone but Riley. You don’t know her at all if you think differently, wolf. She doesn’t tolerate possessiveness very well, you know.”

“Maybe she didn’t used to, or maybe she just didn’t tolerate it from guys she wasn’t possessive of in return.”

“And you think she’s possessive of you?”

“I have her brands all over my back, what do you think?”

“What about when she moves back here?” Sawyer challenged. “You can’t honestly say you’ll come with her.”

“Move back here? That’s not going to happen. She’s pack now.”

Dismissive, Sawyer snickered. “Bullshit.”

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d think Cynthia had grounds to be paranoid that you still want Riley,” said Tao. “But then, Riley’s the type of female who can get into a guy’s head and stay there, isn’t she?” He took a step toward Sawyer. “I have a funny story to share with you. I went for a run in my wolf form last night. When I came back, I got a little . . . distracted by Riley, so it wasn’t until later that I remembered I’d left my clothes on the deck. I went to grab them, and they were gone, apart from my shoes. Then I noticed those.” He pointed to a tree, where strips of clothing were dangling from the branches.

Sawyer sighed. “I didn’t tear your damn clothes.”

“I believe you. At first I thought it might have been you. But I can see now just how pissed you are about the idea of me and Riley. If you’d been outside last night while the back door was open and I was fucking her on the

kitchen floor, you'd have done more than rip my clothes. Or at least you'd have tried."

Sawyer growled, eyes briefly flashing raven as the avian rose to the fore for a moment. Apparently the avian was also a little possessive of Riley.

"Ooh, temper, temper." Tao grinned. "I'll bet if it hadn't rained a little last night, those strips would have your girlfriend's scent on them." Of course, there was a chance it had been Shirley, but his gut screamed otherwise. "You need to deal with her."

"Cynthia was with me last night."

Tao raised a brow. "All night?" He didn't answer, and Tao smirked. "I didn't think so."

Sawyer stepped forward. "You took Riley on the kitchen floor? Let me ask you something. Have you taken her in the shower? The bathtub? How about against the wall? Tell me you've at least bent her over the—"

Tao slammed his fist hard into the bastard's face.

"What the fuck is going on?" Riley rushed to Tao's side. She'd been so shocked when Tao punched Sawyer that she'd almost dropped her unopened can of Mountain Dew.

Licking his split lip, Sawyer smiled. "Got a bit of a temper, haven't you, Lukas?" he taunted, sounding smug. That was when Tao realized the bastard had wanted him to lose his shit.

Glaring at Sawyer, she demanded, "What the hell did you say to him? He was perfectly fine when I left."

Still smiling, Sawyer shrugged innocently. "You know, Riley, you want to make sure he never turns that temper on you."

Tao advanced on him. "You son of a—"

Riley slipped in front of Tao and planted a hand on his chest just as she scowled at Sawyer and snapped, "Get the fuck out of here, asshole!"

Looking very pleased with himself, Sawyer began to back away. "You used to have such sweeter things to say to me."

Growling, Tao snatched the can out of her hand and threw it at Sawyer, but the raven was jogging away, retreating into the woods.

Riley spun to face Tao. "What the hell was that about?"

"He took me on a trip down memory lane," Tao said through his teeth. "Told me how he'd had you in the shower, the bathtub, against the wall—"

"No, he hasn't," she scoffed. "He sensed you had a short fuse, so he antagonized you. Unfortunately, it worked. He probably just wants me to feel

unsafe with you.” Suddenly Tao was all up in her space.

“Let’s get one thing straight,” he rumbled. “I can be a mean motherfucker, I have a shitty temper, and I’m not tuned in to the feelings of the people around me. That means I’ll snap at you, piss you off, even yell at you, but I will never lay a finger on you in anger. Not ever.”

“I already know that,” she assured him. “Now can you calm down?”

“It’s a bit hard to be fucking calm when I’ve got images of you and him dancing around my head.”

Casting a sad look at the can spinning on the ground, squirting precious Mountain Dew everywhere, she sighed. “Did you really have to throw it?”

“Well, some people need to have cans slung at their head. Boat-size cans. Or maybe just boats. Cruise ships would be better.”

“It would be hard to pick up a cruise ship. Impossible, actually. Unless you’re Superman. You’re not Superman. You can’t fly and you don’t have a cape. You also don’t have x-ray vision or the ability to shoot red-hot beams out of your eyes—both of which would be cool.”

He looked at her in sheer exasperation, shouting, “*Why are we talking about Superman?*”

*“Because it’s distracting you!”*

He inhaled deeply. Very, very deeply. “I need coffee. Then food.”

“Max and Ethan just invited us over for blueberry pancakes. Their cabin’s only a few minutes’ walk away; I’m ready to go when you are.” Spotting something, she frowned. “What’s that in the tree?”

Under the glare of the sun, Tao followed her along the winding, uneven dirt path, taking in what he couldn’t deny were breathtaking views of red rocks, tall spires, canyons, and mountains. Predatory birds flew overhead while small animals scrambled in the underbrush. He could hear the trickle of a nearby creek and the white noise of a distant waterfall.

Like his wolf, Tao found the sights and smells of nature relaxing, but it was hard to relax when he had the sultry scent of Riley filling his nostrils, drowning out the other scents of wildflowers and dry earth.

Now that they were closing in on her uncles’ cabin, he could see the mated pair setting plates out on the patio table. Tao squeezed her hand. “Looks like we’re eating outside.”

“They like to have breakfast outside,” she told him.

Tao sighed inwardly at her flat tone. He’d hoped she’d have calmed

down by now. From what he could tell, she was even more pissed about Cynthia's stunt than he was. It had taken a good twenty minutes to convince her it wasn't worth storming to Cynthia's cabin and calling her on it.

His wolf rubbed up against Tao's skin, wanting to soothe her. "What are you thinking?" he asked, sidestepping a berry bush.

"I'm thinking that I shouldn't have let you talk me out of bitch-slapping Cynthia for ripping your clothes." Riley swatted a gnat. "I'm also thinking that I don't like that she saw us fucking."

"Is she the type to gossip?"

"Depends on the topic. Why?"

"If she goes around telling people how big my dick is, you might find yourself with some competition, even if I am an asshole." As he'd hoped, she laughed. It was a husky, from-the-heart laugh that made him smile.

"Your confidence issues concern me."

"Don't worry, I'll get by."

They made their way to the patio table, where Ethan stood to kiss her cheek. "Morning, sweetheart. Morning, Tao."

"Morning," Riley said with a smile. Tao just nodded in greeting.

Slumped in his chair, Max said, "I'd stand and kiss you if I trusted my balance." It was clear by his pinched expression and disheveled appearance that he was feeling the aftereffects of the party.

Riley bent and kissed him on the cheek. Seeing there was a glass of Mountain Dew waiting for her, she grinned. "You guys are the best."

Max eyed Riley and Tao as they took the seats opposite him and Ethan. "You don't look at all hungover."

"We only drank Coke," said Riley, wasting no time in grabbing pancakes from the pile at the center of the table. "How's your head?"

Max shrugged one shoulder. "It's been worse. It's also been fucking better."

Ethan pushed a glass of water toward him. "Drink more."

Dutifully, Max took a sip and then turned to Tao. "Well, Tao, tell me about yourself. I know you're a Head Enforcer and you've marked my Riley, but that's pretty much it."

Tao sliced into his pancake. "There's not much worth knowing."

"Did you grow up in the Phoenix Pack?" asked Max.

"No," replied Tao. "My childhood pack split when I was about fourteen. Some of those that left formed a new pack, the Phoenix Pack."



“I heard some stories about your Alpha, Trey,” said Max. “Heard his wolf turns feral during battles, and that your Alpha female was latent until she mated Trey.” Tao nodded in confirmation. “I also heard they’re both pretty crazy,” Max added.

After chewing his pancake, Tao said, “It’s a fairly common belief.” It was also true.

Max put down his glass. “How long have you been Head Enforcer?”

Riley exhaled heavily. “Max, will you stop? He’s not actually interrogating you, Tao, he’s just terribly curious.”

“What else do you expect from a raven?” Max smiled. “I suppose we could talk about you instead, sweetheart. I have some pictures here he might be interested to see.”

“Max . . . ,” she growled. But it was too late. Her uncle dug out his wallet and showed Tao his collection of her childhood photographs, some of which were too embarrassing for words.

Studying one of her on her fifth birthday, Tao said, “You look . . . sweet. I can’t imagine you ever being sweet.”

Ethan chuckled. “She was sweet when she wanted something.”

“And so damn cute and funny,” said Max. “Remember her second Christmas with us, Ethan?”

Max ignored Riley’s groan and turned to Tao. “We asked her to write a list of the things she wanted so we could post it to Santa. She came to us later and it read, ‘A new bear, a bike, a Minnie Mouse dress, and a pair of tits.’”

Tao burst out laughing.

“Turned out she was trying to spell ‘tights,’ but it was still freaking funny.”

Riley shook her head at Max. “I can’t believe you pulled that out of the vault.” He smiled, not the least bit repentant.

Hearing his cell phone chime, Tao fished it out of his pocket. He frowned as the words “Private Number” flashed on the screen. “I’ll be back in a sec.” Standing, he moved a few feet away as he answered. “Hello.”

“You let me down, Mr. Lukas.”

Tao stilled. Motherfucker. How the hell had Ramón Veloz gotten his number? “Excuse me?”

“I told you to impress the seriousness of my situation upon your Alphas. You failed me in that.” The reprimand was sharp and held a note of betrayal, as if Tao were one of his minions.

“No,” said Tao, “you failed to hear me when I told you that my Alpha can’t heal fatal diseases. Maybe there are other healers who—”

“Do you have important people in your life, Mr. Lukas?”

He had plenty of important people in his life, but he didn’t see what the fuck that had to do with anything.

“Sad as it may seem, my brother is really the only person in my life whom I consider important.” Funny, because Ramón didn’t sound as if he found him important. There was no emotion when he spoke of him. “He once saved my life. It’s something I wasn’t able to repay him for until now.”

“You don’t want him to die, I get that, but it doesn’t change that there’s nothing my Alpha female can do for him. You need to accept that.”

“Would you? If someone important to you were dying, would you accept it? What about that little raven I saw you with?”

He really had done his homework on the pack if he knew Riley wasn’t a wolf.

“If she were dying, if death threatened to steal her from you, would you accept it? Or would you do what you could to save her?”

Tao automatically turned to look at her, watching her laugh with her uncles.

“I suppose we shall see.”

Tao scowled. “What the hell does that mean?” The line went dead. Cursing, Tao shoved his cell back into his pocket and—

Thunder cracked through the air, making him jerk to a halt. No, not thunder, he realized a second later.

Gunfire.

## CHAPTER SEVEN



Heart in his throat, Tao raced to Riley's side as she tipped up the table, using it to shield herself and her uncles. The smell of her blood hit him, twisting his gut in knots and sending his wolf crazy. "Riley, look at me!"

"I'm okay, it's just a graze," she said, eyes wide. The bullet had sliced across her upper arm, tearing through cloth and skin. Her nostrils flared and her gaze cut to her uncle. "Ethan?"

That was when Tao noticed the blood blooming near Ethan's shoulder. "Shit."

"We need to get him inside," said Max. Slinging one of Ethan's arms around his neck, Max quickly hauled him into the cabin. Tao used his body to shield Riley as they quickly raced after them, slamming the door shut.

"Keep away from the windows," ordered Tao, ushering Riley straight into the small dining area attached to the kitchen. Wetting a cloth, he used it to dab at and clean her wound. She didn't even flinch—her attention was on her uncles.

Max helped Ethan into a chair and then tore off the bloody shirt. Riley winced at the sight of his wound. The hole wasn't as big as she'd thought it would be, but it was ugly and swollen and bleeding profusely—like a mini volcano on his shoulder. *Too close to his heart*, she thought. *Too fucking close.*

Dread oozed through her, thick and malevolent. She rubbed at her chest absentmindedly. Her heart was beating so fast she thought it might explode. Every breath she took hurt, as if her lungs were on fire.

Nothing could happen to him, nothing. Not to this person who, like his

mate, had loved her and supported her and been her fucking anchor when she most needed one. But the blood just kept coming. Fear clawed its way up her throat until she could taste the metallic tang of it in her mouth. Her raven was going out of her ever-loving mind.

“He’s okay, Riley,” Max assured her, voice calming. “The bullet went straight through. It didn’t hit anything vital.”

“Max has got this, sweetheart,” Ethan said through his teeth, sweat beading on his upper lip.

Done cleaning Riley’s graze, Tao massaged her nape as he watched Max lay his hands over Ethan’s wound, concentration etched into every line of the raven’s face. “You’re a healer?”

“My skills are too weak for me to be classed as an actual healer,” replied Max. “But I can speed up the healing process by stopping blood flow and helping wounds scab over. That’s pretty much it, though. And only if the wound isn’t too bad.”

This wound was bad. Pacing, Riley shoved a hand through her hair. It seemed as if the air had gone from the room and she were smothering. Raw shock had sent her thoughts tumbling, leaving her mind scrambling to make sense of the situation. Everything had happened so fast she couldn’t properly process it. She felt panicked, out of control. “What . . . what the hell . . . who the fuck just shot Ethan? And why would someone do that?” Well, there was one way to find out.

Tao slid in front of her when she tried to barge outside. “Whoa, whoa, whoa!” He grabbed her shoulders, careful not to touch the graze on her upper arm. “We stay here.”

“They could still be out there!” she hissed. “I could shift and fly—”

“And get shot. Not happening.”

“Riley, stay with us, sweetheart,” Ethan urged, voice groggy.

She looked back at him, chest tightening. Max was now using a wet cloth to clean the excess blood from the closed wound. It still looked ugly and raw, and it made her throat thicken.

“I don’t think that bullet was intended for Ethan.”

At Tao’s words, she whipped her head back to face him. “What?”

“I think it was meant for you.”

She frowned. “No, I don’t—”

“It was meant for you,” Tao stated.

“You’re wrong, I—” But then she remembered how, just before the

bullet was fired, she'd bent to grab the knife she'd accidentally knocked off the table. Could someone have been aiming for her? And why? Who would do that? Who would try to shoot her and . . . ? "Shirley," she bit out.

"No," said Tao.

Riley put her hands on her hips. "Well, it was her or Cynthia."

"I don't think it was either of them," Tao told her. "That call I just received was from Ramón. He still won't accept that Taryn can't help his brother, and he's pissed with me because he feels that I didn't communicate to her just how serious he was."

"That doesn't mean—"

"And just as he asks me what I'd do if you were dying in front of me, you're shot at. You think that's a coincidence?"

Riley's mouth dropped open. "That motherfucker."

"Wait, who's Ramón?" asked Ethan, just as Max growled, "Someone's threatening you?"

Tao drew her against him as he explained to her uncles. "Ramón Veloz is a human and suspected drug lord who's allegedly involved in all kinds of illegal shit. His brother's dying of a brain tumor, and he wants my Alpha female to heal him."

Max's brow furrowed. "Even if she could, surely that would kill her."

"Exactly," said Tao. "Not that she'd heal someone who's suspected of several murders. You could say he's dug his own grave, in a roundabout way." Needing to speak to Trey, Tao dug out his cell and dialed the Alpha's number.

After just two rings, Trey answered. "Yep?"

"Did you call Ramón?"

Trey hesitated, as if surprised by the question. "Yeah. I explained that Taryn wouldn't be able to help and wished him luck finding a healer who could. Not that he listened. He's called several times since then. We ignored the calls and let them go to voice mail. Each message is an offer of yet more money. The last offer exceeded a quarter of a million."

"Shit." Tao scrubbed a hand down his face. "Well, he's not fucking happy that you aren't accepting his offers, and he's pissed at me for not impressing upon you just how serious he is. The son of a bitch not only somehow got my number and called me; he had someone follow us here."

"Follow you?"

"Yeah. And that someone just fucking shot at Riley."

“What?”

“The bullet grazed her arm, but it hit her uncle’s shoulder. Luckily, he’s going to be fine.”

“What, what’s going on?” asked Taryn in the background.

“Don’t lose your shit, baby,” said Trey, “but Riley was shot at.”

“Are you kidding me?” Taryn fairly shrieked. Tao and Riley both winced.

“His uncle took the bullet, not her,” Trey told his mate. “Hang on, I’ll put Tao on speakerphone. Tao, tell us exactly what happened.”

Tao relayed his conversation with Ramón and then gave them a rundown of what had happened after the call.

Trey swore again. “You’re sure Ramón’s behind it?”

“It’s too much of a coincidence that the shooting happened right after the call.” The bastard would pay for it. His wolf, pacing angrily, growled his agreement. He wanted to taste Ramón’s blood, to rip him apart limb from fucking limb.

“I don’t think he meant for her to be killed, Tao. I think it was just a warning. The kind of guys who work for people like Ramón Veloz don’t miss.”

Fair point, but it didn’t make Tao feel any better. “We’ll be back tomorrow morning—”

“It might be best if you stay there a little longer. If any of his people are lurking around Exodus territory, they might make a grab for you as you leave. Then we really would be fucked, because the guy would no doubt threaten to kill both of you unless Taryn heals his brother—and that would likely kill her. None of us want to be put in that kind of position.”

Riley folded her arms and declared, “I’m not leaving until Ethan’s fully recovered, Tao.”

“His wound will be almost fully healed by tomorrow,” Tao told her.

“Shifters heal fast, sure, but ravens sleep deeply when they’re injured,” she said. “They can be weak for a few days afterward. I’m not leaving until he’s one hundred percent fine.”

Seeing the stubborn set of her jaw, Tao spoke to Trey. “We’ll stay awhile. What are you going to do about Ramón?”

“Call him back,” said Trey. “Impress upon him just how pissed I am and make him hear me loud and clear when I say that Taryn can’t help his brother. We’ll also tighten security in case the persistent bastard tries taking a

shot at anyone on our territory. I'll keep you updated. Watch your back and take care of Riley." The line went dead, and Tao slid his phone back into his pocket.

"Tao," called Max, "help me get him upstairs."

With a nod Tao went to Ethan's side and helped Max support his weight as they ascended the stairs. "Why hasn't anyone responded to the shots?" Tao asked.

"A lot of humans go hunting around these parts," said Max. "Gunshots don't raise any alarm bells. I'll call Sage in a minute. If there's a human loitering around the perimeter, they'll be found."

Following them into the bedroom, Riley watched as Tao and Max eased Ethan onto the bed. She'd never once seen Ethan hurt or weak. It chilled her to see him so pasty and . . . vulnerable. The wound might be closed, but it still made her stomach roll.

He'd be okay, he would.

She was hit with a sudden memory of telling herself the same thing as she'd seen her father lying in his own bed, weak and pale. She'd assured herself that he'd be fine, that he was just tired, that her mom would be back soon. Only he wasn't fine, and her mom didn't come back.

And suddenly she wasn't looking at her uncle anymore. She was looking at her father. She was four years old, standing by his bed and grabbing his big hand with hers. Ethan and Sage were arguing. Ethan said this wasn't the place for her; that she shouldn't have to watch her dad fade away. Sage had argued that she might be enough to make her father hold on and stay. But she hadn't been enough; he hadn't held on. He'd let go. She'd thought that maybe he'd come back and bring her mom with him. But he hadn't, he'd left her, and she'd hated him for it.

Swamped by the overwhelming despair she hadn't felt in a long while, Riley wanted to turn and flee, but she felt rooted to the spot. Her muscles were sore and stiff from standing so still, but she genuinely couldn't move. And as the memories slapped her one after the other, a heavy weight descended on her.

As it had long ago, it pulled her under until she felt numb and completely disconnected from what was happening right in front of her. Sound seemed to disappear from the room, and she felt alone. Empty. Cold. She'd been in this dark place before, a place where no one could reach her. Maybe it was better that way, because what kind of person hated their father

for dying?

As Max left the room to call Sage, Tao glanced at Riley. She was unnaturally still, her shoulders tight and her stare vacant. Something about the sight made the hair on his nape and arms stand on end.

Crossing to her, Tao turned her to face him. Her eyes met his, but there was nothing there. He could almost see her retreating into herself, closing herself off from everything around her. He knew exactly what he was looking at. He remembered his orphaned cousin doing the same thing smack-dab in the middle of a street as an ambulance went by.

Seeing Ethan hurt had acted as a grief trigger.

Cursing himself for not having considered what the situation might do to her, Tao cupped her cheeks. “Riley? Riley, look at me.” She didn’t respond. Hell, she didn’t even seem to see him. His wolf raked at Tao, wanting him to do something. “Ethan’s fine, baby, he’s just sleeping.” Still she didn’t respond.

Panicking a little now, Tao lightly slapped her cheek. “Riley, come back to me.” It was a whisper, but it held a command. “He’s going to be fine, I swear that to you.” When she still gave no reaction, his wolf almost lost his fucking mind.

Wondering if prodding her temper might work, Tao collared her throat in a move that was both dominant and possessive—a move that would make any dominant female bristle. Her eyes sparked with anger and he almost fucking sighed with relief. “That’s it; good girl.”

She licked her lips, back with him now. But her breathing was shallow and barely audible. Tao put her hand on his chest. “I need you to breathe with me. Deep breaths, okay? In and out, come on.” She breathed with him over and over, never once breaking eye contact. “You good now?”

“Yeah.” Her voice cracked, so she coughed to clear it. “Yeah, I’m good.”

Thank fuck. Curling an arm around her, he crushed her to him and buried his face in her hair. “Don’t go away like that again. You scared the shit out of me.” Her arms slid around him and she tucked her face into the crook of his neck and shoulder. Tao just held her until the tension seeped out of her.

After a minute she pulled back and flipped her hair away from her face. “I just need a minute.”



Sensing that what she really wanted was time alone to regroup, Tao nodded and released her. “Don’t go far.” He expected her to go downstairs. Instead she headed to the room across the hall that he guessed was her old bedroom.

Max, who’d been observing from the top of the stairs, crossed to Tao. “She’ll be okay.”

“Does that happen a lot?”

“It used to when she was a kid. She watched her dad deteriorate right in front of her. Neither me nor Ethan thought she should have been allowed in the room as much as she was, but Sage believed that her presence might pierce through her dad’s pain and make him fight to live.”

“Did he fight?”

Max’s mouth turned down. “No. He didn’t even try. I was so pissed at him for that. Hey, I’d be broken if something happened to Ethan, and I’d feel like I had nothing to live for. But Daniel did have something to live for—he had someone who needed him right then, but he barely looked at her. He was too deep in grief, too swallowed up by his pain, to even bother to find the will to hold on for Riley. I’ll never forgive him for that. And I’m not sure if she will either.”

In her position, Tao doubted he’d be any more forgiving.

“I called Sage. Not gonna lie, he’s pissed that a drug lord’s assassin came calling. He wants you to call him.” Max dialed a number, passed Tao his BlackBerry, and moved to Ethan’s side.

Sage answered. “Put the wolf on the phone.”

Tao ground his teeth. “This is the wolf.”

“Mind telling me what the hell’s happening?”

It was on the tip of Tao’s tongue to tell him it was pack business, but he’d unknowingly brought that business to the flock’s territory—it had every right to know exactly what was happening. Tao filled him in on the situation, adding, “The last thing we ever would have expected is for the human to have us followed here, let alone shoot at Riley.”

Sage was silent for a moment. “Hugh and the enforcers are circling the perimeter in search of the gunman. They should find him.”

Tao was counting on it.

“But even if they do, the threat to you and Riley remains. The gunman is only an employee of your enemy and he may not have come here alone. The moment you and Riley step off our territory, you’ll be in easy reach for

the humans. It might be best for you both to stay a little longer.”

Tao was sincerely surprised by the offer. He, personally, would have wanted the people who’d brought trouble to his pack to be gone yesterday. But then, Tao was an asshole. “We appreciate that offer and we’ll take you up on it.”

“Good. You might consider Riley pack, but I’ll always consider her one of ours.”

As the line went dead, Tao handed the phone back to Max. “He’s recommending that me and Riley stay a little longer . . . which is a good thing because I don’t think she’ll leave until Ethan’s okay.” Tao studied the raven lying so still on the bed. “I didn’t expect him to fall straight to sleep like that.”

“It’s a healing sleep,” said Max.

“It’s a what?”

“When our kind is injured, we fall into a deep sleep. It’s like our body shuts down a little so we can use all our energy to heal. It’s annoying, really, because it’s impossible to stay awake and fight the pull.”

Hearing a creaking sound behind him, Tao glanced over his shoulder to see the door to what he assumed was Riley’s old bedroom swing open. She came strolling out, the image of composure. The shock and anguish was gone from her expression. In its place was sheer unadulterated rage. Ah, his little raven had found her anger. Good. That was a lot better than despair. “Feel better?”

She gave a stiff nod. “I’m fine.”

The landline phone began to ring, and Max sighed. “I’m guessing the news has spread around the flock. The damn phone will be like a hotline.”

“I’ll answer it,” offered Riley, heading down the stairs.

Max spoke quietly to Tao. “You need to watch her. Riley is very protective of those she cares for. She’ll avenge them to her last breath. If she can get to the person who—however inadvertently—shot Ethan, she will . . . even if it means going off on her own little hunt.”

Later on, Riley shoved open the front door of the cabin, seething with a rage that didn’t seem to be going anywhere. She felt hot and edgy all over. Her jaw ached from how hard she’d clenched it. She wanted to punch something. Punch, claw, mangle, maul, tear apart with teeth and talons. If she didn’t release the rage soon, she’d explode.

She still couldn't quite believe it had happened. Her raven was still in shock, though not in any way numb—no, she was pissed as all hell. Riley was going to get her hands on that bastard, Ramón. She was going to see him writhe in agony. He'd beg for death by the time she—

“Baby, you need to calm down,” said Tao.

Yes, she did, but it was hard to think past the pounding in her ears and the red clouding her vision. “In case you've forgotten, someone shot my uncle.”

“Yeah, they did. And I want to rip out their fucking lungs because you were the real target, Riley. You.”

“I know that,” she clipped, voice fairly shaking with anger. “Ethan's more important.”

“Not to me, baby. And you came too fucking close to being vulnerable in a place where there are two people who resent you. All things considered, you've got the right to rage, but you need to keep your shit together. I don't want you going off on your own. Promise me that you won't.”

“I could just do a flyby and—”

“Potentially get shot out of the sky,” Tao finished. “That's not going to help Ethan or get you vengeance. Now come here.” He grabbed her nape and pulled her to him, wrapping an arm around her stiff body. He could all but feel her fury vibrating through her.

“I don't lose it often, but I find it hard to calm down when I do.”

He kissed her forehead, wishing he knew how to soothe and comfort her, but he wasn't much good at this kind of thing. He tried petting the anger out of her, rubbing his jaw against her temple and pressing more kisses to her forehead. The whole time his wolf pushed against him, offering her that same comfort.

“Sage said he'd have Hugh and the enforcers circle the area,” said Tao when her body lost its stiffness. “It's highly likely that they'll find him.”

“They'd better not kill him,” she said, pulling back to look at him. “That's my job.”

# CHAPTER EIGHT



**H**ugh and the enforcers didn't kill the shooter. Probably for the sole reason that they didn't find him. The news that the bastard had gotten away didn't sit well with Riley, and Tao quickly came to learn that Riley Porter had a tendency to disappear into her own head when she was worrying over something. No doubt she was plotting what she'd do with the gunman once she had her hands on him. Knowing how merciless ravens were, Tao might have pitied the bastard if he hadn't tried to shoot Riley.

Hoping it would help distract her from the temptation to venture off alone, Tao took her to her uncles' cabin first thing the next morning. He could smell bacon grilling and eggs frying before he even got to the front door. He'd no sooner raised his fist to knock than Max opened up and urged them inside.

"Morning," said Max. He kissed Riley's cheek. "Have you two eaten?"

Riley nodded. "How's—"

"Ethan's fine, sweetheart. He's feeling groggy and shaky after waking from the healing sleep, but he's otherwise okay. Go on up to the bedroom. Seeing you should perk him up." As she shot out of the den and up the stairs, Max looked at Tao and said, "He'll let her fuss over him because it'll make her feel better and he's missed her."

Tao followed Max into the kitchen. "How's his wound?"

Max scooped two eggs out of the pan and slid them onto a plate. "Not as well healed as I'd hoped. Maybe that's a good thing, though, because if he was fully recovered, he'd be burning shit down right now. Go on up."

Tao took the stairs two at a time and strolled into the bedroom just in time to watch Riley huff as Ethan walked awkwardly to the bed.

“I don’t know why you won’t let me help you,” Riley griped. “It’s not weak to admit you’re weak.”

Sliding into bed, Ethan sent her a frown. “I can go to and from the damn bathroom on my own steam. And I’m not weak.”

“Is that why you look close to passing out?” She plumped his pillow and pulled the covers over his legs.

Tao sidled up to her as he spoke to Ethan. “How are you doing?”

“Better,” said Ethan. “There’s no need for all her fussing.”

Tao suspected the guy was enjoying it, but, of course, pride dictated that he hide it.

“Oh, I love you too,” she sassed, dropping into the armchair beside the bed.

The smell of eggs, bacon, and ketchup was followed by the entrance of Max. He handed Ethan a tray on which a full plate of food and a bottle of water sat. “Eat.”

“He hasn’t stopped feeding me,” Ethan grumbled to Riley and Tao.

“Good,” she said. “You need to build up your strength.”

Glancing around the bedroom, Tao noticed the number of “Get well soon” cards that were positioned on the dressers and the wooden computer desk. “You’ve had a lot of visitors, I see.”

“Max didn’t let them past the front door,” said Ethan, but it wasn’t a complaint.

Tao frowned. “Really?”

Riley looked up at him. “Our kind doesn’t like having people around us while we’re not at full strength.”

Max straddled the dining chair he’d dragged into the room. “Riley, be a sweetheart and make some coffee. I forgot.”

Ethan grunted. “You make better coffee than he does.”

She gave her uncles a look of sheer disgust. “You just want to talk to Tao without me around, which means you want to talk to him about me.”

As if hurt, Max slapped a hand over his heart. “Would we trick you like that?”

“Yes. Yes, you would.”

Ethan chuckled. “Go, we won’t take long.”

She snorted at his reassuring smile. “Why don’t you just say it in front of me?”

“Because you’ll answer his questions for him so we only hear what you

want us to hear,” said Ethan.

“I’m fine!” she growled.

“Then that’s what he’ll tell us, isn’t it?” said Max. “So there’s no need for you to stay.”

She stood, threw up her arms, and left the room—grumbling to herself the entire time.

Once she was out of hearing range, Max turned to Tao. “How’s she been? She seems better this morning.”

Tao slid into Riley’s seat and linked his fingers behind his head. “She seethed all the way back to the cabin. Thoughts of vengeance pretty much took over for a while. She calmed down eventually, but she barely touched her dinner.”

Ethan sighed. “Her appetite always suffers when she’s upset. Did she sleep much?”

Tao shook his head. “She woke up a lot earlier than she usually does, and she was too wired to relax and get back to sleep. I stayed up with her because I was worried she’d go off hunting for the bastard who shot you.”

“Good call on your part,” said Max. “You did a good job of bringing her out of her zone yesterday. That’s what we used to call it. She had a few grief triggers as a kid.”

“It’s the first time I’ve ever seen her like that,” said Tao, “so I think they lost their sharp edge a long time ago. Seeing Ethan hurt must have just thrown her back to the past.”

Ethan nodded. “You like our Riley a lot, don’t you?”

Tao snorted. “She’s a pain in my ass most of the time.”

Flashing him an understanding smile, Max said, “Riley has a bad habit of annoying people to keep them at a distance.”

“Yeah, it took me a while to realize that was what she was doing.” But she hadn’t done it recently; she’d kept her word and let him in. Both Tao and his wolf felt rather smug about that.

“It’s nothing personal to you.” Ethan paused to drink some water. “I don’t know if you’ve ever been around a child who’s lost a parent, but it’s heartbreaking. Riley was very close to Anabel and Daniel. She’d only just turned four when they died and she didn’t really understand what happened. Even though she pretty much watched Daniel die, she’d look for them, call out for them, wait at the window for them. We’d try to explain the situation to her and she’d nod like she understood, but then she’d go searching for

them again.

“Eventually she stopped looking. And then all we’d ever see in her eyes was fear. Fear of being without her parents, fear of being alone, fear of anything else bad happening. She didn’t trust the world anymore. She changed from happy and open to wary and cautious. She didn’t accept new people in her life easily, and if she could annoy them into leaving her alone, she would.” Ethan paused. “You see, deep inside Riley is a little girl who doesn’t think she’s enough to hold anyone to her.”

“Because her father didn’t hold on for her,” Tao guessed.

“It’s probably not fair of me to judge him for it, but she’s my niece and I love her—it’s my right to judge anyone who hurts her.”

“Sage should never have put pressure on her to keep him alive,” said Tao.

“No, he shouldn’t have,” Ethan agreed. “He’s my Alpha and I respect him, but he let her down there.”

Max leaned back. “She’ll take a little time to let you fully in, but that’s only because a subconscious part of her is testing you—if you’re persistent, it will show you’re truly interested and worth the risk. It’s a defense mechanism, I guess, and I’m pretty sure she doesn’t even realize it’s there. But once she lets a person in, they’re in.”

Tao tilted his head. “What you’re saying is that I should be patient with her?”

“Patient?” echoed Ethan. “No. You don’t strike me as the patient type. We’re telling you to keep on chipping away at her walls. If you give her even a moment’s reprieve, she’ll shore up her defenses without even knowing she’s doing it. Riley will drive you crazy, but she’ll also protect you with her life and be loyal to you to the day she dies . . . if you’re worth it. So be worth it. She deserves that in a mate.”

*Mate?* Tao stiffened. “It’s not that serious between me and Riley.”

Max smiled. “I said the same thing about Ethan when my mom asked about him.”

Ethan chuckled at Max. “I told my mom I was just using you for sex.”

“You were,” said Max.

“At first.”

Tao raised his hands and gently stated, “I really don’t think she’s my true mate.”

Max’s smile widened. “I said that about Ethan too.”

“If you want the truth,” said Tao, “I was a shit to her in the beginning. If I’d had my way, she wouldn’t have been allowed to step foot on my territory. Why is that funny?” Tao had expected her uncles to be pissed at him, but both were laughing.

Ethan took another drink of his water. “When I first met Max, I wanted to kill him. I didn’t even know why. He just rubbed me the wrong way. Looking back on it, I think part of me sensed he was my true mate and felt threatened by it. Taking a mate, making that ultimate commitment, can be a scary thing. There’s no going back from something like that. It can freak a person out.”

Suddenly feeling a little uncomfortable, Tao rolled back one shoulder. “I know what you’re getting at, but I don’t think she’s my true mate.”

Max cocked his head. “You don’t sound particularly bothered by that.”

“I’m not. But things truly aren’t serious between me and Riley. And trust me when I say that’s a good thing for her.” And for him too. For Tao, flings were safe. There were no expectations to “complete” someone, no dependency, no pressure to feel something he hadn’t yet been able to feel for a female. It wasn’t that he was incapable of loving someone. He’d just never been able to feel love for someone outside his family or pack.

Max shrugged. “All right, if you say so.”

He did say so, but neither raven looked as if he believed him.

It was 3:40 a.m. when Riley woke up the next morning. Because it had taken her a while to fall asleep, she’d had three hours’ rest in all. Not great, but she’d learned not to moan about what sleep she *didn’t* get and just be thankful for what she *did* get.

Feeling ridiculously alert, she didn’t bother closing her eyes and trying to fall back asleep. Tired though she was, it wouldn’t happen, so she simply lay on her back, staring at the ceiling. Getting out of the bed without waking Tao would require some finesse. He’d proven to be a light sleeper, and, well, he wouldn’t like it when Riley tried to take her breast back.

Tao wasn’t a “cuddler”—which she loved because she didn’t like being smothered—but his hand would often end up splayed possessively over her breast, stomach, or ass while they slept. Her raven liked it.

Hell, her raven liked practically everything about him. In truth, she was becoming a little too attached to him for Riley’s liking. If Tao knew just how territorial the avian felt about him, he’d probably shit his pants and run a



mile.

He'd impressed both Riley and her raven yesterday by snapping her out of what her uncles called "her zone." One minute she'd been in that dark, emotionally sterile pit, struggling to feel anything but grief. The next she'd been absolutely outraged by the dominant hold on her throat, and the world had been a colorful place once again.

It was a world she'd paint red with the blood of the bastard who—

"What's wrong?" he rumbled.

"I'm fine." And a little turned on by how deep and gravelly his voice was when he was half-asleep. "Go back to sleep."

"Stop plotting and let your mind rest."

"What?"

"You're a plotter. There's no way you aren't planning your revenge." He kissed her shoulder. "Let it go for now and go back to sleep."

"It doesn't work like that."

"How long have you had insomnia?"

"As far back as I can remember."

"Is it hard to fall asleep or just hard to stay asleep?"

"Sometimes my mind shuts down pretty fast, sometimes it takes a while to drift off. But I always wake up after a few hours." She gave a nonchalant shrug. "I'm used to it."

"I don't know how you function with it. After I left my childhood pack I had . . . well, I wouldn't call it insomnia, but there was a month when I kept waking up in the middle of the night and couldn't get back to sleep. By the end of the four weeks, my concentration was shot to shit, I looked like crap, and I was so damn edgy I bit everyone's head off."

"Why did you leave with Trey and the others when he was banished by his father?" Generally she didn't ask personal questions, but since Tao had no problem asking them of her, she figured he wouldn't mind.

"I left because I didn't agree with the decision. When you're a teenager, you think you're older and wiser than you truly are. To me it didn't feel like a big deal to leave. It felt like the most obvious thing to do; my loyalty was to Trey, and I wouldn't follow an Alpha I couldn't respect or trust. Trey's father was an evil fucker."

"Didn't your parents try to stop you from leaving?"

"No. They understand me; they knew that leaving with Trey was something I had to do and they respected that." Which he'd appreciated.

“They later transferred to the pack that my brother mated into.”

“You have siblings?”

“Just one. An older brother, Joaquin. He’s mated, with a passel of kids. Unhappily mated, for the most part, however. I don’t see him or my parents as often as I should, if I’m honest.” Tao softened his voice as he asked, “Do you remember much about your parents?” She was quiet for so long that he thought she wouldn’t answer.

“I remember some things,” she finally said. Somehow it was easier to talk about them in the dark. “I remember my mom’s laugh. She had one of those really contagious laughs that made you want to laugh with her. She used to take lots and lots of pictures of me, like she was collecting memories. My dad . . . he loved sketching and painting and sculpting. He would shut himself in the spare room for days while he worked. And sometimes he’d leave origami animals on my pillow.” Her freshest memories were of him dying in a bed, refusing to talk to or even look at her, no matter what she did.

Sensing her mood begin to plummet, Tao said, “I once saw my dad in a dress, eating low-fat yogurt.”

She blinked. “What?”

“It sounds ridiculous, doesn’t it? I thought it couldn’t possibly be a real memory. But I have this image in my head of me looking out my bedroom window and seeing him that way and thinking . . . *Dad hates yogurt, and what’s with the dress?* I mentioned it to my mom once and she laughed so hard I was worried she’d pee herself. Apparently there was one New Year’s Eve party when everyone had been drunk out of their minds, daring each other to do weird stuff.”

Riley smiled. “Your parents sound like fun people.”

“They are.”

“Ethan said my mom was a fun person. Social and positive and full of mischief. Everybody loved her. My dad was an artist and had a big personality. Very emotional. When he was happy, he was ecstatic. But when he was sad . . . when he was sad, you’d think Armageddon had come calling. That’s what others tell me, anyway.”

“Were they true mates?”

“No. Daniel came to our flock to visit a friend. He saw my mom . . . and he never left. They were apparently inseparable from day one and it didn’t take long for imprinting to start. They were good to me, from what I remember, and I refer to them as my parents”—she bit her lip—“but I think

of my uncles as my parents, really. Do you think that's bad?"

"No, not at all." He kissed her shoulder. "Jesus, baby, your uncles have raised you since you were four. They have been parents to you. There's nothing bad about you feeling that way. I'll bet if you asked them, they'd say they think of you as a daughter. I like them. I like how good they are to you." Tao combed his fingers through her hair, loving the silky feel of it. "How did you spend your years away from the flock?"

"I did a lot of traveling, saw a lot of cool places. New York. Shanghai. London. I never stayed anywhere longer than a few months. Ethan and Max came out to see me a couple of times and we always had a blast. They even came to the shelter."

"Really?"

"They didn't like the idea of me staying in a shelter and wanted to be sure it was as nice and safe as I described it to be. They love Makenna and Madisyn." Madisyn was a cat shifter who worked at the shelter with Makenna.

"I'm surprised they didn't come to our territory to check it out when you moved there."

"They were going to, but Makenna assured them it was a great place and that I was safe there."

"And you were trying to keep your past a secret from the pack." He nipped her shoulder punishingly.

She flinched and gave him a mock scowl. "It wasn't so much about keeping it a secret. It was just that some of you were inclined not to trust me when I first got there—you yourself insisted I was trouble and cunning. If you'd known I was accused of manipulating someone into shooting nine people, you might have believed it, especially since you were convinced I was banished. Greta would have used it against me, not just to sway Trey and Taryn into making me leave, but to hurt me."

He couldn't deny that. "And later? Why not tell us later?"

"Because confiding in people about deep stuff like that—"

"Is bonding," he finished. "And you were afraid to bond with us. You needed to keep a nice healthy distance between yourself and the pack . . . only it didn't work so well," he added with a smug smile. "You might not have come to the pack looking for a place, but you found one. Would you really leave Savannah and Dexter?"

Her chest panged at the idea. "Taryn and Trey would let me visit them."

“Why visit them when you can stay with them? Tell me you aren’t missing them like crazy. Tell me it doesn’t hurt just a little to be away from them. You’re their mom, for all intents and purposes.”

“More like the fun aunt.”

“Ethan and Max are your uncles. Does it detract from how much you care for them? Why do you think none of the couples in the pack adopted Savannah and Dexter? They’re yours. You stood guard over them the way your uncles did over you. They’ll adore you for that forever. And no matter where in the world you are, they’ll think of you as their protector and they’ll wish you were with them. But why love them from afar when you don’t have to?” He trailed kisses from her shoulder up to her neck. “You wouldn’t be happy living among humans, Riley.”

Her brows snapped together at the confident remark. “And you’re so sure of this why?”

“Living a life where you had to hide half of what you are would leave you feeling like a fake. You’d hate that. Besides, you’d miss me.”

Laughter bubbled up out of nowhere. “Miss you?”

“Admit it, things wouldn’t be the same without me around.”

“No, they’d be a hell of a lot better.” She flinched as he bit her earlobe hard. “Ow. That hurt, asshole.”

“I’ve tried not to be an asshole, but I find it pretty exhausting to pretend to be anything other than who I am. I don’t want to be fake.”

“You’d rather people hate you for who you are—how admirable of you.”

He chuckled. “Isn’t it, though?” Combing his fingers through her hair again, he held it up toward the ceiling. “I used to prefer blonde hair, and I have no idea why. But your hair . . . the way the light hits it, making it look any color from blue to black to purple . . . perfect.” His wolf was in complete agreement, wanted to roll around in it. Tao spoke into her ear. “Know where I want to see it? Spread over my thighs while you suck me off.”

“I’m worried by how hard you find it to express yourself.”

He chuckled again. Flipping the covers back, he braced his weight on his elbow as he looked his fill at her deliciously naked body. His cock, already thick and heavy, throbbed almost painfully. “You are seriously fucking gorgeous. You know that, don’t you?”

“You said I’m not your type,” she reminded him.

He draped himself over her. “You’re every guy’s type, baby. Don’t

listen to me, I talk shit.”

“Are you talking shit now?”

“Nope.” He sucked her bottom lip into his mouth and gave it a sharp nip. He wanted to bite and mark every inch of her. Wanted other males to know she was taken. He cupped her breast and flicked her nipple with his thumb, liking how she arched into him. “I’m going to fuck you. I’m going to sink deep inside you and fill you up.” He closed his mouth around her nipple and suckled hard. “In a little while.”

She frowned at him as he curled his tongue around her other nipple. “What do you mean, in a little while?” Her voice came out a little shaky. “Why not now? Now sounds better.”

“I want your taste in my mouth while I fuck you.”

Oh. Well then. “I supposed you’d better get to it—time’s a-ticking.”

Tao licked and bit his way down her body, leaving little marks of possession everywhere. Settling between her thighs, he parted her wet folds with his thumbs. The scent of her need shot right to his cock, and a growl rumbled out of him. “So wet.” He slid his tongue between her folds, lapping up all the cream there. Her taste was his very own aphrodisiac, as though her pussy had been made just for him. He shouldn’t like the idea, but he did. “You make me greedy.”

“For what?”

“Everything I can get from you.” He used one finger to scoop up some of her cream and, locking his gaze with hers, rubbed his wet finger over the rim of her ass. “I want this.”

“No.”

He’d been fully expecting that response. Females usually saved anal sex for their mates. He understood and respected that, and so did his wolf. Still . . . “I want it.”

“Well, thanks for sharing that. Now if you could get to work, that would be great.” She gasped as his tongue teasingly fluttered around the entrance of her pussy. She bucked her hips, needing more. His tongue sank inside her just as he pushed his finger into her ass. “Now wait a minute—”

“I’m not going to fuck your ass, baby. I won’t take what you’re not prepared to give, no matter how much I want it.” He flicked her clit with his tongue. “But I want to feel how tight and hot this ass is. Will you let me have that?”

She hissed as he worked his finger deeper; the burn felt surprisingly

good. “Only if you make me come fast.”

“If that’s what you want . . .”

A moan slipped out of her as his mouth clamped around her. He ate at her pussy like his life depended on it; all the while his finger thrust in and out of her ass. The dual assault on her senses drove her insane, making the friction build and build inside her. Then his mouth suckled her clit and, yeah, she was gone. She fisted his hair as bolt after bolt of pleasure racked her body, leaving her a shivering mess.

Tao rose above her, licking his lips. “Nothing should taste that good.”

She stared into gold eyes that were hooded and gleaming with a need that called to hers. His face was stamped with possessiveness and a predatory hunger that made her pussy clench. “Fuck me.”

“I want your mouth first.” Grabbing a chunk of her hair, Tao kissed her hard, thrusting his tongue inside. She gave as good as she got, digging her nails into the skin of his back and arching up to grind against his cock. He groaned, so full and aching to be in her. Surely it wasn’t a good thing to need anything this much, but he needed her. There was no changing it. “Tell me what you want, Riley.”

“You talk too much. Get moving.”

“I’d love to, baby, I really would. But you didn’t do what I asked.” He shook his head in reprimand. “Now tell me what you want.”

She rolled her eyes. “For God’s sake, Fenris, do you have to be so damn chatty in bed?” He stilled, eyes glittering with menace, and she realized she’d made a mistake. “Um . . .”

“Did you just call me Fenris? Because you know I don’t like that.”

She twisted her mouth. “Well—”

He flipped her over, pulled her to her knees, and slapped her ass.

“Hey!”

He grabbed a fistful of her hair and snatched her head back. “What’s my name?”

“I can’t believe you just spanked me!” The bastard did it again. She reached back and slashed his upper chest—it was instinctive, a primal reaction. Her stomach dropped as his blood pooled to the surface. She realized she hadn’t scratched him with her nails; she’d used the tips of her talons . . . and she’d clawed him deep enough to permanently mark him. The same realization was in his eyes—eyes that flashed wolf for a second. “Oh my God,” she whispered. “I am so sorry.”

Tao slammed his cock into her pussy. She was swollen from her orgasm, but he forced himself deep. Her pussy, so hot and slick, clenched and rippled around him. Too fucking good. He should have been angry about the mark. Instead he was at risk of exploding right then. Curling over her, he pressed her into the mattress. “Want more?”

“But I just—”

He rammed into her again. “Do you want more?”

Thrown that he didn’t seem to care about the mark—or at least was too damn turned on to care about it at that moment—she said simply, “Yes.”

“Then what’s my fucking name?”

His teeth scraped over her shoulder in warning. She bit out, “Tao.”

“That’s my girl.” He fucked her hard. Maybe too hard, but she was pushing back to meet every brutal thrust and moaning for more. Those husky little moans were chiseling away at his control—like he’d had much of that to begin with.

He pushed her deeper into the mattress so she couldn’t move, not at all surprised by the low guttural sound that rattled out of her throat. He hammered into her even harder, faster, letting her know she wasn’t getting the upper hand. Her pussy tightened around him, showing him that a part of her liked the dominant move.

He bit her earlobe. “I’m going to come inside you, Riley. Come until you’re dripping with me. But first I want to hear you scream and feel you come around me. Make that happen for me.” Pounding into her, he slipped his hand around her and plucked at her clit. “Come.”

The growled word vibrated with a pure male power that sent Riley tumbling hard into a vicious orgasm—it wrenched a scream from her throat and threw Tao over the edge. An agonizing pleasure flooded every part of her and stole every bit of her strength, leaving her body weak and quaking. She would have sunk into the mattress like a limp ragdoll if she could have moved, but Tao’s body still held hers in place.

After a few moments, he pressed a kiss between her shoulder blades and pulled out of her. “Don’t move.”

She would have—okay, she might have—obeyed that order if she’d had the strength to control her body. Instead she slumped onto her stomach, breathing hard. She sensed him leaving the room, but she couldn’t open her eyes to see what he was doing. Moments later he reappeared, and then a wet cloth was dabbing her back. She frowned. Why the hell would he be cleaning

her—?

Oh yeah. Clearly some of his blood had seeped from his chest onto her back. She still could not believe she'd branded him. Flushing red, she said, "I really am sorry about that."

"Don't be."

Her eyes flipped open at his nonchalant response. "Don't be? Those marks are deep, Tao. They won't fade."

"I know that." Lying on his side, he dragged her to him so her back was against his front.

"You should be pissed."

"Well, I'm not." He kissed her shoulder. "Now sleep."

"Sleep?" Was he for real?

"You're tired, so sleep."

She would have argued with him further, but she was tired. More importantly, she was sleepy. So she let the subject go and closed her eyes. Tomorrow, they could deal with it tomorrow.



## CHAPTER NINE



**B**efore Tao even opened his eyes, he knew he was alone. He reached out with his enhanced hearing, listening for any movements in the bathroom. There were none, but Riley's scent was strong enough in the air to suggest that she hadn't been gone long.

He inhaled deeply, taking that scent inside him. It shot right to his cock, and he almost groaned. It was a sincere shame she wasn't right there beside him—he could have rolled her onto her back and driven himself deep inside her.

After edging out of bed, he washed and dressed in a black T-shirt and dark blue jeans before heading downstairs. There were no sounds coming from inside the cabin, so he guessed she was either out on the porch or lying on the sun lounger. But when he slipped out the patio door a few minutes later with a cup of coffee in hand, it was to find no sign of her.

Hearing a distinct *prruk-prruk* call, he looked up to see a very familiar raven soaring above the trees. The metallic glint of her feathers shone in the sunlight, making them seem alternately blue and purple.

His wolf pushed against his skin, wanting out, wanting to play with the pretty raven. Instead Tao leaned against the porch post and watched as she performed a series of carefree, acrobatic flying maneuvers. As she flew, her wings made a sound that was much like silk rustling. She was so incredibly agile and beautiful, much like Riley herself. It was surprisingly relaxing to just watch her flutter around.

After a minute or so, she swept down and perched on the wooden porch rail. Head cocked, she blinked at him. Those dark-brown eyes held a surprising amount of intelligence and curiosity. The raven had come close to

him before, but never this close—she seemed to prefer dropping worms on his head.

“Don’t bite me with that big beak.” Slowly he reached out and lightly skimmed a finger over her long wings. The feathers were softer than he’d expected.

Her body dipped low, making her large, slightly curved bill lift. It made him think of a wolf getting ready to pounce. She let out a *toc-toc-toc* sound.

“I don’t know what that means.”

She edged along the rail, moving closer to him. Swift as lightning, she snapped her beak around the cell phone sticking out of his pocket and was gone in a rustle of wings.

“Hey, give it back!”

She didn’t. Instead she circled him low enough that he could almost touch her. Again and again she did it—taunting him. He jumped up to grab her tail and almost had her. She settled on a tree branch, dangling the phone toward the ground . . . and that was when he realized there was a huge rock at the base of the tree.

“Don’t you dare!” But she would dare. The raven could be a little devil at times. He balanced his cup on the wooden rail and stalked over to the tree. “Give it back.” He held out his hand, repeating, “Give it back.” But of course she didn’t. “Riley, tell your damn raven to hand it over.”

The raven soared out of the tree and landed on the porch swing, where she dumped his phone. Her throat feathers puffed up and a deep croak seemed to rattle out of her. It sounded like a complaint—possibly that he was no fun—but Tao couldn’t be sure.

“Whatever,” he grumbled, snatching his phone just as she flew off. Instead of heading back to the trees, she retreated into the house. A few moments later, Riley came out in one of his flannel shirts. “I don’t think your raven likes me much,” he said.

“Actually, she thinks you’re freaking hilarious.”

Leaning his back against the porch post, he curled an arm around her and drew her against him. “Hilarious?”

“She likes to play, and she thinks it’s funny when you moan and whine.”

Affronted, he frowned. “Dominant male wolves do not whine.”

“You do.”

“Whatever.”

“If you want the truth, she’s becoming worryingly attached to you. You should probably run while you still can.” Her raven didn’t get attached to people easily. When she did, she held on tight. It took a lot to make her let go.

He snorted, sliding his hand under her shirt to cup her delightfully bare ass. “You think my wolf’s any less attached to you? He hasn’t given me a minute’s peace since he caught your scent. Even at the beginning, before you managed to charm him, he wanted you.” Tao licked at the mark on her neck. “All he’s done is hound me to take you. It’s not easy to not be at peace with your inner animal. This is the most relaxed he’s been in a while, even though you’re in danger and he hates it.”

Taking all that into consideration, Riley said, “Our animals are weird.”

“I can’t argue with that.” He combed his fingers through her hair, letting his gaze drift a little too possessively over her face. She wasn’t wearing any makeup, and yet she looked too beautiful for words. “I have no idea why you wear makeup. You don’t need it.”

Riley’s mouth twitched. From anyone else that might have been a compliment. But this was just Tao being his direct, outspoken self, complaining about her use of cosmetics. “I’ll take that on board.”

“You should.” Cupping her pussy, he slid a finger between her folds, humming as he found her wet. “I didn’t like waking up alone. I like finding you next to me.”

“You like morning sex,” she corrected. She slid her hands up his chest and he winced ever so slightly, but she caught it. Her smile faded. “I really am sorry about the marks.”

He rubbed his nose against hers. “I told you: don’t be.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I pushed you too hard; you reacted.”

“Clawing you is one thing; scarring you is another.” His mate would hate her for it. Yeah, well, Riley would hate her right back just for having him. God, she despised jealousy.

“What are you thinking that has you scowling?”

“That your mate will hate me for leaving a permanent brand on you.” It wasn’t so much that that bothered her, it was that . . . “And then you’ll hate me for upsetting her.”

Snapping open his fly, he said, “I could never hate you.” Tao lifted her and settled her over his cock, groaning as she took him deep. “Not ever.” He

turned them so she was up against the post as he took her with short, feral digs until he came so hard it almost blew the head off his cock. And he knew it wasn't just his wolf who was becoming attached to Riley; it was him.

Later, after breakfast, Tao called Sage for an update. They hadn't yet found the gunman, which pissed Tao off and had Riley pacing up and down the den like a caged tiger. The Alpha assured them that the Beta and his enforcers would continue their search until the human was found.

A whole day passed without success. And another. And another. The shooter seemed to have literally disappeared. That didn't go down well with Riley at all. She'd gotten more and more restless as the days went by. Tao had kept a close watch on her, worried she'd get tired of waiting and go hunting for the human herself. So when they were invited to share a meal with the entire flock, Tao accepted the invitation, hoping it would cheer her up a little.

Unlike his pack, the flock didn't share daily meals, but it did eat together once every two weeks. Of course, his nature balked at the idea of spending time with a bunch of people who were, for the most part, strangers. But if it would distract Riley from her worries, it was worth it.

So, he and Riley made their way to the main cabin for the evening meal. It quickly became clear that the event wasn't being held inside the building, but in the pretty garden outside. The style in which the long wooden tables were set up, forming a U shape, made Tao think of a medieval banquet. Circular stands of food stood within the U shape.

Spotting Cynthia at the head table with Lucy and the Alphas, Tao was sure to send the bitch a narrow-eyed look, communicating that he knew exactly who'd shredded his clothes. Her brow furrowed in confusion, but he wasn't buying it. He didn't miss that Riley tossed her a hostile look, and he wasn't at all surprised.

While they ate, Tao scanned the tables. Although the ravens were smiling and laughing, there was a tension that hadn't been present at the anniversary party. One of their own had been injured and there had been no justice, so they were naturally a little on edge. But soon after the last plates were cleared, bottles of tequila were brought out and the whole atmosphere changed.

"Ravens love tequila," Riley told him. Of course, she tended to despise it when she was hungover.

Lucy, who'd joined them after finishing her dessert, said, "Riley usually drinks us under the table. Not tonight, though. No. Tonight, I will be the last one standing."

Riley smiled sweetly. "You always say that. And you always fall flat on your face at least an hour before Max does."

"I do not fall on my face," insisted Max, flushing, but Ethan snorted.

"There will be no falling on my face this time." Lucy shook her finger at Riley. "Tonight, your wolf here will need to carry you to your cabin and I will be perfectly alert and coherent."

Tao wasn't surprised that things didn't quite work out like that. The tequila kept flowing and, though it seemed that ravens had a high tolerance for it, most of the flock retired to their cabins after a couple of hours.

By midnight the only people still around were he, Riley, her uncles, Lucy, the Alphas, and Hugh. Everyone was smashed, except Tao, who hadn't touched a drop of tequila.

Lucy slammed down her glass and lifted her hands. "I'm done," she slurred. "You win, Ri."

"Doesn't she always?" grumbled Max, resting his chin in his hand.

"Lucy, come dance with me, sweetheart," urged Ruby, who'd been swaying in the center of the tables for a while now.

Lucy's brows drew together. "But there's no music."

"We can't let a little thing like that stop us." Ruby dragged her daughter out of her chair. "I'll sing."

"Oh God, no, don't sing," Sage begged his mate.

Ruby planted her hands on her hips. "Are you saying I don't have a good singing voice?"

Sage lifted his glass. "Woman, you're tone-deaf and you know it."

Hugh laughed, which earned him a scowl from Ruby.

"That was mean, Dad," Lucy told him. "I'm not saying it isn't true, but it was totally and utterly—" Her body jerked just as a thunderous sound cracked through the air.

Tao knocked Riley onto the ground and covered her body with his, shouting, "Everybody down!" The ravens dove to the floor, knocking glasses everywhere. Sage and Max army-crawled their way to Lucy. Ruby was already there, putting pressure on Lucy's chest, her hands red with blood. *Shit.* Feeling Riley wriggle under him, he hissed, "No, stay still."

"But Lucy—"

“Will be all right,” Ethan assured her. “Max is with her now; he’ll help.”

If he’d been on his own territory, Tao might have risked trying to get to Lucy, knowing Taryn could heal him if need be. He’d never realized just how much he truly relied on Taryn’s healing skills until then. “Be still for me, Riley,” he growled.

She punched the ground. “I need to check Lucy!”

“What we need is to get her inside.” Luckily, the ravens were already well ahead of Tao on that one. Sage, Ruby, and Hugh did their best to shield Max as he carried Lucy into the main cabin. Tao nodded at Ethan, who then helped him provide cover for Riley as they followed the others inside.

In the den Ethan went straight to Max, who was leaning over the sofa and using his limited healing skills on a half-aware Lucy. Ruby paced at her side, frantic, while Sage yelled orders into his cell phone to “find that bastard.” Just moments before, they’d all been swaying and slurring. Nothing like a shooting to sober everyone up.

Finally Max straightened, sweat beading his forehead. “The bleeding’s stopped. The bullet missed her heart and doesn’t seem to have done any internal damage. She’ll probably be asleep for a while.”

“Thank you, Max.” Stroking her daughter’s hair, Ruby looked accusingly at her mate. “You told me you were sure the human was long gone.” Her voice shook with suppressed rage.

“We all thought that,” said Sage. “Hugh and the enforcers were sure he was nowhere near our territory.”

“Obviously they were wrong,” Ruby clipped.

“We searched everywhere,” Hugh told her. “Every area, every cave, every possible hiding place you can think of. There wasn’t even a trail to follow.”

Ruby whirled to face Tao. “I want the name of this human who has assassins shooting my daughter!”

Tao lifted his chin. “I don’t think it was him.”

Everyone swung to face Tao, their eyes widening.

“Excuse me?” asked Ruby.

“It makes absolutely no sense that he would ask someone to shoot your daughter,” said Tao.

Hugh exchanged a look with Sage. “Maybe he did it to get at Riley.”

Tao shook his head at the Beta. “He shot at Riley to get at me. Or at

least I thought he did. There's no reason for him to think that shooting Lucy or any other member of this flock would hurt me. The guy's brother is dying, and he has it in his head that my Alpha female can help. He's pissed at me because he feels I didn't heed him. Does it make sense that he would have someone shoot at Riley as a warning to my pack? Yes, it does. Does it make sense that he would have someone shoot Lucy? None at all."

Ruby clutched the collar of her sweater. "He might mistakenly think Lucy means something to you."

"And why would he think that?" asked Tao. "I've spent no real time with Lucy. What's more, she's no one to my Alphas—they're the people he wants the attention of, not you."

Hugh rubbed the back of his head. "Who else would shoot at Riley and Lucy?"

Tao raised a brow. "You don't think it's odd that, out of all the things this person targeting them could have done, they shot at them? As I understand it, there was only ever one other time a gun was used against your flock members."

Riley closed her eyes, not liking where she suspected he was going with this. She took a deep breath, trying to calm her raven.

"Wade's dead," Ruby whispered.

"But maybe someone feels he didn't finish his job," said Tao. "Lucy was supposed to be at that party, wasn't she?"

Sage nodded, brows knitted. "She was on her way there when the shooting started."

Ruby jutted out her chin. "No, this is totally unrelated."

"Where did Wade get the gun?" Tao asked Sage.

"We figured he stole it from one of the humans who go hunting around here," replied Sage. "But the person who shot Lucy and Riley used a rifle, Wade used a shotgun. He dumped it outside Alec's house before he shifted and flew off into the mountains. We destroyed it."

"They're likely using a rifle because it's better for shooting long-distance targets." Tao folded his arms. "Just because it's not the exact same weapon doesn't mean I'm wrong."

Ruby looked from Sage to Tao. "You can't seriously think one of the flock did this."

"Why not?" asked Tao. He understood why she wouldn't want to believe it, but he wouldn't placate her—they all needed to face the facts so

they could take appropriate action. As long as they were blaming the wrong person, no one was safe.

Ruby opened her mouth, but no words came out. She shook her head again. “I won’t believe it.”

“Whatever way you look at this,” began Tao, “it makes no real sense that the human would target your daughter. Riley was right there at the table. He could have just as easily shot her”—the thought made his stomach roll—“but he chose not to. Lucy wasn’t near Riley, so he couldn’t have *accidentally* shot her. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that two people who should have technically died at the shooting are now being targeted with a weapon similar to what would have killed them that night.” He turned to Riley, who looked a little shell-shocked. “Who else should have been there?”

“Um, Cynthia. Apparently she had a ‘wardrobe crisis’ or something.” Riley looked to Sage for confirmation, and the Alpha nodded.

“Duncan should have been there too,” said Hugh. “And Sawyer.”

“Why weren’t they?” Tao asked.

Hugh shrugged. “I don’t know about Duncan; you’d have to ask him.”

“Sawyer was at our cabin, looking for Riley,” said Max, slumping into an armchair. “They’d just broken up, but he wanted to walk her to the party. I told him she’d already left.”

Ethan nodded. “Then we heard the shots. Normally we’re not alarmed by the sound of gunfire, but”—he swallowed—“we heard the screams, we knew something was wrong.”

Hugh let out a long sigh. “I don’t want to believe that one of our own could do this.”

“Wade was one of yours, and he did it,” Tao pointed out. He didn’t *want* to be insensitive, but he wouldn’t allow them to bury their heads in the sand.

Sage inhaled deeply. “Tomorrow, Hugh and I will question every member of the flock. We need their whereabouts for tonight and the morning that Ethan was shot. The only people we can be sure had no part in the shootings are in this room.”

Ruby once more shook her head in denial. “I don’t see how it could be anyone in this flock.” She held up her hand when her mate tried to speak. “I don’t want to think about it anymore. I just want to put Lucy to bed.”

Sage hugged his mate. “Then that’s what we’ll do.” He whispered something into her ear; whatever it was made her visibly gather herself.



Tao took Riley's hand. "We'll go."

"I'll drive you all back home." Hugh pulled out his car keys. "I doubt anyone's still out there aiming a rifle—they hit their target, after all, and they'll be hiding from the enforcers. But it's best to be safe."

Ethan grabbed Max by the arm and pulled him to his feet. "Home."

Max nodded. "Home."

Hugh first dropped off Ethan and Max, who both warned Tao to "watch over" Riley. Tao picked up on the double meaning: "keep her safe" *and* "make sure she doesn't go off alone." She seemed to have also picked up on the double meaning, because she gave both her uncles a narrow-eyed look.

When Hugh pulled up outside the guest cabin, Tao thanked him for the ride before literally hustling Riley inside. Locking the door, he announced, "We should leave."

She whirled on Tao. "What?"

"Leave. Tonight."

She took a step back, shaking her head. "I'm not going anywhere."

His wolf growled. "Yes, you are," said Tao, his tone nonnegotiable. He knew he needed to handle this delicately, but he wasn't a delicate guy. "This situation isn't what it seemed. You weren't shot at as a warning; the gunman didn't deliberately miss. You've got a crazy-ass son of a bitch out there shooting at the guests that didn't show up for Alec's party. Their bullet did nothing more than graze you, which may not be enough for them. They could try again. We need to leave."

"Run away, you mean? No way."

"It's not running, it's being smart."

"I want to find out who shot Ethan and Lucy, and I want their blood. I'm not leaving here until I have it."

Tao would have ranted and railed at her until he got his way, but the sight of her—pale, confused, hands shaking with suppressed anger—made his heart soften. And not a lot could do that, because he was a hard bastard. "Ethan and Lucy would agree that this isn't a place you should be right now."

"Has it occurred to you that you're wrong and it *was* the human? That he shot Lucy to scare us into leaving so we'll be easier to grab?"

Actually, he hadn't thought of that. It annoyed him that he couldn't deny it was a possible scenario.

"Either way, Tao, I'm not leaving."

"Why? What can you do here? You're not an enforcer. Let the people

responsible for the safety of the flock handle this—that’s their job.”

“Oh, and they’ve done a great job of that so far, haven’t they?” she mocked.

“You can’t find this bastard alone—”

“So help me.” Her voice cracked. She never asked anyone for anything, which was why Tao seemed taken aback by the request. It wasn’t that she was too proud to seek help, rather she *liked* relying on herself. But this . . . this was different. “I was a mess after the shootings, Tao. I don’t do well with grief, I’m not strong when faced with it.”

The self-condemnation in her voice pissed him off. “That’s not weak, Riley. Of course you find death hard to cope with—it must trigger memories and dredge up all the pain you felt when you lost your parents.”

“You think it was bad the other day when I disappeared in my ‘zone’?” Riley shook her head. “That was nothing compared to how I was after that party.”

“Do you think I’d judge you for that? Hell, you might not have watched all those people get shot at the party, but you were there and you heard it. That would leave anyone a mess.”

“It wasn’t just the victims I was grieving, though, Tao. I was grieving the friend I lost, and I couldn’t even be seen doing it because he’d taken all those lives. It was so hard to watch people hate Wade, to watch them forget that he’d been a victim of their kids all his life. I’m not saying those kids deserved to die. They didn’t, not by any means. But how was it fair that everyone so easily overlooked just how much pain Wade must have been in to get in that state?”

“What made it worse was that I didn’t even have the space to grieve because Shirley was harassing me, blaming me for what he did. But Ethan, Max, and Lucy were there for me. They talked with me about the old Wade, looked through his pictures with me, and helped me grieve the person I once knew. They didn’t judge me or try to make me feel bad for grieving a killer. Without them I wouldn’t have coped. I really wouldn’t have. They were there for me when I needed help, so I’ll be damned if I’ll walk away from this and —”

Tao grabbed her nape and pulled her to him, wrapping an arm around her. “Shh,” he soothed, rubbing her back. He wanted to argue with her, talk her into changing her mind, but the pain in her eyes and voice absolutely gutted him. He kissed her temple. “I’ll make you a deal. We’ll stay and we’ll

try to find out who did it, but if somebody tries to hurt you again in the meantime, Riley, we go. That's the deal."

"And if I don't agree to go until I've made the bastard pay?"

"I'll shoot you myself and haul your ass home where you're safe."

Um, no, he wouldn't, thought Riley. She wouldn't be going anywhere until this shit was over, but she decided to keep that to herself. She needed his help. Tao had a sharp mind and a keen eye; he was tireless when in pursuit of something. "Deal."

She just had to hope she didn't have to back out of that deal.

## CHAPTER TEN



Tao woke to a very pretty view. Riley was sprawled over him in bed, her gorgeous hair fanned out all over his chest. Instantly he remembered last night. Remembered calming her as best he could, remembered taking her to bed and just holding her, remembered waking up at two in the morning to find her trying to edge out of the bed. Tao had coaxed her back to him, talked to her for hours about Lucy, about how close they'd been since childhood. Then he'd taken her soft and slow, drawing the whole thing out for as long as he could. Afterward he'd rolled onto his back, still inside her, and they'd both pretty much crashed.

He didn't want to wake her—God knew she didn't get enough sleep as it was—but he had an important call to make. He carefully rolled her onto the bed and slipped out from under the covers. She muttered something into the pillow as her face scrunched up adorably. His chest sort of . . . clenched. He frowned, not sure he liked the sensation.

Grabbing his phone from the nightstand, he made his way into the bathroom and called Trey. Predictably, the Alphas didn't take the latest news too well.

As Taryn ranted in the background, Trey spoke to Tao. "Ramón denied having anything to do with Riley being shot at, but I didn't believe him."

"Why would you? He's a prick who does tons of illegal shit for a living—not exactly a person whose word means anything."

"I'm going to send some wolves to you. You need people there you can trust and who can help you work out what the hell happened."

Tao couldn't agree more.

"They'll arrive sometime tomorrow. In the meantime, don't let Riley go

far from your side.”

“Don’t worry; I have no intention of doing that.” Even though her instincts would probably balk at it, especially since she was a dominant female.

“Be on high alert. Suspect everyone.”

Tao smiled. “The latter is pretty automatic for me.”

Ending the call, he did his business and then returned to the bedroom to find Riley gone. After tugging on some jeans, he followed the sounds coming from the kitchen and found her stirring two coffees, wearing nothing but one of his shirts. He came up behind her and snaked his arms around her waist. “Morning,” he said, kissing her neck.

She tilted her head to give him better access. “Morning. You called Trey,” she guessed.

“I did.” Tao turned her to face him and dropped a kiss on her mouth. “He’s sending reinforcements. We need people here we can trust to help us figure out what’s going on.”

“Sounds good.”

He grabbed his coffee off the counter and took a sip. “I need to let Sage know that more wolves will be showing up tomorrow. Before you assure me that you’ll be fine here, know that you’re coming with me. There’s no way I’m leaving you here alone. Huff and stamp your feet if you want—I don’t mind watching your tits jiggle.”

She folded her arms. “I actually wasn’t going to object. I’m not stupid, Tao. Someone means me harm. If I die, I don’t get revenge.”

He sighed. “Only a raven would care more about revenge than their own life.”

“I’ll go speak with Ruby and see how Lucy is doing while you talk with Sage.”

Tao narrowed his eyes. “I don’t like the idea of you out of my sight.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’ll be in the same building as you.”

Not good enough. Tao curved his hand around her nape. “I know you can take care of yourself, and I know that keeping you close might make you feel suffocated. I don’t want to make you feel that way, but I *have* to know you’re safe. Just give me this.”

Deliberating on it, she poked her tongue into the inside of her cheek. “Okay. I’ll wait outside the office, where I’ll call Ruby. She’s not going to let me in the room while Lucy’s vulnerable anyway.”

Tao kissed her again. “I can live with that.”

An hour later Hugh escorted Tao into Sage’s spacious mahogany office. It was very old-fashioned, with antique bookcases, a double-pedestal desk, and a vintage leather office chair.

Instead of leaving, the Beta leaned against the window at the right of Sage’s desk—a supportive move. Tao came to a halt in the center of the room, standing solidly and at the ready. The Alpha sat at his desk chair before him, looking tired.

“Tao, I can guess why you’re here,” said Sage with a weary sigh. “I can assure you that my attention is focused on finding out who shot at Riley and my daughter. Hugh and I will be interviewing each member of the flock today—not accusing them of anything, simply asking questions that may help. I am ruling no one out at this point.”

“Good, but I didn’t come here to ask how you plan to deal with this.”

“Oh?”

“I’ve come to notify you that my Alphas are sending some wolves here. They’ll arrive sometime tomorrow.” Tao noticed Hugh stiffen in his peripheral vision.

Fingers digging into the arms of the chair, Sage pushed to his feet. “Now hold on a damn minute. If you want to bring outsiders here, you ask permission.”

“The only permission I’ll ever seek is that of my Alphas. They’re the only people I’ll ever answer to.” Though, truth be told, Trey would have snorted at that comment and claimed that Tao was too single-minded to answer to anyone but himself. According to Trey it was one of the reasons he’d named Tao Head Enforcer. The Alpha didn’t want blind obedience, he wanted people who were decisive and wouldn’t fold under the weight of Trey’s dominance.

Face reddening, Sage said, “This is *my* territory and *my* flock.”

“Let me ask you a question. Do you have a single suspect?”

Sage averted his eyes. “No.”

“That’s a lie,” said Tao. “You know who it could be, but you don’t want to believe any of your flock could possibly be responsible. It’s understandable. It also gives you too many blind spots. Outsiders won’t have that problem. They’ll be able to look at the matter objectively. You’ll benefit from having them here.”

Hugh pushed away from the window. “He could be right, Sage.”

“I don’t need the help of outsiders,” Sage insisted, Alpha energy radiating from him.

Tao stood tall and strong against the dominant vibes. He didn’t fold under Trey’s and he wouldn’t fold under Sage’s, so the Alpha raven needn’t think he’d make Tao submit to his wishes. “You can guarantee Riley’s safety? Really?” Doubt was heavy in every syllable.

“I know you’re worried for her,” said Sage, “but it doesn’t give you leave to show such disrespect.”

Clearly the Alpha was mistaking Tao for someone who gave a shit about the feelings of anyone outside his pack. “This isn’t about respect, so set aside your ego’s need for it for just a minute. I’m not questioning how long your proverbial dick is. None of that is important to me. *Riley’s* important to me. Her safety is my priority and, considering you believe her to be one of your flock, it should be yours too.”

“She *is* part of my flock. You’re not the only one who cares for her. I want this person caught too. They shot my daughter. If it hadn’t been for Max, she might well be dead. Knowing someone from the flock could be the shooter . . . it’s hard.”

“So let my pack mates onto your territory tomorrow without playing any dominance games,” said Tao. “They can help. Someone seems to believe they have a valid reason for hurting both Riley and your daughter. I want to know who that is. Don’t you?”

“Yes, I do.” Sage picked up his tumbler and chugged down what looked like whiskey. “All right, your pack mates can come here. But let’s get one thing clear: they can talk to my flock and question them, but they don’t detain anyone—they don’t take over this matter.”

“They don’t want to; they just want Riley safe. I’d appreciate it if you could ask your ravens to cooperate when we come asking questions.”

“I’ll tell them.”

Satisfied, Tao turned and left the office. Riley was waiting on the burgundy leather sofa outside, ankle twirling in a gesture of impatience.

She stood with a smile. “Everything okay?”

“Fine. Come on.” Hand in hand they made their way through the building, passing various ravens along the way—all of whom looked shaken. Finding out that one of your flock mates was going around shooting fellow ravens would have a way of doing that to a person, he supposed. “How’s

Lucy doing?”

“Better, thankfully. She’s awake, but she’s drowsy and weak.”

“Why don’t avian shifters like being around others when they’re injured?”

She shrugged. “I never really thought about it before. It’s instinctive. We’ll only tolerate people around us who we trust when we’re vulnerable. Ethan only tolerated your presence when he was injured because he’d rather that I was guarded.”

“Wolves like having pack mates around when they’re injured.”

“Yeah, but your breed is much more tactile than ravens.”

He inclined his head. “I guess that’s true.” Outside, Tao noticed Sawyer at the fringe of the woods, having a fairly animated conversation with a red-faced Duncan. Duncan’s body language was defensive while Sawyer appeared completely at ease. “I’ve been meaning to ask you. Why did you break up with Sawyer?”

“It wasn’t really anything to do with him as a person,” said Riley. “People thought I’d make a good Beta female, so they liked the idea of us together and hoped it was more serious than it truly was. Sawyer doesn’t want a mate, because he doesn’t want to share power when he ascends to Beta, but Hugh told me that makes him uncomfortable handing over the reins. He feels that he personally is a more effective Beta because he has his mate, Dana, supporting him, so he’d prefer it if Sawyer was mated.”

“And Hugh was hoping *you* would be that mate.” Tao’s wolf snarled at the idea.

“Yeah, so I ended the fling to nip all that in the bud.”

“The flock should have known better than to think you’d ever be Beta female—you wouldn’t like that position.”

He was right, but Riley asked, “What makes you think I wouldn’t have been happy as Beta female?”

He snorted. “You’re a nonconformist, Riley; enforcing rules and regulations would have gone against your nature. Besides, positions of authority don’t impress you, so your heart wouldn’t have been in it. Being a Beta is demanding work. Unless you love it, you can’t be productive at it. The role of Guardian would suit you better.” A Guardian watched over the young within a pack. “I told Taryn as much, and she agreed. She’ll probably offer you the position when you finally give her official acceptance of the offer to join the pack.” He frowned at her odd expression. “What?”



“I don’t like how well you see me.”

“I know you don’t, baby. Isn’t it better that I see you?” He smiled at her “not really” look and rubbed his nose against hers. “Don’t worry so much about it.”

“I cannot *believe* you.”

At the new voice, Riley turned sharply to find Cynthia striding toward her, with Shirley close behind. “Problem?”

“My sister is shot because you led a madman here, and instead of taking responsibility for that, you’re trying to pin the blame on someone from the flock?” clipped Cynthia.

“Not true, but I can see why you’d want to believe that,” said Riley. “I mean, if someone really is finishing what Wade started, you’re on their list.” Riley wasn’t ruling out Cynthia as a suspect, actually, but she decided to keep that part to herself.

Hands curling, Cynthia said, “There is no ‘list.’ This has nothing to do with Wade or what happened four years ago.”

Riley cocked her head. “I don’t think you really believe that. I also don’t really care what you think, though, so why don’t we both just walk away?”

“If it were up to me, you’d be walking all the way off this territory. You brought this trouble here; you need to lead it back to where it came from.”

“Everything was fine here until *you* showed up,” Shirley piped up. “Now everyone’s eyeing each other with suspicion.” She looked at Tao. “If you want my opinion, your Alphas should think twice before giving Riley a place in your pack. Some people are just poison.”

Tao glared at her. “That’s the thing: I *don’t* want your opinion. I’m clueless as to why you think I would.”

Protectively, Cynthia ushered Shirley to stand behind her. “Don’t bother, Shirley. Let him find out for himself what trouble he’s accepted into his pack.” Looking down her nose at Riley, Cynthia shook her head in contempt. “It should amaze me that you thought you’d get away with manipulating the flock into believing one of its own is a killer. But then, you got away with manipulating Wade into—”

Riley snapped her hand around Cynthia’s throat and dragged the bitch to her. “Finish that sentence, I fucking dare you.”

Eyes wide and nostrils flaring, Cynthia just stared at her.

Riley’s raven wanted to peck her fucking eye out. “You know, Cynthia,

there are no guys standing around with their pants down, so I can't help but ask myself why the fuck you keep opening your mouth."

Sawyer shouldered his way through the crowd that was beginning to form. "What the hell is going on here?"

"She has Cynthia by the throat," said Shirley, sounding a little shrill. "You're an enforcer. Aren't you going to do anything?"

Riley tensed. Not because she feared Sawyer, but because the laugh that came out of Tao was a dark, menacing sound that made the little hairs on her arms and nape stand on end.

"Touch her," Tao said to Sawyer, "and I'll kill you."

Sawyer sifted a hand through his hair. "Riley, stand down."

Ignoring him, Riley kept her attention on Cynthia. "You can submit or you can fight me here and now—either works fine for me. Honestly, I'd prefer the fight. I've got a lot of anger to burn off."

Cynthia's eyes fairly glowed with hatred, so it came as a sincere shock when the female then looked down in a gesture of submission.

Riley shoved her away. "I guess I can't blame you for backing down. I wouldn't want to get my ass kicked in front of my male either."

Stroking her throat soothingly, Cynthia bared her teeth. "Don't you have an off button or something? By the way, some guy from the village down the road just called; apparently their idiot's gone missing."

"Aw, bet you thought up that insult while Sawyer was using a map to find your G-spot. Am I right?"

Sawyer planted himself between them and snapped, "Enough." He sighed. "Riley, why don't you and the wolf go see your uncles or something? Cynthia, I thought you wanted to see your dad."

Shirley glared at him. "She's trying to make the flock believe one of us is a killer and you're doing *nothing*?"

"Stop trying to stir the pot, Shirley," said Sawyer. "You're a grown woman. Act like one." He turned his back on her and, with one last look at Riley, stalked away. The crowd then gradually dispersed, whispering among themselves.

Head held high, Riley crossed to the rental car and hopped into the passenger seat. She and Tao had agreed that since the route to the main cabin provided no real cover, they would use the car to get there. She was glad of it now, because she needed to get away from Cynthia and Shirley fast or she'd seriously let loose on the shit-stirring bitches.

What bothered her more was that the flock had just stood around, watching the drama unfold—no support, no speaking to Sawyer in her defense, no nothing. Not that she *needed* anyone to defend her, but dammit, they were supposed to be her flock. The Phoenix wolves would never have stood by while allegations were thrown at her feet. If nothing else, they'd have been at her back in a gesture of unspoken support. And she had to face that the Phoenix Pack felt more like home than the Exodus Flock did.

Neither she nor Tao said a word as he drove them back to the cabin. Inside he surprised her by shoving the coffee table and sofa close to the wall, creating a large space. He then turned to face her and invited, "Hit me."

She blinked. "What?"

"Hit me," Tao repeated, sensing just how on edge she was. "You're gonna snap if you don't get it all out of you. Don't worry; I can take a punch from an itty-bitty thing like—*motherfucker*." He stroked his jaw, trying to ease the pain pounding through it thanks to the blow she'd just dealt him. "You weren't supposed to be that enthusiastic about it."

She shrugged, smiling sweetly. "Sorry."

Yeah? She sure didn't sound it. Giving her a little space, he planted his feet shoulder width apart. "Again."

Tao really hadn't expected her to come at him like a street fighter on crack, but Riley literally didn't pull her punches. She was fast. Wicked fast, actually. Fluid too. Even fighting, she moved with grace. She knew every sensitive zone on a person's body and she targeted every one of them with punches, kicks, and those razor-sharp talons.

Tao did his best to block each blow, but she was a sly little scrapper and had no problem fighting unfairly, so she clipped him a few times. She hadn't once drawn blood, though—not even when she'd raked him with her talons. Still, he'd have some bruises for sure. And that made him and his wolf kind of proud.

Tao found himself smiling as he asked, "Who taught you to fight?"

"Ethan."

He grunted as she caught him on the jaw yet again. "Damn. Why do ravens always go for the face?" Blocking yet another punch, he yanked her to him and locked his arms around her. "Feel better, baby?"

She puffed out a long breath. "I don't feel like I'm going to explode anymore."

"Good." He stroked his jaw. "You punch like a guy. Let's never do that

again.”

“Okay.”

He nuzzled her. “As much as it pissed me off that Cynthia confronted you, I can’t deny it was pretty hot when you grabbed her by the throat. Part of me wanted to bend you over right then and fuck you raw.”

She smiled, melting into him. “You can do that after we shower . . . or maybe even while we shower.”

“Sounds fair.” Draping an arm over her shoulders, Tao guided her up the stairs.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN



**Y**ou're not listening to me, are you?"  
Blinking, Riley looked up from her seat at the breakfast bar. "I am," she lied.

"Oh yeah?" said Tao, doubt heavy in his voice. "What did I just say?"

She pursed her lips. "I'm still processing it."

"What exactly are you processing?"

"Let's not revisit the past, Tao."

He closed his eyes and banged his empty mug on the counter. "Too early for this shit, Porter. Too early." Pouring more coffee into the cup, he said, "I was telling you that I found my watch this morning. It was in my duffel. I wonder how it got there," he added drily.

She stifled a smile. "Very mysterious." Drinking her coffee, she watched him bustle about the kitchen—checking cupboards, messing with the fridge magnets, and tampering with the juicer. Riley had to smile. He was so used to having all his time taken up by a cute little pup that he just didn't know what to do with himself. "You find it weird not having to run around after someone."

Tao's brow furrowed. "I'm enjoying the break."

She snorted. "You miss Kye like crazy."

"Yeah, well, you miss Savannah and Dexter." He'd heard her talking on her cell phone earlier, known instantly from her soft tone that she was speaking with the kids. Tao wasn't sure if she realized it or not, but it was a tone she used strictly with them. "You promised to call them every morning, didn't you?" She was a total softy for those kids, and he found it rather endearing. "How are they?"

“Causing trouble. Hoarding food. Hissing at Greta. They’re upset with me for not coming back when I said I would.” And that made Riley feel like utter crap.

“I aim to find who out who shot at you as soon as possible so we can get the fuck out of here.” Tao’s stomach clenched as she licked a drop of coffee from her lower lip. It hadn’t even been an hour since he’d last tasted that mouth, and he wanted it again. He also wanted to see her lips wrapped around his cock. It was something he envisioned often. Probably much too often, but he decided there were worse things to obsess over, so he didn’t give himself a hard time about it.

“You’re thinking about sex, aren’t you?” Riley could always tell, because his face would be completely deadpan but there would be an intense energy in his eyes that speared her.

“I’m thinking about fucking your mouth, to be exact.”

“Of course you are,” she said drily. “You’re a boy. Boys are delusional.”

He smiled. “You’re not going to let me feel what it’s like to slide my cock in your mouth? That doesn’t seem fair. I go down on you all the time.”

“Oh, I won’t deny you eat pussy like a champ.”

He laughed. “Like a champ?”

“Totally. But you know, over seventy percent of erectile dysfunction cases are caused by having too many blow jobs.”

“They are not.”

“They could be,” she said. “Besides, you really shouldn’t give to receive.”

He crossed to her and pulled her off the stool, sliding his hands down to her ass. “I don’t do it to receive anything. I do it because I like the taste of you.” He loved it. Craved it, even. “It’s addictive.”

“Oh really? What do I taste like?”

He brushed his mouth over hers and replied, “Mine.”

Riley didn’t really know what to make of that comment or quite how to respond to it. As if sensing that, he smiled in amusement. She narrowed her eyes. “You like it when I’m off balance, don’t you?” It was more of an accusation than a question.

“It’s only fair. You shake my balance all the time.”

Hearing two cars pull up outside, she frowned. “If that’s the Phoenix wolves, they’re early.”

“Of course they’re early,” he said, following her to the front door. “They’re worried about you.”

Opening the door wide, Riley found Hugh leading four familiar wolves up the steps and onto the porch. She gave the Beta a quick smile. “Hey, Hugh.”

His smile was a little strained. “Your friends are here. They’ve been allocated the two cabins that border this one. Think you can give them directions when you’re done here?”

“Of course.”

With a nod Hugh returned to the Chevy he’d parked beside an SUV the wolves had rented. The Beta drove off, leaving a cloud of dirt in his wake. One by one the Phoenix wolves filed inside the cabin and into the den.

Dante squeezed her shoulder and clapped Tao on the back. “How are you both doing?”

“We’ve been better,” said Tao. “How’s everyone?”

“Other than anxious for you and Riley, they’re good.”

Jaime wrapped her arms around Riley. “I have to say, I’d like to smack the shit out of whoever tried to shoot you.” Pulling back, she held Riley’s eyes as she asked, “You’re okay?”

“I’m okay,” replied Riley. “I appreciate you coming.”

Makenna hugged her. “Of course we came. The sooner we get you home and away from here, the better.”

“Which, I guess, means figuring out who’s trigger happy and then taking care of the situation,” said Dante, sinking into the sofa.

Makenna raised a finger. “Coffee first.”

“I have one, thanks,” Riley told her. “I left it on the breakfast bar, though.”

“I’ll bring it in with me.” Makenna made her way into the kitchen, and—after inclining his head in greeting at both Riley and Tao—Ryan trailed after his mate.

Taking a turn around the den, Jaime said, “This place is cute. Are the other cabins the same?”

Riley shrugged. “Pretty much, yeah.”

Dante pulled Jaime onto his lap. “How’s your friend, Riley?”

“Weak, but recovering,” she replied, joining them on the sofa.

Jaime’s brows knitted together. “The flock doesn’t have a healer?”

“Nope. My Uncle Max has enough healing skills to accelerate the

process.”

“Fortunately for Lucy, Max was there when she was shot,” said Tao, perching himself on the arm of the sofa so that he was beside her.

Moments later Ryan hauled two dining chairs into the den for him and his mate while Makenna carried a tray of coffees. Once everyone was settled, cups in hand, Makenna said, “Now tell us exactly what’s been happening—leave nothing out.”

Riley and Tao told them everything, from the recent shootings and the confrontations she’d had with Cynthia and Shirley to even the small matter of someone’s ripping Tao’s clothes to shreds.

“It’s possible that someone is finishing what Wade started by shooting the people who should have been at the party that night,” said Tao. “But it occurred to me that it’s equally possible that someone’s trying to hurt Riley by hurting the people who are important to her. The bullet that hit Ethan could truly have been intended for him.”

“Another theory is that someone feels that Riley and Lucy let Wade down by not pulling him out of his depression, and now they’re punishing them,” said Dante.

Riley considered that for a moment. “Maybe. We were his closest friends. That would make Shirley the likeliest suspect, but I have to admit that my anger at her could be blinding me a little. I mean, I can’t really imagine her crouched somewhere in the mountains with a rifle. Plus whoever did it has done a good job of evading the Beta and enforcers. Shirley doesn’t strike me as the type who’d know how to cover her tracks so well.”

Makenna tilted her head. “Is there anyone else who would feel that you and Lucy let Wade down?”

“Only his father,” replied Riley. “But he died a long time ago. Wade didn’t have any friends other than me and Lucy.”

“What about the parents of the kids that Wade shot?” asked Jaime. “Do you think the shooter could be one of them, wanting you dead because they resent that you’re alive?”

“None of them seem to feel that way anymore,” said Tao.

“Okay, so let’s go back to the theory that someone could be finishing the job Wade started,” said Dante. “Who should have been there that night?”

“Me, Lucy, Cynthia, Sawyer, and Duncan.”

Ryan looked at Riley. “Do you have personal issues with any of them?”

“You could say that.” Riley told them about her history with Cynthia.



“She’s also currently dating—although, honestly, ‘dating’ might be a strong word for it—my ex. Sawyer’s next in line to be Beta, and Cynthia’s always wanted to be Beta.”

“So she could see you as a threat,” said Jaime.

“If Riley still wanted Sawyer, she *would* be a threat.” Tao was certain of it. “The guy still wants her—even his raven is possessive of her. I think Cynthia’s the type of person who would do what she had to do to ensure she wasn’t knocked off the power ladder.”

“But I’m not sure she’s someone who’d shoot her own sister,” said Riley. “She might not have much time for Lucy or even particularly like her, but she’s still her sister.”

Dante scraped his hand over his jaw. “I don’t know . . . Just because someone’s your sibling doesn’t mean they care for you. Some people just aren’t capable of caring for anyone.”

Knowing that Dante would be thinking of his own brother, Tao nodded. “That’s true.”

“Tell me about Sawyer and Duncan,” said Dante.

Riley took a sip of her coffee. “Sawyer is ambitious, highly dominant, and isn’t rattled by much. Duncan’s very dominant, but he keeps to himself and doesn’t like leaving his territory. Oh, and he’s got personal history with Cynthia. She actually dated him the longest out of all the guys she slept with, and I think she even cares for him a little. She just cares for power more.”

Jaime fiddled with her earring. “Have you ever had any problems with Duncan?”

Riley shook her head. “None whatsoever.”

“This Sawyer guy,” began Makenna, “how long were you and he together?”

Thinking back, Riley said, “Not very long. A few months.”

“Who dumped who?” asked Jaime.

“I ended it,” replied Riley. “But not in a bitchy way.”

Dante drummed his fingers on Jaime’s thigh. “How did he react?”

“About as well as any dominant male reacts to being dumped—it’s a bruise to the ego. But we didn’t have a major fight or anything.” In fact, Riley had gotten the impression he didn’t care all that much.

“That doesn’t mean he wasn’t pissed,” said Ryan, scratching at his palm.

Makenna smiled and touched his arm. “Ooh, you’re going to get money

soon.”

Ryan scowled at his mate. “What?”

“If the palm of your right hand itches, it means you’ll get money soon.”

Ryan stared at her. “Tell me you don’t truly believe that.”

She waved a hand. “Fine, be pessimistic.”

“I’m not being pessimistic, I’m being *realistic*. Try it sometime.”

Makenna huffed. “I don’t know why you insist on thinking there’s no substance in superstitions. I told Riley not to go traveling on a Friday because it brings misfortune, but she didn’t heed the warning and look what happened.”

“You honestly think all this happened because she came here on a Friday?”

Makenna lifted her chin. “I don’t care for your tone.”

“I don’t *have* a tone.”

Smiling, Riley drained her cup and stood. “I need a refill.”

Tao wasn’t surprised when Makenna and Jaime trailed after her into the kitchen. Or when the sound of a scuffle was quickly followed by the swish of the patio door’s opening and closing. The girls had no doubt dragged Riley outside to interrogate her in private about what was going on between her and Tao. After all, the cabin smelled of sex and he and Riley wore each other’s scents, so there was really no way to hide it.

Dante sank deeper into the sofa. “It’s about damn time you two stopped dancing around each other. Are you going to pretend that it’s just sex?”

“No.”

“Good.” Dante pointed at him. “Don’t mess this one up, Tao.”

“I’m not sure I could if I tried. She mostly just rolls her eyes when I piss her off.”

“Consider yourself lucky. Jaime puts all my CDs in the wrong cases when I annoy her.” And since Dante had an OCD streak, that was akin to a nightmare for him.

“Kenna makes me go shopping,” grumbled Ryan. “Have you ever been shopping with a devout bargain hunter? It’s painful.”

“She took Jaime with her the other day, so I went along,” said Dante. “They kept going *all day*. Searched every shelf and rack, and had the shop assistants searching the stockrooms for stuff. Once they found what they wanted, they compared prices on websites, found out where the items were cheaper, and then hauled ass there.”

Tao smiled a little smugly. “Riley doesn’t like the mall, she only shops online.”

Dante gaped. “Dude, do not let her go. Like *ever*. Seriously, a woman who doesn’t like the mall is a gift from God—accept that gift with gratitude and grace.”

Ryan grunted. “Let’s hope Riley will rub off on Kenna.”

Thinking of the times he’d seen Makenna come back from shopping with dozens of bags and a euphoric smile on her face, Tao twisted his mouth. “Yeah, I really don’t see that happening.”

Ryan sighed, grim. “Yeah, neither do I.”

Out on the deck, Makenna slid the patio door closed. “Well? Is Tao good in bed? I have to know.” She held up a hand. “Don’t say nothing happened. You reek of each other.”

“I wasn’t going to deny it,” said Riley. “And, yes, he knows his way around the bedroom.”

Jaime joined her hands. “Is it just sex between you, or . . . ?”

Honestly, it was starting to feel like more than that for Riley, but she simply said, “We agreed to a fling.”

Jaime dropped her hands. “No, this has to be more than a fling. If you mate with Tao, you won’t leave the pack. I like that idea.”

Riley rolled her eyes. “I’m not going to leave the pack and we all know it.”

“Yeah, but mating with Tao would provide me with extra insurance.”

“Do you think it’s possible that you’re true mates?” asked Makenna.

Was she kidding?

“Tao and I don’t suit each other.”

Jaime waved a hand. “Sure you do. Tao’s never had a good relationship. He’s very intense and stubborn, and he can’t hold in his emotions or opinions. It rubs a lot of dominant females the wrong way and leads to argument after argument. But you roll your eyes at his mood swings. You ignore his tantrums. You smile at his insults. You say what you think and give him no choice but to accept it. That’s what he needs—someone who isn’t threatened or challenged by his need to vent. If anything, you find it funny.”

Yeah, she did. “I’ve just never known anyone so easily riled.”

“Although you aren’t an obvious couple, you work.”

Makenna nodded in agreement. “Let’s face it, Riley: you don’t like people getting too close. He won’t stand for that shit, and only someone as determined and hardheaded as Tao could truly cope with that and get through to you. You need someone who isn’t controlling. Tao might be a pain in the ass who shoves his way into your business, but he isn’t controlling—which is rare for a dominant male. He’s also complex enough to hold your attention. Be honest; you have a short concentration span and get bored pretty easily. He’ll keep things interesting.”

Blowing out a breath, Riley sat on the porch swing.

Head tilted, Jaime looked down at her. “You’ve never looked at things that way before, have you?”

“No. Like you said, we’re not an obvious couple.”

“Neither are me and Ryan,” said Makenna. “He doesn’t believe in fate, and I’m as superstitious as they come. I like working with people and helping them. Ryan doesn’t like people, period. But we work.”

“Dante loves control,” said Jaime. “I love doing whatever I want. He’s a total neat freak, and I find order in chaos. But we’re happy.”

Riley leaned back. “But if Tao *was* my true mate, wouldn’t I sense it on some level?”

“Not necessarily,” said Jaime. “I had no idea Dante was my true mate. I’d known him for years, but I hadn’t sensed it. We both had too many issues jamming the frequency of the mating bond. If you and Tao build something, you might just resolve your own issues. Maybe a mating bond will snap into place, maybe it won’t. It might take imprinting to—” She cut off as the patio door slid open and the males stepped out.

“You girls done gossiping yet?” asked Dante.

Jaime lifted her chin, looking affronted. “We don’t gossip.”

Her mate snickered. “Sure you don’t.”

“So, what now?” Riley asked him.

“You and Tao will stay here while the rest of us question the other people who should have been at the party that night,” Dante replied. “We need to know why they weren’t there, because it’s possible someone didn’t go because they knew what was going to happen.”

“You think that one of them could have put Wade up to it and they’re now finishing the job?” Riley asked.

“Possibly,” said Dante. “We have a few theories that we need to explore.”

“What Wade did was totally out of character for him, but he wasn’t himself back then,” said Riley. “People do strange and even awful things when they’re depressed like that. I honestly don’t think anyone was behind it.”

Dante leaned against the porch post. “You’re probably right, but I’d still like to speak with them. There is still the possibility that one of them is responsible for the recent shootings.”

“They may not talk to us,” said Makenna.

“Sage assured me that he’d tell his flock mates to cooperate with you,” said Tao. “Hopefully, that will be enough to make them do so.”

“Don’t come across as accusatory, or it will put them on the defensive,” Riley told Dante.

The Beta gave her a shark’s grin. “Don’t worry, this isn’t my first round of interrogations.”

“Oh yeah, I know all about your version of interrogations.” He was quite the merciless master at them. “That’s what’s worrying me.”

“I say we split up to do the interviews,” Dante proposed. “Jaime and I will talk to Sawyer, since I think he’s more likely to talk to a Beta, since he’s so eager to be one. We’ll also have a chat with Shirley.” Dante turned to Makenna. “You’re good at getting people to open up, so you go see Cynthia and Duncan with Ryan.”

At Makenna’s nod, Dante straightened. “Then let’s get going.”

Shirley’s cabin was close by, so Dante decided they should speak with her first. Fingers linked with Jaime’s, he made his way to the small building that was almost an exact image of their guest cabin.

Shirley took her sweet time opening the front door. Then she stood in the doorway, arms folded, peering down at them like a princess glaring down at the peasants. His wolf growled.

Still, he offered her a cordial smile. “I’m Dante, and this is—”

“You shouldn’t have come here.”

“I’m sure your Alpha warned you that we would,” said Dante.

Shirley leaned a little toward him. “I’ll tell you what I told him. I don’t believe that anyone from the flock is the gunman. Your pack mate’s original theory is the only one that makes sense.”

“From what I’ve heard,” began Dante, “you’ve always felt that someone manipulated your son into shooting those ravens four years ago.”

Shirley straightened, face softening slightly. “My Wade was a gentle boy. Caring. He didn’t have an aggressive bone in his body. Even if he was depressed, I don’t believe he went through the trouble of finding himself a gun to kill all those people. No way.” She shook her head, adamant. “If it was someone from the flock, it could only have been Riley.”

Dante bit back a growl. Riley was his pack mate, whether she was prepared to accept it or not, and he didn’t like hearing someone make such an accusation about her. Apparently, neither did Jaime, because her hand was clenching his tightly. “Why?”

“Because he let her live.”

She said it as if that were proof. Dante forced himself to speak calmly. “Maybe he let her live because that caring part of Wade reared its head just enough to recognize that, unlike the others, she was his friend.”

Shirley looked away.

“If you’re right and someone gave your son that gun, it could be that they’re now intent on finishing the job. Don’t you want to know who it is? Don’t you want to know who might have done that to Wade?”

Shirley didn’t say anything, but the hostility seemed to slip out of her expression.

“Did anyone spend a lot of time with Wade before his death?” asked Dante.

Shirley sighed, rubbing her temple. “I don’t know.”

“I understand that this is difficult for you,” Dante began, “but I need you to think real hard. Was there anyone who visited him a lot back then?”

“Riley and Lucy.”

“Anyone else?”

Shirley was about to say no, but then her brow creased. “Sawyer came around here a few times, come to think of it. It surprised me, because they weren’t friends. He hadn’t exactly disliked Wade, but he’d always been aloof toward him at best.”

“Do you know what they talked about?” Dante asked.

Shirley shook her head. “Now that I think about it, Wade used to get a lot of text messages back then too.”

“From who?”

“I’m not sure. I’d ask him who it was, thinking maybe he had a girlfriend, but he’d always mumble, ‘No one’ and walk off.”

After a moment Dante nodded. “Thank you for speaking with us.” Still

in possession of Jaime's hand, he pulled her down the path.

"Delightful woman," muttered Jaime when she heard the door close. "I agree with Riley. Shirley's pissed and has a major hard-on for Riley, but she doesn't have that killer's edge. So where do we find Sawyer?"

Dante kissed her, just because. "Riley called Hugh before we left; he said that Sawyer is patrolling the southern perimeter."

"Then let's head that way."

It didn't take long to find Sawyer, and he didn't seem at all surprised or daunted to see them striding purposefully toward him.

Dante stopped a few feet away. "I'm Dante, and this is my mate, Jaime. We were wondering if you had a few minutes to talk. Like it or not, you're a possible target of whoever went after Riley and Lucy. We need your help to find out who's behind this."

Sawyer studied them intently for a minute. "You're Betas."

Dante nodded. "We are."

That fact alone seemed to be enough to make Sawyer drop his guard. "What do you want to know?"

"Do you know of anyone with a grudge against the ravens in your age-group?"

"Only Wade. I'm sure Riley told you what it was like for him growing up."

"She did," Dante confirmed. "If someone is targeting the few of you who didn't attend the party, it would suggest that they feel Wade's actions were justified and that his job was left undone. It could even be that someone gave Wade a little push in that direction four years ago."

Sawyer's look was doubtful. "Shirley believes the latter, but that's only because it's hard for her to accept that Wade did what he did. But though Wade was a lot of things, he wasn't weak. Peer pressure never worked on him. And he was a smart kid. If someone had been trying to brainwash him into doing something so against his nature, he would have seen it."

"Did anyone seem especially eager for you to be at the party that night?"

Sawyer pursed his lips. "No."

"Did anyone try to persuade you *not* to go?"

Sawyer seemed surprised by the question. "Cynthia tried to lure me to her house that night. She'd heard Riley and I broke up."

Dante's brow lifted. "*Did* you go to Cynthia's?"

“No, I went looking for Riley. She’d already left.”

Dante was quiet for a moment. “You allegedly spent a lot of time with Wade before the shootings. Shirley says she found it strange, since you weren’t friends.”

“Riley was worried about him.”

“You thought helping him would impress her?” asked Jaime. “That it might make her go back to you?”

“Maybe, but then I saw just how right she was to be worried,” said Sawyer. “He’d lost a lot of weight, he wasn’t taking care of his hygiene, and there was no drive in him—no motivation to even get out of bed. And he had all these drawings in his room.”

Dante cocked his head. “What kind of drawings?”

“They were dark and violent,” said Sawyer. “Pictures of demon-type monsters, like something out of a nightmare. He only ever used the colors black and red. I asked him about them. He said the demons talked to him; they wanted blood. I thought he meant his own blood—that he had some kind of inner demon he couldn’t face and he wanted to hurt himself.”

“Did you tell anyone?” Jaime asked.

“I told Shirley. She didn’t see how him drawing dark pictures meant anything was wrong. She said he’d suffered from nightmare disorder since he was a kid and he’d always drawn the things he’d seen in the dreams, that I was making a fuss about nothing.” Sawyer sighed. “I listened to her, and now he’s dead, and so are a bunch of other people. I have to live with that.”

After a short pause, Jaime spoke. “Shirley said somebody used to text him a lot back then. Was that you?”

“Yes,” replied Sawyer. “I liked to check on him, see how he was. I’ll admit it, it started out as me trying to impress Riley. But when I realized how bad his situation was, when I realized how little I’d done over the years to defend this person, I felt like shit about it and wanted to help him.” He shrugged. “But I couldn’t,” he added grimly. “None of us could.”

As she and Ryan reached Cynthia’s cabin, Makenna sighed. She really wasn’t looking forward to talking to this bitch, but it had to be done. Her mostly mute mate certainly wasn’t going to do it, and that was for the best, since he wasn’t exactly a people person. “Please try to refrain from grunting at her. I don’t want to give her an excuse to shut the door in our faces.”

Ryan, of course, grunted.



“I don’t want to be near her either, so let’s just get it over with.” Stepping onto the porch, Makenna knocked on the door.

Cynthia opened it a crack, eyes narrowed. “I’m not answering any of your questions, I have nothing to say.”

“Riley said you’d avoid talking with us,” Makenna lied, “but I said you wouldn’t do anything that would make you look guilty. Not unless you had anything to hide, anyway. Do you?”

Her eyes flared. “No, I do not.”

“But you won’t talk to us,” Makenna pointed out.

Her lips flattened. “I don’t have to.”

“In your position, I’d want to know who shot my sister and see them pay. And I’d accept all the help I could get.”

Cynthia hesitated, seeming torn.

“We just have a few questions.” Makenna’s tone was steady and friendly. “It won’t take long.”

With a sigh of impatience, Cynthia opened the door a little wider. “I firmly believe that the person who shot my sister is not part of this flock. Everyone here likes Lucy.” The latter was said with a note of envy. “We were all scarred by what happened four years ago. None of us would wish to see it happen again.”

“You were invited to Alec’s party, but you didn’t go. Why?”

Cynthia blinked. “I had every intention of going. I was simply late getting ready.”

“Was there anyone who asked you not to go?”

She put a hand on her hip. “I don’t see what that has to do with anything.”

“Humor me.”

“Duncan asked me to meet him at the make-out spot near the hot springs. We used to date back then. But I told him I would be at the party and that he should meet me there. I wasn’t going to miss a party like that.”

Makenna heard the lie. “Really? Because we heard differently,” she bluffed, hoping Cynthia might believe they’d spoken with the others first and heard something to contradict her.

Cynthia’s eyes tightened. “Sawyer told you.” She sniffed. “Okay, fine, I invited him to my house that night. I didn’t think he’d want to go to the party anyway, after all the shit that happened between him and Alec.”

“Can you elaborate?” asked Ryan.

Cynthia replied, “He ordered Alec and his friends to ease up on Wade, though I’ve no idea why he cared. They agreed. The next night, they beat the shit out of Wade—Alec was sending a message to Sawyer that he wouldn’t take orders from him. They ended up dueling, and Alec submitted when it became clear he wasn’t going to win. He then apologized, and so did the others. A few nights later, they all went to a bar together. At some point they got Sawyer drunk, stripped him naked, tied him to a tree, and left him there . . . but not before taking photographic evidence. You can imagine how much that pissed off Sawyer.”

Yeah, Makenna could. Dominant males had a proud streak a hundred miles long.

“Of course, Sawyer then practically pulverized Alec when he got home,” Cynthia went on. “It wasn’t the first time they’d gone head-to-head like that, and it probably wouldn’t have been the last.”

“When did that happen?”

“Maybe a month before the party, something like that. They’d settled things by then, but it still surprised me that Sawyer said he would go. I sure wouldn’t have risked getting drunk around them again, in his position.”

“I see. One last thing . . . Is there anyone who might have a grudge against the people of your age-group?”

“Sure. Riley. Oh, I can see that you doubt that. Ask her how many years of her life she spent defending poor Wade. Ask how many years she spent arguing and fighting the people who continued to target him, no matter what she did. Maybe she blamed them all for his depression.”

*Bitch.* Makenna offered her a grateful smile that she suspected bared a few too many teeth. “Thanks for your time.”

“You’re welcome.” Then she slammed the door in their faces.

Grunting, Ryan herded Makenna to the end of Cynthia’s path.

“Such a sweetheart,” Makenna remarked. “At least she talked to us. Hopefully, Duncan does too.”

Makenna and Ryan headed straight to the eastern border, where they had been told they could find Duncan. He was sitting on a large rock. At the sight of them approaching, he slowly stood . . . like a snake uncoiling. He stared at them with blatant distrust.

Hoping to put him at ease, Makenna smiled as she introduced herself and Ryan. “We’d like to speak with you, if you can spare us a few minutes. Our questions are pretty basic.”

After a long moment, Duncan said, “All right. Ask.”

“Why didn’t you go to Alec’s party?”

“I wasn’t invited.”

She blinked. “Your father is under the impression that you should have been there.”

“I told him I was going,” said Duncan. “Really, my plan was to meet with Cynthia near the hot springs.”

Makenna nodded. “Why weren’t you invited?”

Duncan shrugged. “Probably because Alec had never liked me much. Cynthia dumped him for me, and he didn’t take it too well.”

“Did Cynthia agree to meet with you that night?”

“No.”

“Sawyer says that Cynthia invited him to her house,” Makenna said as sensitively as possible.

“She probably did,” said Duncan, his tone surprisingly even. “Cynthia likes having her cake and eating it too. Back then, she didn’t want to end things with me, but she wanted Sawyer—she’s wanted him for a long time.”

And that clearly hurt him, thought Makenna as pain briefly spiked in his eyes. She couldn’t help feeling a little bad for him. “Do you have any idea who, other than Wade, might have had a grudge against your age-group?”

Duncan shook his head. “No.”

Makenna felt Ryan tense beside her, and she knew why; she’d sensed the lie too. “Duncan, now is really not the time to hold back information.”

He glanced away. “I’ve told you all I know.”

“Is it about Cynthia?”

He exhaled heavily. “Yes, okay. And if I say anything, you’ll point fingers at her.”

“She already has fingers pointed at her, Duncan,” said Makenna. “I know you want to protect her, and I can understand that. But someone shot at Riley and Lucy. They have to be stopped.”

“Cynthia wouldn’t hurt Lucy.”

He seemed to genuinely believe that, Makenna thought. She, on the other hand, didn’t. Blood didn’t always mean anything to people. “Then what’s the harm in telling us why she might have held a grudge against all the others?”

“It wasn’t that she held a grudge.” He rubbed at his eyes. “Look, someone hurt her, okay? Hurt her bad.”

Makenna's stomach turned, because it was clear by the torment in his eyes just what he meant by "hurt." She didn't like Cynthia, but she could still feel sympathy for her. "Who did it?" But Duncan didn't answer; he just stared over her shoulder. "Answer me this, at least: were they at the party that night?"

"I don't know."

"*Duncan.*"

"I don't know. Cynthia doesn't know who hurt her. She woke up near the waterfall. She was soaking wet, like she'd been dunked in it. Her clothes were torn, her mind was fuzzy like she'd been drugged, and she was . . . she was sore enough to know she'd been raped. But she had no idea who'd done it, no memory of anything happening."

*Well, fuck.* "When did this happen?" He hesitated to answer, so she gently pushed. "When?"

"Six months before the shootings."

"Did she tell her parents?"

"No. She was ashamed. Control is important to Cynthia. Whoever attacked her took that away from her that night. The only reason I know is that she showed up at my house after she woke up near the waterfall. She had no scents on her—the water had washed them away. I helped her shower, dressed her in some of my mom's clothes . . . and then she just left. She hasn't spoken about it since. She refuses to admit it even happened."

Working at the shelter for lone shifters, Makenna had met many people who'd been assaulted, and many who denied it because it was really the only way they could cope.

"Now you're thinking that gives her reason to want all those people dead, that maybe she thought the best way to know she'd hurt the person who'd hurt her was if she took out every one of them." Duncan shook his head. "There's no saying for sure that it wasn't one of the adults in the flock who did it. Besides, she's blocked it out. She won't face it, let alone stew enough on it to seek vengeance."

He did have a point, she thought. "Do you have any idea who might have done it?"

"If I did, they'd be dead." A mocking glint entered his eyes. "Now you're thinking I have motive too, right? Who says I didn't have them killed in the hope that I might have avenged her?"

"Did you?" asked Ryan.

“No,” said Duncan. “But if I’d known who did it, I would have avenged her. She can be a bitch and she gets off on hurting people, which has earned her plenty of enemies, but she didn’t deserve that.”

Makenna would have to agree with that. “I appreciate you answering our questions. I won’t mention anything about Cynthia’s attack to the flock.”

Once she and Ryan were out of Duncan’s hearing, Ryan said to her, “Don’t feel bad for her. She’s an A-class bitch who’s done her best to make Riley miserable.”

Makenna sighed. “I know. I’ve learned that some people are just hateful and negative. You’d think that anyone who woke up to a view like this would be a happy person. I mean, look at all those cacti and rocks and mountains. Bet you see some cool wildlife around here.” She abruptly halted and threw out her arm, barring Ryan from taking a single step forward. “Look, there’s a penny on the floor by your foot. Didn’t I tell you you’d be getting money soon?” She bent to pick it up but then snatched back her hand. “It’s tails side up. Don’t touch it.”

Grunting, Ryan shook his head and walked away.

Makenna gaped at his back. “There’s no need for language like that, White Fang.”



When the Phoenix wolves returned to Riley and Tao’s temporary cabin later, they all settled in the den, where they discussed how the interrogations had gone.

Afterward Tao said, “So, in short, each of them has a reason to have—at the very least—been pissed with the kids who died that night.”

Dante slid his fist down Jaime’s long sable ponytail. “I meant to ask you, Riley, did anyone try pressuring you to not go to the party?”

“They didn’t need to,” said Riley. “I had no intention of going.”

Makenna’s brow creased. “Why did you?”

“Lucy wanted to go, but she didn’t want to go alone.” Riley held up a hand before anyone tried to imply Lucy had had anything to do with what happened. “It can’t be Lucy—she was shot.”

“She could have an accomplice, though that’s stretching things a bit,” said Ryan.

Tao curled an arm around Riley. “You said you wouldn’t have gone at all if Lucy hadn’t asked you.”

“Yeah, so?”

“So it’s possible that people didn’t expect you to be there. Wade might have been surprised to see you.”

Riley swallowed, remembering Wade’s vacant stare. “I don’t think he was feeling much of anything that night, least of all surprise.”

Dante turned to Tao. “What does your gut tell you? I trust your gut.”

“I can’t trust my gut,” said Tao. “I’m too pissed at these people about other things to be unbiased about this.”

Riley had the exact same problem. Although she had no idea what to think, she found herself smiling at each of the wolves. “I’m really glad you guys came.”

Jaime returned the smile. “Of course we came. You’re pack.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE



I was thinking we could go home tomorrow.”

Riley literally dropped the game controller. Did he have to go ruin the afternoon? They’d had a perfectly good day so far playing on the Xbox she’d borrowed from Max, and it had been pretty fun beating Tao’s ass at Killer Instinct. Now he was blurting out crap. “Look—”

Sitting cross-legged on the floor, Tao turned to fully face her. “It’s been four days, Riley. Four. Nothing else has happened. Not a single thing. I think we were wrong about the shooter wanting to finish off from where Wade started. I think they just wanted to hurt you through Ethan and Lucy. You were there when we ran the theory by Sage and Ruby yesterday; they agree.”

“You’re probably right, but I still want to see someone punished.”

Tao pulled her onto his lap so she straddled him. “Do you? Do you really want to stick around here when you could be at home, where you belong?” He tucked her hair behind her ear. “I don’t think you do. And I don’t think your raven does either.”

He was right about that. The raven didn’t think of Exodus territory as home anymore. She found a certain level of comfort in it and enjoyed being there, but she missed Phoenix Pack territory, craved it. And yeah, okay, so did Riley.

Smoothing his hand up and down her back, he asked, “Don’t you want to get back home to the kids?”

Riley’s chest tightened. “Of course I do.” She missed them like crazy, and it hurt every time she had to explain to them on the phone that she’d be gone a little longer.

“Aren’t they more important to you than retribution?”

“You know they are.”

“Then let’s just get out of here.” He framed her face with his hands. “I spoke with Trey on the phone last night. Ramón has completely backed off. He hasn’t made a single call since Trey spoke to him on the day you were shot at. It’s safe to go home. It’s time. Sage will keep investigating the shootings—he wants to know who shot Lucy as much as you do.”

She closed her eyes, torn. For a while it had been rage that kept her there. But now that her thirst for blood had somewhat eased, she was more interested in getting back to the kids than in letting the gunman keep her away from Savannah and Dexter. The bastard didn’t deserve any such power.

Sighing, she opened her eyes. “All right, we can go.”

Tao smiled and kissed her. “That’s my girl.” His wolf pretty much sagged in relief.

“But I’d like to see Lucy before we leave. I want to check on her.”

Tao nodded. “I’ll call Sage, tell him that we’re leaving, and ask if he’ll let you in Lucy’s room to say goodbye. How’s that?”

“That would be good.”

Tao pulled out his cell. “What’s his number?”

“I don’t know it by heart. Just use my phone.” She plucked it from the coffee table and handed it to him.

He found Sage’s number in her list of contacts and dialed it, keeping Riley pressed against him so she could hear the conversation. It took a while for the Alpha to answer.

“Hello,” he greeted, his voice unusually gruff.

“Sage, it’s Tao.”

“I take it you heard, then.”

Tao stilled. “Heard what?”

“About Sawyer.”

“What about him?”

“He was shot twenty minutes ago.”

*Fuck.* Not the least bit surprised that Riley’s eyes were blazing with anger, Tao asked the Alpha, “What exactly happened?”

“He was patrolling the perimeter, just as he does most mornings,” replied Sage. “Hugh heard the shot and, given what had been happening lately, didn’t want to assume it was a human hunter. He was first on the scene and managed to stop the blood flow. The bullet tore through Sawyer’s side, but thankfully it didn’t hit any major organs.” He paused. “I’m surprised you



haven't already heard about it. We had to call Max in—he and Ethan know what happened.” There was the sound of other voices in the background, and then Sage said, “I have to go, Tao. We can speak again later.”

Tao slung her phone onto the table. “You hear all that?”

Riley jumped to her feet. “What the hell is going on, Tao?”

“I don't know.” Standing, he once again fished out his cell. “I have to call Dante.”

She grabbed her own phone. “I'll be talking to Ethan. I want to know why he didn't tell me what happened.” It turned out that Ethan hadn't told her straightaway because someone was starting to speculate that Riley was somehow involved, and Ethan hadn't wanted her anywhere near the mob of people whose emotions were running high. When she passed on that information to Tao, his face turned a disturbing shade of red.

“You are *shitting* me,” rumbled Tao.

“I wish I was.” Hurt, angry, and confused, Riley began to pace. “Ethan avoided the question when I asked him who it was. I don't know why.”

“How can anyone suspect *you*?” His wolf bared his teeth, pissed beyond belief. “Everyone knows that you were there when both Ethan and Lucy were shot! How the fuck could it have possibly been you?”

“They think that I have one of the Phoenix Pack hiding in the mountains, doing the shootings.”

Tao swore. “We have to get out of here, Riley.”

She came to a halt. “Tao—”

“No, this isn't a negotiation.”

Bristling, she was about to snap at him, but then she heard familiar voices outside. Riley stayed in place while Tao opened the door for the Phoenix wolves.

Dante strode in, fairly vibrating with anger. “I cannot fucking believe this shit. What did Sage say, word for word?”

Tao quickly relayed the conversation to his pack mates.

“They're seriously blaming Riley? I say we just get out of here,” declared Makenna.

Tao nodded. “I agree.”

“You guys go if you want,” said Riley. “I'm staying.”

“I can understand why you'd want to stay, Riley,” Dante told her. “In your position I'd want blood too. But we've questioned every person in this flock and we still can't be positive who's doing this.”

“If I were Alpha,” began Ryan, “I would have detained every suspect and separated potential targets for their own protection. Sage hasn’t done a single thing. If his own daughter wasn’t shot, I’d suspect he had something to do with not only this but with what happened four years ago.”

Riley blinked. “Sage? Really?”

“You don’t think it’s convenient that *both* of his daughters weren’t at Alec’s party that night?” asked Ryan. “He was also the one to arrange a celebration for your uncles’ anniversary—he had to know Lucy would invite you. Maybe he wanted you here to tie up loose ends.”

Riley hadn’t really considered that. “But . . . he loves Lucy, and he was at the scene when she was shot right in front of us.”

“Which are yet more reasons why I don’t suspect him,” said Ryan. “But I also don’t trust him. I don’t like his lack of action.”

Tao turned to Riley. “We’ve done what we can to find out who it is, and we can only be sure of three things: One, they can’t shoot worth shit or you, Lucy, and Sawyer would all be dead. Two, if this is about finishing Wade’s job, they have a grudge against the five of you remaining from your age-group. Three, if they *are* related to the past shootings, they’re cunning and manipulative to have done what they did to Wade and kept the entire flock fooled all these years. Much as I hate to say it, we’re no closer to finding out who they are *now* than we were when we first got here. It’s time to go home.”

“I can’t leave.” Riley shook her head. “Not now.”

“For fuck’s sake, Riley!” Tao threw up his arms. “What the hell can you possibly do here?”

Nothing. She knew that. But walking away after Ethan, Lucy, and Sawyer had been shot . . . it felt disloyal, as if she were leaving them to deal with the entire mess. Riley knew intellectually that she wasn’t to blame for what was happening, but her arrival had still somehow triggered it. She didn’t know how or why, only that it might never have happened if she hadn’t come. To just run back to Phoenix Pack territory and leave them to their fate felt wrong. Maybe it didn’t make a lot of sense, but that was how she felt.

“This isn’t up for debate,” snapped Tao. “We’re leaving. Pack your shit and let’s go.”

She lifted her chin at his dictatorial tone. Her raven let out a pissed-off croak. “Don’t ever think you can intimidate me into doing what you want,” she clipped. “Throw your dick and dominance around all you want, but I have my own mind and I’ll damn well use it.” She looked at the others. “I

appreciate that you came to help. You've done more than enough and I really don't blame you for leaving, but I can't go." With that she spun on her heel and stalked up the stairs.

"Riley, we're not done here!" Tao clenched his fists against the urge to punch the wall. He turned to his pack, eyes flashing wolf. "She can't be serious about staying."

"I can understand why she's torn, Tao," said Jaime. "She lost her parents. This whole thing will be bringing it all back—the loss, the pain, the fear. Especially since one of the people who was almost killed is one of the people who raised her. I'd want the bastard's blood too."

Tao's mouth tightened. "Her life is more important than revenge."

"I'll bet if you ask her," began Makenna, "you'll find out that this is about more than just revenge. She grew up with these people, Tao. They were here for her like your pack mates were there for you. A couple of them might be assholes, but others have been good to her and they've loved her. For Riley, leaving probably feels like abandoning them all to whatever danger lies ahead."

He closed his eyes. "Fuck, I hadn't thought of that."

Makenna gave him a weak smile. "Talk to her, Tao. All she's hearing now is you trying to bully her into doing what you want. That's not going to get past her anger or the chaos in her head—that's just going to put her on the defensive."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm not good at talking."

"I know, but you've got more chance of getting through to her than any of us have," said Makenna. "She's—much like you, actually—arbitrarily stubborn. If anyone can talk her into leaving, it's you. Your worry will mean more to her than ours."

Dante took Jaime's hand. "We'll head back to the cabins and pack. Convince Riley to do the same so we can all get the fuck out of here."

After the front door closed behind his pack mates, Tao inhaled a deep breath and made his way up the stairs. He needed to be calm, he told himself. Calm. Patient. Nonconfrontational.

Basically, he needed to not be himself.

He found Riley sitting on the chair near the window, her face in a book. It was a dismissive act that raised his hackles. *Be calm*, he reminded himself.

She didn't pay him the slightest bit of attention as he crossed the room, not even when he came to a halt in front of her. She just kept her gaze on that

damn book he knew full well she wasn't even reading.

"Riley, we need to talk."

"I don't want to hear it."

His wolf growled. "Well, you're going to."

"I don't need to." Expression haughty, she flicked over to the next page. "I already know what you're going to say. Don't waste your breath. I'm staying."

Like *hell* she was. "Sawyer was shot, Riley."

"Yeah, I remember."

"Good, so you must also remember that we're back to not having a fucking clue what's going on here." She didn't respond. Just kept on pretending to read. "Look at me." But of course she didn't. He snatched the book and slung it behind him.

Folding her arms, she glared up at him. "Problem, Fenris?"

"Being bitchy won't push me away, Riley. Annoy me, provoke me, piss me off—it'll do all of those things. But I'm not going anywhere. We're going to talk this out. Tell me why it's so important to you to stay. You won't be abandoning the flock, if that's what this is about. And you can bet your sweet ass that if they were on pack territory and shit started happening, they'd be gone in a fucking blink."

"Not Ethan and Max."

"No, not them," he agreed. "They're also the last people who would ever blame you for going home where you're safe. Hell, they can come with us if you want." But he knew they wouldn't leave. Like Riley, they wanted to see someone pay.

"You're wasting your time with this, Tao. I won't change my mind."

Jaw tight, Tao growled. He reminded himself once again to stay calm. He tried to come up with something sensitive and diplomatic that might make her *think* and see things his way, but he wasn't good with words. It didn't help that he couldn't stop growling at her. "Don't forget that someone is claiming you have one of our wolves doing all this shit, that it was you who pulled Wade's strings and you're finishing what he started. If others buy into that, you're going to have a riot on your hands. Do you want your uncles to have to go through that?"

She narrowed her eyes. "This argument will get you nowhere. The motherfucker behind all this is *not* getting away with it. No way. Like I told the others just now, I appreciate all that you've done. If you want to leave, I

understand and—”

“Like you told the others?” he echoed. Like he was nothing more than a pack mate to her, just like them? Anger sparked through him like a fever in his blood.

Standing, she put her hands on her hips. “You leave if you want to, but I’m staying right here. And if you weren’t so overprotective of your pack, you’d see that this is the right thing to do.”

Patience gone, he loomed over her, his neck corded. “I’m not interested in right and wrong, I’m interested in you. You’re not safe here.”

“Are we still on that? Boring.”

He went nose to nose with her. “Don’t fucking test me right now, Riley. *You’re going.*”

“I’m. Not. Leaving. You don’t get to tell me what to do just because we fuck.” Riley froze as something not wholly on the side of the angels flashed in his eyes.

“Fuck?” It was a whisper. “We fuck? That’s it?”

“Of course that’s it.”

“Bullshit,” he spat.

“Excuse me?”

“We have something here, Riley. It’s fragile and easily fucked up, but it’s there. And there’s no point in us pretending any different, so don’t fucking bother.”

Looking at the stubborn set to his jaw, she marveled, “You’re serious.”

“I’m serious. Don’t even *think* about playing dumb right now. You’re not stupid. I’m not stupid. This thing crept up on us when we weren’t looking and now we have to face it.”

Her hands slid from her hips. “You said you didn’t want a relationship.”

“Because I’m not good at them. Making people happy is not my specialty, and most people annoy the shit out of me anyway. But you . . . I want you more than I’ve ever wanted any damn thing in my life. You got right under my skin and it should piss me off but you feel good there.”

“Tao—”

“We’re not going to ignore what’s between us. No way. It would be pointless and tiring, just as it was pointless and tiring when I fought how much I wanted you. All that brought me was sexual frustration and a pissed-off wolf. I’ve learned my lesson.”

Yeah, Tao knew that bulldozing her wasn’t the smartest move, but he

refused to go easy on her. For him there was no budging on this. There was no going back for either of them. He wanted the very thing he'd thought of when he was dying on a battlefield not so long ago while providing backup for the Mercury wolves: he wanted Riley Porter. He'd accept nothing less.

Closing her eyes, she waved her hands. "I can't have this conversation right now."

"You can and you will." He wasn't going to let her "process" him later. "Look at me." He cupped her jaw tight and repeated, "*Look* at me." Finally those eyelids lifted; there was a whole lot of confusion there. "We have something. Something I have every intention of keeping. It makes me happy. I'm never happy." He'd been passably content before, but not happy. The fact that she'd cheapened that and what was building between them by implying it was no more than sex pissed him off on too many levels to count. "Lie to me again and tell me all we do is fuck," he dared, anger pulsing through every word. "Lie to me, baby, go ahead."

Riley swallowed. On the outside she was composed. Inside she was fumbling. She'd never expected any kind of declaration from Tao. He was just too . . . well, Tao. Distrustful of others. Cynical about relationships. A guy who, even amid his pack, seemed to walk alone. She'd expected him to eventually get bored with her and, as much as it would have hurt, she'd been prepared for that. But this . . . she hadn't been prepared for this.

Riley wasn't good at handling being taken off guard. Right then, she didn't know what to do. She didn't really have the right words to say to him—not even the words to apologize for hurting him by lying that this was just sex for her. So she did the next best thing and lowered her gaze.

Feeling the anger drain from him, Tao closed his eyes. She'd completely disarmed him and his wolf by submitting. It was no easy thing for a dominant female, and it was the last thing he'd expected her to do. Sliding his hands into her hair, Tao rubbed his cheek against hers, accepting the silent apology.

"Eyes back to mine," he said. Her gaze returned to his, soft and confused. "I can see your mind is racing and you're not quite sure if I'm really serious. I'm deadly serious. This is no fling, Riley. I'm not sure if it ever was. The situation is actually very simple. You're mine now. I'm yours. This is exclusive. Permanent. And it's what we both want, isn't it?"

She hesitated. "If I said no?"

"You'd be lying and I'd ignore it, because the answer simply doesn't

work for me. You want this, don't you?" After a moment she nodded, but it wasn't enough for him. Tao tightened his hold on her hair. "Say it."

Riley licked her lips. "Yes, I want it."

"Good, because you're mine, Riley. And I protect what belongs to me. We *are* leaving. Hear me out. Lucy and Sawyer were shot, punished. You weren't. You dodged the bullet, literally. If you stay here, the person who did it may take another shot at you. They want you punished for whatever crime they feel you're guilty of committing. And that's why I think that if you leave, they'll follow you."

Her brow furrowed. "Follow me?"

"Follow you to our territory. Much as I hate that idea, I also know you'll be a lot safer there. Here they know every inch of this place and they have the advantage. On our territory they won't. We have sensors and cameras and traps everywhere, especially near the border." A friend of the Mercury Pack Alpha male had installed all kinds of high-tech security stuff all over the place.

"They're a raven, Tao. They could just fly right over the perimeter fence and the traps."

"I always know when you've shifted and your raven is on the loose. Know why?"

"The full-blooded birds go crazy every time." *Crazy crazy*. For some reason full-bloods had a seriously big aversion to avian shifters. Her raven found true delight in spooking them.

He nodded. "If another raven shifter appears on our territory, we'll know somehow."

"Okay, well, then, think of this: they don't need to get past the fence if they have a rifle. They can just shoot from there."

"Not if we all stay near the mountain, far away from the perimeter. They'd need to get closer."

"You're talking about luring them into a trap."

"You got a better idea, baby? Because I'm all out of them at this point. You want blood, don't you? Leading them away from here is your best chance of getting it."

Leading them away also meant her uncles would be safe, she thought. She wouldn't be abandoning them; she'd be protecting them. But it would also mean bringing that danger to others she cared about. "Don't ask me to lead this person to the kids, Tao, I can't."

He cupped her neck with both hands. “The kids will be well protected at all times, and so will you. They’d rather that you came home with danger on your heels than that you came home with a bullet in your head.”

She flinched. “Ouch.”

“I’m not trying to hurt you, baby. I’m just pointing out the reality of the situation. There is no easy solution here. What we know for sure is that you staying with the flock won’t help anyone, especially if the majority turns against you. You’ll have no real help, support, or protection here. At home you’ll have all those things and you’ll give your uncles peace of mind by being away from here. You have to admit, that sounds like the best and safest option at this point.”

Yeah, she thought with an inward sigh, it did. “Okay. When do we leave?”

Relief rushed through him. “Right now, before anyone gets wind of the news and takes a shot at you while they still can.”

“Then let’s get packing.”



# CHAPTER THIRTEEN



**A**s Trick drove them through the perimeter gates of Phoenix Pack territory, Tao waved to Gabe, who was manning the security shack. His wolf let out a long breath, losing much of his tension now that they'd returned to their land.

The vehicle shook slightly as they drove up the rocky trail toward the mountain. Trick and Dominic had picked the six of them up from the airport in the pack's nine-seater Chevy Tahoe. Having listened to the sequence of events that had occurred on Exodus Flock territory, they were supremely pissed on Riley's behalf.

Although she'd wanted to say proper goodbyes to the flock, Riley had agreed to tell only her uncles and the Alphas that she was leaving. Sage and Ruby had *claimed* to be disappointed to see her go, but their relief had been obvious. They'd been good enough to let her say a quick goodbye to a mostly healed Lucy, though.

Her uncles had been genuinely upset to see Riley leave, but they'd also agreed that she should be far away from what was happening. Tao was glad of that, because her uncles alone had the power to change her mind. Thankfully, they hadn't tried to. They had, however, threatened Tao with dismemberment if he didn't keep her safe.

He turned to Riley, who was looking out the window, admiring the view of the lighted windows, arched balconies, and smooth stairways carved into the mountain up ahead. "You okay?"

"Sure," she replied without looking at him.

"Such a little liar." Who would be fine after everything that had happened? Taking her hand, he massaged her palm with his thumb. "You're

away from that shit now.”

She cast him a weak smile. “Not if it follows me here.”

Tao cupped the back of her head. “If it does, we’ll be ready.” As Trick pulled into the concealed parking lot at the base of the cliff, Tao unclicked Riley’s seat belt. “You go see the kids, I’ll update the Alphas and the rest of the pack on what’s been happening. Okay?”

“Sounds good to me.”

He kissed her. “Then let’s get moving.”

They all grabbed their duffels out of the trunk and jogged up the cliff steps. Inside the tunnels of the mountain, Jaime and Dante headed to their room while Makenna and Ryan headed for theirs.

Reaching a junction, Tao dropped another kiss on Riley’s mouth. “I’ll catch up with you soon.”

Taking her duffel from him, she said, “Okay, tell everyone I said hi and that I’ll talk to them later.” With that she disappeared down the tunnel.

Once she was out of sight, Tao, Trick, and Dominic then made their way to the living area.

“I can’t even begin to imagine how mixed up she must be feeling,” said Trick. “You should be able to trust your Alphas and your pack with your life. I’ll bet she trusts only a handful of the flock.”

“The majority of them appear to be good people, particularly her uncles,” said Tao. “There are always bad apples. And the bad Exodus apples are sour as fuck.”

Dominic grinned at him. “At least something good came out of her trip. The two of you—”

“Are none of your business, so don’t start.” Striding into the living area, Tao found most of the pack lounging around. Taryn muted the TV, and everyone turned to face him.

“I got the short version from Dante over the phone,” said Trey. “Give me the long version.”

So Tao did. Like him, they were not only ready to burn shit down; they had no real idea what the hell was going on. “We need to tighten security.”

“We already did when Ramón started harassing us.” Trey slung an arm over the back of the sofa. “We haven’t let it slack, and we won’t until we get our hands on the shooter.”

Dominic folded his arms. “Are you sure they’ll follow you here?”

“I believe they will,” replied Tao.

“Is it possible that they *deliberately* didn’t fire any fatal shots?” asked Taryn. “Maybe the gunman doesn’t have the stomach to take a life, so they’ve settled for severely injuring their targets.”

Tao nodded. “That would make sense. After all, if this person *did* use Wade all those years ago, it was likely because they didn’t have it in them to do the killing themselves. Either way, they didn’t succeed in punishing Riley unless they count a graze on her arm as a mission completed. My gut tells me they’ll follow us. I told Sage to let us know if any of the flock suddenly have a reason for taking a temporary trip.”

“But can we trust that he’d tell us?” asked Trey.

Given everything that Ryan had quite rightly pointed out about Sage and his lack of action . . . “No. We just have to hope that he does right by Riley. Her uncles will definitely let us know if anyone leaves for any reason. They can be trusted.”

“Who tried to imply that Riley had one of us in the mountains, picking off their flock members?” asked Roni.

“I expected it to be Cynthia,” said Tao. “Ethan said it was actually the Beta female, Dana. Personally, I think she’s just scared because aside from Cynthia, her son is one of the only people left unharmed who should have been at Alec’s party. She needed someone to blame so she could feel that Duncan was safe. What Dana and her mate don’t seem to know is that Duncan was never invited to the party. For some reason he never told them that.”

“What kid wants to admit to their parents that they were the only one who wasn’t invited to a party?” asked Dominic. “If his parents are Betas, they most likely would have reprimanded Alec for not inviting him. And that would have been damn embarrassing for Duncan.”

Tao inclined his head. “When you put it like that, it’s not so confusing that he didn’t tell them. Anyway . . . if anyone at all agreed with Dana, they weren’t vocal about it. I’d expected Cynthia and Shirley to back her up if for no other reason than to piss off Riley, but Ethan said they didn’t.” Maybe they hadn’t wanted to risk that Riley might stay just to spite them.

“I’ve gotta say,” began Marcus, “I don’t like the flock much. Riley’s better off with us.”

Tao agreed with that. “As I told Trick and Dominic, the majority of them—especially her uncles—are good people.”

“Well, Ethan and Max are welcome to visit,” said Taryn, “but my hope

is that Riley will agree to never go back there.”

Tao was hoping the same thing. “On to another subject . . . You said that Ramón’s backed off. Do you think he’s gone for good?”

Trey pursed his lips. “What I think is that he’s not a guy who’s likely to waste his time pestering us when his brother doesn’t have long to live. He probably sought the help of someone else. He won’t have liked that we refused him or that he had to back off, but he had no choice.”

Nodding, Tao said, “All right. I’ll be back in a while; I have something I need to do.”

“Before you go,” began Taryn, “I wanted to ask about you and Riley—is it just a fling?” Taryn’s eyes held a plea that said she hoped to God his answer was no.

“It’s more,” he told her.

She beamed at him before barking a laugh at Dominic. “Told you he’d come through.”

Dominic frowned. “*I told you.*”

“Not as I recall it,” said Taryn.

Jaime smiled again, rubbing her hands together with glee. “I’m glad you two are finally together.”

Yeah, so was Tao.

If there was one thing that could always make Riley smile, it was the sound of a child’s laugh. Since she currently had four kids bouncing on her bed, giggling and squealing, she had a big smile on her face. Her raven, relaxed and happy to be home with them, wanted nothing more than to shift and play with them.

“You’re making a mess of my bed,” Riley playfully grumbled. They just giggled again.

When she’d walked into their bedroom, Savannah and Dexter had launched themselves at her and peppered her cheeks with kisses. Lilah had waved and given her a picture of squiggles, which she’d then taken back and stuffed in her little pocket.

Kye had scowled and said, “I don’t like you anymore; you didn’t come back when you said you would.” Then he’d wrapped himself around her leg and said, “Okay, I forgive you.” The kid didn’t hold a grudge long.

As they’d followed her to her bedroom, they’d been full of questions.

Why had she taken so long?

Did she enjoy the party?

Could they go with her next time?

And, in Savannah's case, was she still not allowed to bite Greta?

Finished unpacking her stuff, Riley balled up her dirty clothes and put them all in the canvas laundry bag. Just as she turned, Savannah leaped at her. Used to it, Riley easily caught her.

"You smell like Tao," Savannah told her, nose wrinkling.

Riley smiled. "I do?"

"Did you kiss him? I'm never going to kiss a boy. They're silly."

"Boys are not silly." Riley chuckled. Not all of them, anyway. "Having said that, I'm glad you don't intend to kiss any boys. You can do that when you're twenty-one." Her raven wholeheartedly agreed.

Savannah leaned in and whispered, "Lilah tries to kiss Dexter, but he runs away."

Hearing a playful hiss, Riley looked to see that the cub in question had unsheathed his claws. "Dexter, do not rip my sheets."

Dexter snatched Kye's candy bar and raced out of the room fast as . . . well, a cheetah.

Laughing, Kye shouted, "Hey, that's mine! Give it, give it, give it!" His shout faded as he disappeared down the tunnels with Savannah and Lilah.

Smiling to herself, Riley closed the door, intending to take a shower. She'd just taken off her T-shirt when there was a knock at the door. With a sigh, she slipped the tee back on and opened the door, expecting the kids. But it was Tao. And he was carrying several bulging duffels.

He barged inside and dumped his bags on the floor. "Don't piss and moan. We agreed we were together, and I'm not interested in living in a separate room from my female."

Tao held his breath, waiting for the argument that would no doubt come. No one appreciated their personal space being invaded, least of all a dominant female shifter. If she were anyone else, he might have consulted her about it. But Riley thought way too much sometimes, she stewed over things that were really very simple, and he wasn't prepared to wait. As he told her, he refused to live apart from his female. He wouldn't leave, no matter how much she—

"All right."

Thrown, he had no words for a moment. "All right?"

She shrugged. "I figure if you're prepared to permanently sleep in the

same room as someone with insomnia, you must really want to be here.”

“I do.”

“All right.”

“You drive me insane, Porter,” he growled.

“Why? I’m giving you what you want.”

“Exactly.” She wasn’t acting as he’d expected, and he didn’t like that she could take him off guard.

She threw up her arms. “I really can’t win in this relationship.” She paused. “Why are you now smiling like a loon?”

“You used the word ‘relationship.’” He’d wondered if she’d play the whole thing down, given how hard she found it to accept people in her life. But what was it that her uncle had said? “*Once she lets a person in, they’re in.*” And that meant Tao was in.

Baffled, she asked, “Is that not what this is? A relationship?”

Tao caught her to him and kissed her. “That’s exactly what it is.”

Riley blinked rapidly. One minute he was yelling at her; the next he was kissing the breath out of her lungs. “If you’re trying to keep me off balance, it’s working.”

“Good.”

Blowing out a breath, she asked, “What does the pack make of the mysterious shooter situation?”

He ran his hand down her ponytail. “They don’t have any better theories than we do.”

“Are they pissed I’m leading danger here? I told them when I got here that it wouldn’t happen.”

“They don’t see it that way,” he assured her. “They see it as you being home, where you’re safe. If someone follows you here, it’s because they chose to do so—anything that happens is on them. The pack’s not upset with you, they’re upset *for* you. And they’re pissed as hell at whoever shot at you. You’re a Phoenix member, baby. When you fuck with one, you fuck with them all.”

Relieved, she asked, “Did you ask about the whole Ramón thing?”

“Yes, he’s really stopped contacting them.”

“Maybe he’s found another healer who can help.”

“That’s what we’re figuring.” Tao settled his hands on her hips. “You know, I kept meaning to ask . . . what happened to Wade’s father?”

“He died in a duel. For some weird reason, Dean decided to challenge

Sage for the position of Alpha. It was suicide, really. The guy didn't have a prayer of winning."

"If I had Shirley as a mate, I might be a little suicidal."

"They didn't have a great relationship. They imprinted when she was far too young and they sort of . . . grew apart, I guess you could say. He was a lot older than Shirley. Even though their relationship was strained, the breaking of the mating bond was hard for her. Wade got her through it. For all her faults, she did love him. She hung on for him."

"I guess that's probably the only thing that *would* make someone fight to live after they lost their mate—they'd have to have another person in their life they loved just as much or they'd let go." Riley flinched, and he seriously wanted to punch himself right in the face. "Shit, I'm *such* an asshole."

"It's fine—"

"No, it's not." Contrite, he rested his forehead on hers. "I'm so sorry, baby, I didn't mean that your father couldn't have loved you if he didn't fight to live."

"I know you didn't."

"Don't ever think you weren't enough for him. I've seen people grieve over the years. I've seen how easy it can be for them to become selfish while it's happening. A person can get so wrapped up in their own pain that they feel alone, like nobody else can feel that level of pain. They forget that others are hurting too. Maybe your father just couldn't find his way past the pain."

"Yeah, that was probably what it was."

Tao sensed she was just trying to placate him. "It's okay to be pissed at him, you know. I am. You *were* enough for him, Riley. He just wasn't enough for himself."

*Possibly*, thought Riley. But Tao hadn't known her father. He couldn't know whether it was true, and neither could she.

Riley slid her arms around his neck. "Kiss me." She needed to feel something that would chase away the constricting sensation in her chest. Needed to have no thoughts in her mind other than just how badly she wanted to come. And maybe he sensed that, because he kissed her like she was his last meal. Licking, biting, devouring her. Riley grabbed his hair and basically just held on as he devastated her mouth. Her blood heated, thickened. Her body pretty much melted into his, and a growl of masculine approval rumbled out of him.

Tao tugged out her hair tie, moaning as all that dark hair tumbled down

her shoulders. “Fucking gorgeous.” Every nerve ending seemed charged by her scent alone, and need roared to life inside him. He would have kept it in check and tried to be gentle with her while she was hurting, but he could read her body, sense that she didn’t want gentle.

Fisting both hands in her hair, Tao snatched her head back and grazed his teeth down her throat. “I don’t know if I’ll ever get enough of you.” It was the truth. He was addicted to everything about the little raven—her taste, her humor, her scent, the feel of her, *everything*. Clawing off her T-shirt and bra, he closed his hand over her breast and squeezed. “Fuck, baby, how do you get your skin this soft?” Using his grip on her hair to arch her body backward, he swooped down and drew her nipple into his mouth, sucking and flicking it with his tongue.

Riley moaned when he bit her nipple, stomach twisting as an ache raw and wild began to build inside her. The hand squeezing her breast slid up to collar her throat. The blatant display of dominance should have made her bristle. Instead it made her even wilder for him. She tore off his shirt and jeans with her talons just as he clawed off her own jeans. She bit into his pectoral just because. A growl vibrated up his chest, and she felt it right through her nipples.

He snaked his splayed hand down her flat stomach, feeling her taut muscles clench. He liked that. Roughly yanking aside her panties, he cupped her pussy. “This is where I’m going to be. In you. Taking you.” He *needed* it. He fucking burned for her, day and night. The hunger never went away, never eased. It was a dark, raw, vicious hunger that clawed and bit at him constantly.

“Don’t wait on my account.” Riley wrapped her fingers around his cock—it was hot and smooth, and pulsed in her hand. Keeping her grip tight, she pumped him hard, exactly the way he liked it.

He licked her lower lip. “I love this mouth. You know where I want it.”

“I know.”

“Give it to me.” It came out a harsh demand, but, shit, his cock was raging hard and it hurt like a motherfucker.

“Moving into my room, asking for me to suck you off . . . You’re full of demands, aren’t you?”

“I’ve told you before, I want everything I can get from you. Are you going to say no, Riley? Are you going to tell me I can’t have what’s mine?” He sucked on her bottom lip and pushed down on her shoulder. “Go on, baby.



It's my mouth. Let me have it." His cock jerked as she slowly went to her knees. The sight alone had him close to coming. Keeping her hair bunched in his hand, he said, "Open."

It wasn't a spoken like a command, to Riley's surprise. His voice was low, calm, coaxing, but also left no room for argument. She thought about defying him for the plain hell of it, but she knew he was expecting that. She liked catching him off guard, since he did it so often to her, so that was exactly what she did.

Tao drew in a sharp breath as she sucked him deep into her hot mouth. No preamble, no teasing flicks of her tongue, no defiant looks. And fuck, it was just what he wanted. She took him deeper with each pass, moaning and dancing her tongue around him. "Fuck, that's it." She hummed—the sound vibrated all the way from the base of his cock to the head . . . and his control left him in a rush.

Riley held on to his thighs as he fucked her mouth. The entire time he looked at her with eyes that gleamed with hunger, possession, and . . . something else. Something softer, something that made her heart stutter. She felt him swell in her mouth, knew he was close. Riley sucked harder and—

Tao pulled out. "One day I'm going to come in your mouth, but not today. I want inside you." Dragging her to her feet, he caged her against the wall, snapped off her panties, and sank two fingers into her pussy. "Damn, baby, you're soaking like you've never had cock before." There was no more waiting. He had to have her. He lifted her, and her legs locked around him. "How much do you want me?"

In answer, she sank her teeth into his shoulder.

"Fuck, yeah." He slammed home, burying himself balls deep in one smooth, possessive thrust that made her head fall back. Her pussy clamped around him, tight and hot and perfect. Cupping her ass, he pounded into her hard. His pace was brutal, relentless. Her eyes were wild, hungry. "Mine. Isn't that right? I'm the only one who can fuck this pussy. Only me."

Riley dug her nails into the hard muscles of his back. "You really do talk too much."

Growling, Tao took her mouth again. The raw need spilled out of him, poured down her throat. He mercilessly hammered into her, swallowing every little moan she fed him, wanting more. He felt the telling tingle at the base of his spine, knew he wouldn't last much longer, but he wanted her to come first. Still powering into her, he slid his thumb between her folds and

rubbed her clit.

She shook her head. “I don’t want to come yet.” She didn’t want it to be over, but he rubbed her clit even faster. And when his thumb pushed on her clit just right, she fragmented as white-hot pleasure surged through her. She might have screamed, but he slammed his mouth on hers with a growl as he jammed his cock deep and exploded.

Hollowed out by how hard he’d come, Tao dropped a light kiss on her mouth. Languid, sex-dazed eyes met his, and his gut clenched. He rested his forehead on hers. Several emotions fought for supremacy inside him—emotions he didn’t know how to articulate. “You wreck me.”

She blinked. “Is that good?”

He smiled. “Oh yeah, it’s good.” It also spooked the shit out of him, but he didn’t have it in him to care.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Using a wet wipe, Riley cleaned the sprinkles of detergent powder from the floor of the laundry room. She didn't look up, though she sensed someone enter. She'd heard their footsteps shuffling down the tunnel, she'd known they were coming. And now she could see one fluffy slipper tapping impatiently. Ha.

"I'll bet you think you're clever, don't you?" sniped a witchy voice.

Riley cast Greta a bright smile. "Actually, I do think I'm quite clever."

"It won't last."

"I'm assuming this is about Tao." Done cleaning the floor, Riley dumped the wipe in the garbage can and then used another wipe to clean the excess powder from her fingers.

"I heard he moved into your room last week."

She'd said it as if she'd shrewdly gotten her hands on classified information. "Well, it wasn't exactly a secret," said Riley, dropping the second wipe in the trash.

Greta advanced farther into the room, arms folded. "I also heard someone in your flock says you manipulated her boy into shooting his friends. It wouldn't surprise me if it were true. Not one bit."

"Ooh, wait a sec while I grab a pen. I just want to add that to my list of stuff I couldn't give a rat's ass about."

Greta's mouth tightened. "Has Tao asked you to imprint yet?"

Sitting on the plastic chair opposite the rows of washing machines and dryers that were lined up against the wall, Riley lifted her face to the ceiling fan. "Our relationship's none of your business, Gretchen."

*"It's Greta. And it is my business, I'm practically his mother!"*

“Well, maybe he’d be better adjusted if you weren’t.”

“I wouldn’t be so smug that you have him if I were you.”

Oh, if only the hum and slurp of the washing machines would drown out the old witch. She briefly considered spilling the liquid softener all over the floor so she could watch Greta do an interpretation of *Swan Lake*. “As much as I enjoy our little chats—”

“If he has asked you to imprint, bear in mind one thing.” Greta leaned forward, smirking. “You aren’t the first he’s asked.”

An ice-cold fist seemed to punch into Riley’s chest. Her raven froze, watchful.

“It’s true. Taryn was the first,” Greta added with utter delight.

Taryn? The crone had to be kidding. Trey would have snapped Tao’s neck like a twig for making a move on his mate. The Alpha male took possessiveness to a whole new level.

“That was back when Trey didn’t know the hussy was his true mate—it would have been better for us all if he didn’t find out. You see, when she first came here, the plan was for her to leave after a few months of faking being Trey’s mate . . . and Tao was prepared to leave the pack with her.”

Speechless, Riley struggled to process what she’d heard. She wanted it to be a lie, but she could see the truth right there in Greta’s eyes . . . eyes her raven wanted to peck right out.

“So be smug all you like, but know that you’re playing second fiddle to Taryn. It’s *her* he wants as his mate.”

Refusing to reveal any of her pain, Riley shrugged. “Can’t say I blame him. Taryn’s awesome.” The crone jerked back with a frown. “What did you think I was going to do? Rant and rave and kick him to the curb? Oh, my dear, dear Gretchen, you’ll have to do better than that.”

Hearing a buzzer, Riley went straight to the washing machine and pulled open the door. The lavender smell of the detergent hit her face. She breathed it in, using it to calm herself and her raven. Ignoring Greta, she then hummed softly to herself as she began moving the wet laundry to the nearest dryer. Snarling at the dismissive act, the witch finally left. Only then did Riley let her shoulders slump. A wet shirt fell from her shaky fingers. It felt like the wind had been knocked right out of her.

Shock. Hurt. Humiliation. Disbelief. Each insidious emotion curdled in her stomach and made her chest tighten. She pressed down on her breastbone, trying to think through it all.

It was hard enough to hear that Tao had once wanted to imprint with someone. The bitch of the matter was that Riley *knew* that someone. It was a person she'd spent time with, laughed with, and gotten blind drunk with. And all that time, Taryn had known—hell, the whole pack probably knew—that Tao had once wanted her as his mate. It was humiliating that Riley *hadn't* known.

Did he still feel that way about Taryn? She didn't think so. Riley had seen them interact plenty of times, but never once had she sensed that he yearned for Taryn. But maybe she simply hadn't noticed it.

Or maybe she was just being paranoid because she was looking at the whole thing through jealous vision. She loathed that emotion, but it wouldn't fuck off. Had Tao ever kissed Taryn? Touched her the way he'd touched Riley? Somehow she doubted it. Trey surely would have otherwise killed him long ago. That only eased the jealousy a little, though.

Dammit, someone should have *told* her. Someone should have warned her so that Greta couldn't have blindsided her with it. And *fuck*, was Riley pissed with every wolf in the pack for not saying a word about it. But then, she thought, of course they hadn't told her. They'd known it might have made her feel awkward to cross the pack mate line with Tao, and they were too intent on bringing her and him together.

While she could understand their reasoning, that didn't make it okay. In fact, she felt a little betrayed by these people she'd slowly but surely started to trust. And she didn't know what to do about it.

Eating his BLT, Tao listened hard for approaching footsteps. It wasn't like Riley to be late for lunch, especially since she liked to settle the kids into their seats and fill their plates for them. His wolf didn't like it that she wasn't there; he missed her. Every time Tao caught a whiff of her scent on his skin or his clothes, it made both him and his wolf miss her that little bit more.

"I noticed the raven's not around," said Greta with a satisfied smile, an odd note to her voice that caught his wolf's attention. "I wonder why that could be."

Brow creased, Makenna paused with her hot dog halfway to her mouth. "I know she went to do her laundry. I haven't seen or heard from her since. She should be done by now."

Tao listened to Makenna's words, but his eyes were locked on Greta, on the sly curve of her mouth, the superior jut of the chin, and her air of

exaggerated casualness. His wolf's hackles rose. "What did you do?"

She put a hand to her chest, eyes smiling. "I haven't done a thing,"

He leaned forward, aggression radiating from him. "What did you do?"  
A tense silence had fallen, and everyone's attention was on him and Greta.

"Now, Tao—"

"I've known you all my life and I know that smile means you've done something to hurt someone and you're proud of it." Right then his instincts were screaming at him to get to Riley. "So I'll ask again, what did you do?"

Savannah crouched in her seat, hissing at Greta.

"Someone get hold of that child before she—" Greta broke off as Savannah hissed again. "See, vicious."

"Leave her the fuck alone," Tao clipped, shocking Greta into silence. His wolf surged to the surface, making his eyes flash wolf. The old woman swallowed hard.

"Greta," Trey growled, "answer his question *now*."

Tao stilled at the sound of footsteps, but he didn't look away from Greta.

She patted her hair. "The raven and I may have had a slight disagreement."

How very vague. "About what?"

Greta averted her eyes.

"About what?" he repeated.

*Dark-red fruit, coconut milk, and black lace.*

Tao looked up as Riley strolled in like she didn't have a care in the world. Then she took in the sight of Savannah snarling at Greta, and her eyes went hard.

"What's going on?" Riley stroked her hand down Savannah's hair. "Did she upset you, sweetheart?"

Head tilted, the little viper said, "I thought she'd upset you."

"Upset me?" Riley pursed her lips. "Well, it does upset me that she won't shave the downy hairs from her chinny chin chin, but that's pretty much it."

Savannah giggled and relaxed in her chair, and the rest of the table seemed to let out a collective breath. Tao remained tense. Riley might look fine, but she wasn't fooling him or his wolf—they knew her too well at this point.

As she slid onto the chair beside him, he said, "You're late." It wasn't a

reprimand, just a statement of fact.

She shrugged. "I was talking with Ethan."

He sensed that that was the truth. He also sensed that she was leaving something out. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," said Riley, unprepared to discuss it here in front of everyone. She'd keep her pain to herself, thank you very much. And she definitely wouldn't expose the kids to what should be a purely adult conversation, especially Kye—who'd probably feel a little mixed up if he knew his bodyguard had once wanted to mate with his mom.

Casting Greta a look of challenge, Riley scooped up some pasta and put it on her plate. Her raven flapped her wings at the old bitch. Honestly, there had been a brief moment when Riley had thought of staying in her room—she wasn't in the mood to spend time with a bunch of people she was a little pissed off with. But no way would she let Greta cause her to hide away in her room. Nuh-uh. And she was annoyed with herself for even considering it.

As Tao ate the rest of his BLT, he watched Riley closely. In between eating her pasta and chatting with Zac, she teased the kids and topped up their plates. She also seemed to be deliberately avoiding making eye contact with anyone else.

Knowing Greta, she'd most likely accused Riley of the same crime that Shirley had, just to hurt her. He sent the old woman a hard look. She didn't look so superior now. In fact, she was watching Riley with a mixture of confusion and . . . no, that couldn't be respect. If she'd thought that hurting Riley would make his little raven isolate herself, she was gravely underestimating her strength.

Draping his arm across Riley's back, Tao rested his hand in the crook of her neck and used his thumb to rub her nape. She stilled beneath his hand. It was a subtle rejection, but it was a rejection all the same. A growl built in his chest—a noise that came from both man and wolf. He spoke low in her ear. "What's wrong?"

"I told you, nothing."

He nipped her ear at the lie and said quietly, "Our room, now."

"I'm trying to eat here." The problem for Riley was that every forkful tasted like rubber. Her emotions were too messed up, and her raven was still in a sour mood. But she wasn't sure she was ready to talk about what she'd learned, not sure she was ready to hear that just maybe there was some truth in Greta's claim that Taryn was his first choice. "Have another sandwich or

something.”

“Baby, you’re hurting and I hate it. It’s killing me. We’re going to our room so you can tell me why and I can fix it.” Cupping her elbow, he brought her to her feet. He knew she wanted to resist. He also knew she wouldn’t cause a scene in front of the kids.

Neither of them said a word as they made their way through the tunnels. Once they were in their bedroom, he folded his arms. “What did Greta say to you? I know she upset you somehow. Tell me.”

Riley sighed. “She brought up Wade. She said she wouldn’t be surprised if Shirley’s accusations were true. That’s not something I wasn’t expecting.”

“What else? Don’t play dumb, Riley. You tensed up when I touched you, like I’ve done something to hurt you. If I have, I want to know what it is.”

“You haven’t hurt me. Fine, okay, you have. I would just rather you had told me so that Greta couldn’t have sucker punched me with it.”

He mentally ran through the possibilities of what she could mean but came up blank. “Told you what?”

Riley folded her arms. “About the none-too-little matter of you asking Taryn to imprint with you.”

He closed his eyes. “*Fuck.*”

“I’m not naïve, I know you have a past and I accept that. I can accept this too, it’s just . . . why didn’t you tell me? You know what, we don’t need to talk about it. It’s your business. I would just rather have heard it from you, that’s all.”

He moved into her personal space. “You’re mine, I’m yours, which means my business is your business. You want to hear about it, I’ll tell you. But let me make it clear that Taryn is not an ex. If she had been, I would have mentioned that. But I never kissed her, never even touched her.”

Admittedly, Riley did feel a little better on hearing that. “Okay.”

“I did want to imprint with her back then. Leaving the pack would have been damn fucking hard to do, but it would have been harder if I hadn’t. When I was a kid, my mother had to deal with one of my dad’s ex-bed-buddies hanging around, causing trouble for her. It was hard for everyone. That’s part of the reason I resisted you. I didn’t want things to be awkward for you, me, your mate, or—if through some unlikely miracle I ever mated—mine.”



Before she asked why he thought it would be an unlikely miracle, he was speaking again.

“Even then, I knew I wouldn’t have been Taryn’s first choice, but I wanted her anyway. It wasn’t because I cared deeply for her, it was because she’s strong and would never have needed me. I could have held myself back from her, and there would have been no pressure to ‘complete’ her the way true mates are supposed to complete each other.”

Having been unprepared for that answer, she asked, “You fear the depth of commitment that comes with mating?”

“Two people completing each other doesn’t always work so well. My brother’s mate had these expectations of the perfect guy that he can never live up to, no matter what he does—how could anyone? She spends her days criticizing him, but that doesn’t stop her from relying on him, needing him, and leaning on him until she’s also weighing on him.”

And that was no doubt part of why he was so cynical about relationships, she thought. “Not all love is unequal and codependent.”

“No, it’s not. But the idea that I have a mate out there expecting me to be her fairy-tale prince scares the shit out of me. How could I ever complete anyone, Riley? I’m a total asshole. Abrasive, selfish, tactless. The list goes on.”

“You’re not an asshole, Tao. You can *be* an asshole when you feel like it, but you’re not an asshole.”

“Of course I am. My point is that I wanted her for all the wrong reasons. I realized that pretty quickly, and I stopped wanting her before she and Trey even had a mating bond. That’s the God’s honest truth.” He cupped her throat with both hands. “I honestly wasn’t keeping it a secret from you. I can understand that it’s definitely not a small thing to you, but it *feels* small to me because it wasn’t a key point in my life. It’s so far in the past I never even think about it, so it didn’t occur to me to tell you.” He pulled her to him, nuzzling her neck. “I’m sorry, baby. That’s the second time I’ve hurt you in the space of a week. It doesn’t seem fair that I’m making you miserable while you make me happy.”

“How do I make you happy?”

“You don’t have to do anything to make me happy. It just happens when you’re around.”

Her mouth curled just a little. He hadn’t said it to flatter her, he’d simply stated what he felt was a fact. The whole him-wanting-to-imprint-

with-Taryn thing still stung, but she was less upset now that she knew he hadn't made a conscious decision not to tell her. Her raven was a little less tense, though she also remained wary. "You don't make me miserable."

Tao smoothed his hands down to her shoulders. "I'm going to repeat this because in your position it would play on my mind. I do not want Taryn. I care about her just as I do my other pack mates, but that's it. Nothing more. Nothing less. And I have no regrets at all that we didn't imprint. None whatsoever."

Now that some of the jealousy had slipped away, Riley could look at the whole thing more rationally. She could be sure that she'd never once seen him look at Taryn with longing. "Greta said I was playing second fiddle."

"Fuck Greta. She knows that's bullshit. You're not second to anyone. You come first to me. Understand?"

She nodded. "Okay."

"Good." He kissed her softly and stroked her hair, soothing and gentling, relieved she didn't tense again. His wolf, still a little anxious, rubbed up against her. "I need to have a good, long talk with Greta."

Riley shivered at the lethal note to his growl. It always made her tingly when he got all overprotective, but she'd never let him know that. "She's not worth it."

"She deliberately set out to hurt you."

"Hey, I'm a big girl, you know."

"But you're my girl. And I don't want anyone hurting my girl." He rubbed his nose against hers. "I especially don't want to be the reason she's hurt."

"I'm fine now, really."

He stroked the bite mark he'd left on her pulse. "I've never marked anyone before. Not even accidentally." He liked rough sex, and some people could get so carried away that they left a mark. But he never had.

"You marked *me* accidentally the first night we slept together," she pointed out. "Then again, you were wasted."

"I was wasted, but I didn't mark you by accident. I knew exactly what I was doing." Even totally hammered, he'd been fully aware that he was leaving his brand on her. It was something he'd wanted to do for a very long time.

His head snapped up at the knock on the door. It was a knock so light that it could only be from one of the kids.

“I’ll get it.” Riley nipped his lip hard when he didn’t release her. With a playful growl, he stepped back so she could open the door. She wasn’t in the least bit surprised to find Savannah standing there. “Hey, sweetheart.”

The little viper walked in, looking at Riley carefully, as if checking that Tao hadn’t hurt her when he dragged her to the room. “Can I bite the mean old lady now?”

Riley chuckled. It was so tempting to say yes. “I’m afraid not. Is Dexter done with his lunch?” Savannah nodded. “Then go ask him and the others if they want to play outside for a while.”

The little girl gave her a beaming smile. “Okay!” She started to leave, but then looked at Tao a little oddly. With her hand, she urged him to crouch down.

Tao smiled. It seemed that by defending her and Riley against Greta, he’d won a little of Savannah’s trust. Progress. He squatted.

“Come closer,” she whispered.

He shuffled a little closer and, equally quiet, asked, “What?”

She smiled. “If you hurt my Riley, I will bite your nose off and let Dexter eat it.”

Okay, so he hadn’t exactly won her trust yet. “Good to know.”

She happily skipped away and it was just a little bit freaky.

Frowning, Riley asked, “What did she say?”

Standing, he replied, “Apparently, if I hurt you, I’ll lose my nose.”

Eyes dancing, Riley gasped. “No!”

“She’ll also let Dexter eat it.”

Riley snorted. “Knowing that kid, he’d at the very least carry it around in his pocket.”

Tao was thinking the same thing.

She gave him a quick kiss. “Gotta go.”

He grabbed her hand to stop her leaving. “It shouldn’t hurt when I watch you leave the room, should it?” He didn’t like being away from her. Not one little bit. Her smile hit him in the gut.

“Dude, you say some pretty nice stuff sometimes.”

A grin tugged at his mouth. “I want another kiss.”

Rolling her eyes, she gave him another. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Stay near the base of the mountain,” he warned. There had been no signs of anyone lingering near the perimeter, but Tao wasn’t taking any chances. Not with her safety.

“Like I needed the reminder.”

He watched her leave the room and then pulled out his cell and dialed a familiar number. “Taryn, there’s something you should know.”

Riley lounged in one of the patio chairs as Kye chased the other three kids around a weathered birch tree. Their laughs and shrieks almost drowned out the sounds of birds calling, insects humming, and squirrels chattering. Her raven, who was still edgy, wanted to shift and play with them. Riley reassured her that they would soon. For now she’d simply watch over the children . . . one of whom had just scrambled up a tree as expertly as any viper shifter.

Kye scowled at said viper. “Savannah, down!”

Hanging upside down from the tree branch, Savannah threw an acorn at him instead.

Enjoying the heat prickling her skin, Riley sank deeper into the chair. The comforting scents of pine, wildflowers, sun-warmed earth, and sweet cedar helped soothe her raven’s nerves. The avian still hadn’t completely lost her anger. It wasn’t Tao she was mad with, it was Greta. The old dragon had deliberately tried to hurt her. It wasn’t the first time and it wouldn’t be the last, but it was the only time that Greta’s words had truly had an impact. The fact that Greta *had* managed to hurt her annoyed the raven almost as much as what Greta had said.

Hearing footsteps rustling the grass, Riley turned to see Taryn, Jaime, Roni, and Makenna come walking out of the trees and over to the patio table.

With a sheepish smile, Taryn asked, “Can we talk?”

“Sure,” Riley replied. “I’m guessing Tao told you.”

“He was about to, but Greta had already admitted what she’d said by then. I’m mad at her, but I’m mad at me too for not considering that she’d do that.”

“I can imagine how pissed you must be at us all for not mentioning it,” said Jaime. “*Rightfully* pissed. But please don’t be upset with Makenna—she didn’t even know.”

Roni gestured to herself and Jaime. “We weren’t part of the pack when all that stuff happened, but we knew a little about it. We should have told you.”

“Yes, we should have,” Taryn agreed. “I didn’t say anything because it *sounds* like a big deal, doesn’t it? It sounds like there must have been some

great unrequited love, but it was never like that. Ask any of the guys or even Grace, Lydia, and Hope—they'll all tell you the same thing. Tao doesn't and has *never* loved me the way a guy loves his mate. I wanted you to see that for yourself before I told you about the imprinting thing. I should have known Greta would get there first, the bitch. She actually seems a little ashamed of herself."

Makenna tipped her chin toward the lake. "She's over there, sulking."

Riley almost laughed. "Sulking?"

Taryn nodded. "Tao won't talk to her. She's devastated."

"He won't talk to her?" Riley echoed.

"Not since ripping her a new asshole a few minutes ago," said Roni. "She hurt you. That's not acceptable to him. It's not acceptable to any of us."

Jaime joined her hands, as if in prayer. "So, can you forgive us all for being too busy at matchmaking to not consider that some old dragon would use the past to dig her venomous claws into you?"

Honestly, Riley had already forgiven them. She could see why they'd kept it from her, and she had to admit that she might have done the same thing in their shoes. All that really mattered to her was that Greta was wrong, that it was *Riley* Tao wanted, no one else. Still, she pretended to consider it. "I guess so." Smiling at their relieved expressions, she stood. "I don't suppose you'd all mind watching over the kids for a minute, would you? I need to let my raven out."

Standing at the mouth of the cave, Tao watched Riley and the other females talk. He wasn't checking on her because he'd suspected she'd snub them or refuse to accept their apologies—he knew Riley was a better person than that. But he'd just wanted to watch her face as Taryn spoke with her, wanted to be sure she fully believed what she heard. It was important to Tao that she didn't have any doubts about him or whom he wanted.

Trick sidled up to him, his gaze on the females. "Looks like blood won't be shed."

"I already explained everything to Riley," Tao told him. "She knows I don't want Taryn and that no one meant to hurt her."

"I hope you're not planning to ask Riley to imprint."

Tao scowled, muscles bunching tight. "Why?"

"Because you'll later find it embarrassing when you realize she's actually your true mate."

Tao exhaled heavily. “Trick—”

“Riley *is* your true mate, Tao. Do us all a favor and just accept it.” Exasperated, Trick shook his head. “I’ve no idea how you can’t see it.”

“Judging by the number of couples I’ve seen mate over the years, recognizing your true mate isn’t as simple as you seem to think it is.”

“It can be. People let their personal shit get in the way. Marcus had the same trouble with Roni. I told him to just listen to his wolf, but he insisted on dwelling on what the Seer told him. Both he and Roni would have sensed the mating bond straightaway if they’d listened to their wolves.”

“My wolf didn’t like Riley at first.”

That took Trick by surprise. “Seriously?”

“Seriously. My wolf likes people to respect him. She isn’t impressed by authority and finds joy in testing my patience. He didn’t like that at all. He’s crazy about her now, but it took him a while to really warm up to her. So if we’re going by your theory that all we have to do is listen to our animals, Riley’s not my true mate at all, or my wolf would have adored her from minute one.”

Trick was quiet for a minute. “It doesn’t make sense that he didn’t like her in the beginning. I’m positive that female is your true mate.”

“Do you think you’ll so easily recognize your own true mate when he or she comes along?” Tao asked him. Trick was openly bisexual.

“I’ll know,” he stated, confident. “My wolf will know.”

“*Have you seen what she’s done to me!*”

The shriek had them both turning. And gawking.

“Oh good God,” muttered Trick, shoulders shaking.

Marching up the cliff steps, Greta planted herself in front of Tao, bird shit dripping off her head and shoulder. “Look what she did to me!”

“Technically it wasn’t Riley,” said Trick. “It was her raven.”

Ignoring that, Greta glowered at Tao. “You want to be with *her*? You want to be with someone who would do this and find it acceptable?”

A smile curved Tao’s mouth. “Yeah, I do.”

“Hopeless,” she clipped, stalking away. “Hopeless, the lot of you.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



**T**wo weeks later Tao and Riley were snuggled together on the plush sofa of the playroom, drinking coffee and eating a cookie she'd grabbed from the snack cart. The room was cute and spacious, with stuffed animals, books, and all kinds of toys. Forest-themed murals decorated the walls. Paper butterflies and birds dangled from the ceiling, which also featured glowing stars and planets.

The playroom was especially good for when the weather was bad. Earlier, Riley and Tao had spent an hour in their animal forms chasing and herding the kids around the woods. The children had been extremely disappointed when it started to rain and they had to be brought inside, but having the playroom to go to softened the blow.

Most of Tao's attention was on the basketball game that was playing on the wall-mounted TV opposite the sofa, but Riley preferred watching the kids play. At that moment Savannah was trying to stop Kye from undressing a doll, while Lilah was having a one-sided conversation with Dexter, who was flicking through one of the plastic toy boxes.

"I was thinking we could take the kids out for the day tomorrow," said Tao.

Riley frowned. "You sure that's a good idea? I know things have been quiet, but that doesn't mean it's safe."

"We're in constant contact with your uncles. They're helping Hugh and Sage keep note of everyone's whereabouts. The moment anyone in the flock can't be accounted for, they'll call us. So far everything's been as quiet there as it has been here."

"Which makes it look like I was in fact behind the shootings."

“I don’t think that’s why the shooter’s keeping a low profile. They can’t act while everyone’s being so closely watched.” He nuzzled her. “I know you’re reluctant to take any chances, but they’ll lose their little minds if they’re cooped up too long.”

She sighed. “You’re right. It’s not good for them.” She really should have thought of that and was annoyed with herself for not having considered it. “I’ll call my uncles in the morning. If they say everyone in the flock can still be accounted for, we’ll take the kids out for the day. I don’t want them to feel suffocated and bored.”

“They’re not bored. They had fun this morning playing with our animals. But they’ll *become* bored if confined to their territory.”

“They did have fun, didn’t they? I like your wolf.”

Tao smiled. “He likes you.” That was an understatement, really. His wolf adored her. He’d be with her twenty-four/seven if it were possible. “He likes playing with your raven.”

“He’s much more patient than you are, so she doesn’t find him as much fun to torment, but she loves that he plays with her.” Riley took another bite of her half-eaten cookie. “Savannah’s warming to you.”

Yeah, he’d noticed. “I switched sides, in her eyes.” Tao rubbed her thigh. “You know, on an honest note, I think Greta actually likes the kids.”

Doubtful, Riley asked, “Then why does she give Savannah a hard time?”

“Most likely because Savannah stands up to her so often. Greta’s probably just trying to knock her down a peg or two.”

Well, that would be pointless. “Savannah’s fearless.”

“She gets that from you.”

Frowning at Tao for taking a big chunk out of her cookie, she said, “She was that way before I met her.”

“Not according to Makenna. She said that Savannah used to be very withdrawn and unsure. She didn’t trust people or form attachments to anyone other than Dexter. Makenna said both of them seemed drawn to you, like they somehow sensed you’re a natural protector.”

“Maybe they heard that ravens vigorously protect kids.”

“Or maybe they saw in you what we see—someone tough, strong, and resilient who’ll stand between them and danger.”

“You didn’t see that when we first met,” she contradicted.

“My judgment was clouded by how badly I deal with change and



outsiders.”

Riley sighed, admitting, “I love them.”

His mouth curved. “I know you do.” If she’d thought she’d been fooling anybody about it, she was totally wrong. It was written all over her in neon colors.

Done with her cookie, she wiped the crumbs from her hands. “Do you think they know?”

“Hell yeah. They love you right back. You’re their hero.”

“Their hero?” she echoed.

“You’ve stood over them like a sentry. They know you’ll always protect them and keep them safe. Not because you swore it—kids sense bullshit. They know it because they see that you’re bone-deep loyal. They trust you.” He curled her hair behind her ear. “I trust you.”

She scowled. “Stop reducing me to mush.”

His mouth quirked. “Mush?”

“You do it every time you blurt out something nice.” She was a dominant female; she wasn’t supposed to be mush. But for Tao, someone unduly suspicious by nature, to say that he trusted her . . . that was no small thing. Her raven was rather smug about it.

“It’s only the truth.” He closed his eyes as she began sifting her fingers through his hair. He knew she was trying to distract him from talking about anything that made her “mush,” but it was seriously hard to care when her fingers were massaging his scalp.

Riley ran her finger along the scar beneath his ear. “I remember when you got that.” Shifters scarred only if a wound was very bad. Tao had almost died that night. Her lungs burned at the memory.

“You were worried,” he sensed.

“Yeah, I was worried. Have you ever been that badly injured before?”

“I’ve had plenty of broken bones, even had some internal bleeding, but I’ve never been that close to death before.”

“When Wade came toward me with that gun, I thought I was going to die. My life didn’t flash before my eyes, but it made me realize how much I wanted to live, who I’d miss and stuff.”

Tao linked his fingers with hers. “I thought of you. Seriously. I was lying there for a good few minutes before someone noticed me. I didn’t have the strength to call out to anyone. I knew I was dying; I could feel it happening. I literally thought, ‘This is it. This is the end. Everything is over.’”

And I looked at my life and all the things I never did. And then you popped into my head. I wondered if you'd be okay, if you'd run or if you'd stay with the pack. I didn't like the idea that you'd only ever remember me as the guy who was an asshole to you."

"You're reducing me to mush again."

He chuckled. "I made the decision there and then to act on how much I wanted you if I lived through it, but I knew it wouldn't be that simple. I knew I couldn't let you see how much I wanted you or even that I liked you. I had to seem like I was no threat."

"You tricked me." And she still rather admired the deviousness of his plan.

"I did what I had to do to get what I wanted. And now I have it." He kissed her, flicking her tongue with his, coaxing her to play.

"Kissy, kissy, kissy."

Tao pulled back to scowl at Kye, who was now making kissing noises that Lilah tried to replicate.

Savannah's upper lip was curled as she stared at Riley and Tao. "Yuck."

Dexter had his little nose scrunched up. He grabbed Riley's leg, holding Tao's eyes with a gaze that gleamed with both possessiveness and challenge.

Tao ruffled his hair. "I don't want to take Riley from you and Savannah, little man. I just want you to share her with me. Can you do that?"

After a long moment, Dexter nodded. Savannah, however, eyed Tao closely for a little while.

Eventually the little viper nodded. "But I'll still bite your nose off if you upset her."

Tao stifled a smile. "Fair enough." Glancing at the clock, he said, "I have to go now. It's my turn to guard the southern border for a while so that Trick can have a break. You guys be good for Riley." He gave her one last kiss before disappearing.

Riley inhaled deeply. "Right . . . who wants to make cookies?"

Four hands shot up in the air.

"Let's get this room tidy first."

Makenna, Grace, and Lydia helped them bake the cookies. Of course, all four kids made an absolute mess of themselves. Later on Grace and Lydia took them to be washed and changed while Riley and Makenna cleaned the kitchen.

Riley was cleaning the flour and cookie dough from the kitchen

countertop when Dante strolled in with an odd expression on his face. Ryan, Zac, Greta, and the Alphas all looked up from the table.

The Beta's eyes danced from Riley to Taryn as he said, "Tao's parents just drove through the fence."

"Shit." Taryn pushed away from the dining table and exchanged a worried look with her mate. "Where's Tao?"

"On patrol in his wolf form," replied Dante. "I've left a message on his cell to tell him they're here. Hopefully he shifts soon and sees the message."

Zac frowned. "Why is it bad that they're here? I thought you guys liked them." It was clear by the teenager's voice that he kind of liked them too. The Alphas exchanged another odd look.

Dumping the rag on the countertop, Riley asked, "Am I missing something?" Because they seemed seriously worried. Makenna shrugged, clueless.

Taryn turned to Riley, scratching her head. "Tao's parents are great. Lennon is a sweet guy and Avery is a little on the hippie side. Tao gets his directness from her, so she's not one to hold back if something bothers her." It sounded like a warning of some sort.

Riley tried to read between the lines but failed to understand where the Alpha was going with this. "What are you trying to tell me?"

Trey moved to his mate's side. "One of the reasons I have a lot of respect for the couple is that they stood strong against a number of people who tried to come between them. When Avery mated Lennon and moved to his pack, it was hard for her. A few of the females who'd had a fling with Lennon acted like serious bitches to Avery, one in particular. They recruited others in the pack to band against her."

Riley nodded. "Tao told me a little about it."

Draping an arm over Taryn's shoulders, Trey continued. "I always suspected that the main reason Tao held back from you was that he was taking his dad's advice to never have a fling with someone from his pack. Lennon gave Dante and me that same advice. I didn't listen, and Taryn paid that price before the bitch in question moved to another pack."

"You think Lennon will be pissed at Tao for not taking his advice," Riley guessed.

"No, Lennon's a pretty understanding guy and he accepts that Tao will always go his own way," replied Trey. "But Avery will be upset that her son did something that could later hurt him and his mate in a big way."

“Ah.” Riley rubbed at her nape. “Look, I won’t lie and say I won’t find it hard when Tao takes a mate, but I wouldn’t try to hurt him.”

“We know you wouldn’t,” Taryn assured her. “Honestly, I’m not sure you have to worry about Tao leaving you for someone else anyway, but that’s not a conversation we can have right now. I’m just warning you that Avery might be difficult.”

“I could just sit with the kids until his parents are gone,” Riley offered.

“That won’t help,” said Makenna. “She’ll smell you on Tao as soon as he arrives, so she’ll flip her lid whether you’re in the room or not.”

“And *no one* has the right to make you hide in your own home,” stated Dante.

He was right, and everything inside Riley balked at hiding anyway. Her raven would hate it. “I’ll finish cleaning while we wait for them.” The wolves all pitched in. By the time an unfamiliar laugh echoed throughout the tunnels, the kitchen fairly sparkled.

Trick entered first, so he’d obviously accompanied the mated pair into the mountain. The male who followed him inside was much darker than Tao, but they had the same solid build and rough angles to their faces. It was Lennon’s confident walk and the way his wandering gaze took in everything that really made her think of Tao, though.

The female at Lennon’s side shared Tao’s shade of hair and gold eyes, but she had a warm and welcoming way about her that was very unlike her son. As Lennon talked with Trey, Avery used Zac’s shoulder as a shelf for her elbow while she teased and laughed with the teenager. Then, after giving Zac a gentle pinch on the cheek, she began to make her way around the room, smiling and chatting with each of the wolves. Her walk was slow and easy. She kind of . . . floated around the room, her long gypsy skirt swirling around her legs.

Finally she reached Riley. Tilting her head, she smiled. “I don’t believe we’ve met.”

Hoping she wouldn’t end up going toe-to-toe with the woman, Riley returned her smile. “I’m Riley.”

“She recently joined the pack,” Taryn put in.

“I see.” Avery studied Riley closely. “A raven, right?”

Riley nodded. “That’s right.”

Avery moved toward her. “It’s the hair, it will always—” Her nostrils flared and she came to an abrupt halt. Her warm smile vanished. She turned

to Taryn. “Where is he? Where’s Tao?” The flat tone got the attention of Lennon, who, with a frown, then crossed the room to his mate.

“He’s on his way,” said Taryn.

Turning back to Riley, Avery folded her arms. “Just how long have you been sleeping with my son?”

Riley blinked. “Wow, that’s really *not* your business.”

“Not my business? I’m his mother.”

Riley gave her a wan smile. “Greta might disagree with you on that.”

Avery’s attention snapped to Greta, who’d returned to her seat at the table.

Greta lifted her chin. “I’ve raised him all these years while you’ve been living with your daughter-in-law’s pack.”

“Raised him?” echoed Avery. “He was *fifteen* when he left.”

“A fifteen-year-old boy still needs a mother,” Greta insisted. “You weren’t there for him. I was. *She* might be a raven with a big mouth, but he could do worse.”

Riley’s brows flew up. Coming from Greta, that was a compliment.

Makenna leaned into Riley and whispered, “Siccing them two on each other was a truly brilliant idea.”

“It’s not about how well Tao can do for himself,” Avery told Greta. “He knows better than to sleep with females from his pack.”

Greta raised an imperious brow. “You didn’t sleep with any males from yours before you mated into Lennon’s pack?”

Avery’s back snapped straight and her eyes flickered. “Of course not.”

Greta huffed. “You were never a good liar, Avery.”

“How dare you!”

“How dare you come in here, causing a fuss when you have no right to interfere—you lost that right when you left him to fend for himself.”

“I didn’t throw him out on the streets, Greta. I let him leave with Trey and the rest of you because I had to respect his decision.”

“But you didn’t come with us. Oh no. Not Avery the free spirit, who makes decisions based on tarot cards,” Greta mocked.

“Will you ever be anything but vile, Greta?” Avery abruptly whirled back to face Riley and began to advance on her. “You and I need to—” She froze, and Riley truly couldn’t blame her. While Avery had been preoccupied arguing with Greta, she hadn’t noticed the two children who’d slunk into the room and were now crouched on either side of Riley—not until they’d let out

a cautioning hiss the moment Avery took a threatening step toward Riley.

“Snake?” asked Lennon, eyeing Savannah with curiosity. He didn’t seem the least bit upset on his mate’s behalf. Riley got the feeling it wasn’t uncommon for Avery to offload her anger and that he’d long ago decided to simply stand back and let her get on with it.

“Viper,” said Riley.

Lennon’s eyes gleamed as they studied Dexter. “He can partially shift?”

“Yes,” Riley replied. The little cheetah was currently tapping his claws on the floor. She cut her gaze back to Avery. “So I really wouldn’t push them right now.” Both kids were superfast. They’d launch themselves at the woman before Riley even had the chance to stop them. Honestly, she wasn’t sure if she’d bother to stop them.

“How about we all just calm down?” proposed Taryn, her voice soothing.

Avery’s eyes flared. “Calm down?”

Trick’s head tilted. “Sounds like Tao’s coming. I think it would be best all around if you weren’t ranting at his female when he walked in.”

Lennon cast his mate a “He’s right” look. Avery straightened her flowery top, chin jutted out. It would seem that she wasn’t done.

Taryn exchanged an exasperated look with Trey. “Avery, I’m asking you as Tao’s Alpha to let this alone. Lecturing him on it won’t get you anywhere.”

“I respect that you’re his Alpha, but this isn’t pack business; this is between mother and son.”

As Tao stalked inside the kitchen, the tension in the air sliced through him. He briefly halted, taking in the situation. Riley looked calm, but the children crouched on either side of her, snarling at his mother, were far from it. It didn’t take a fucking genius to work out that Avery had let loose on Riley, and that seriously pissed him off. Knowing his mother, he could guess what her issue was.

Crossing to Riley, he turned to face his parents. “Mom, Dad.”

Lennon nodded, mouth curved. “Good to see you, Son. Why don’t you introduce me to the raven here?”

Avery frowned at her mate. “You have no problem with him ignoring your advice?” Her mate just shrugged. Avery sighed at Tao. “I would have thought you’d learned from your father’s mistakes.”

Tao exhaled heavily. “Mom—”

“You saw what it was like for me with those women,” Avery clipped. “It didn’t just affect me, it affected you and your father.”

“Mom—”

“She’s pretty, I’ll give you that, but since when did you start thinking with your—?”

“*Mom*. Enough. You’ve made your fucking point.”

“Don’t you fucking swear at me. And I’m not fucking done.” Avery’s nose wrinkled. “God, her scent is all over you.”

“Good. That’s where it should be.”

“You’re a smart wolf, Tao. You know better than to have a fling with a female from your pack.”

“It’s not a fling.”

Avery’s brows snapped together. “Excuse me?”

“It’s not a fling. It started out as one, I won’t lie about that. But it’s far from one now. That’s all I’m prepared to say on the matter. I don’t owe you explanations. I’m a grown fucking man.”

Mouth tight, Avery cut her gaze to Riley. “Don’t you have anything to say?”

Riley pursed her lips. “About what?”

“Mom, don’t,” Tao advised, because Riley would toy with her like a cat with a mouse.

Avery lifted her chin. “I want to hear her speak.”

“Mom, really, don’t.”

“What, she can’t stand up for herself?” Keeping a wary eye on the kids now coiled around Riley’s legs, Avery said to her, “You’re very dominant. I can sense it. And yet you haven’t once spoken in your defense or tried to state your right to be with my son. That tells me you don’t want him as much as he appears to want you.”

Riley twisted her mouth. “Huh.”

“Huh? That’s all you have to say? You don’t deserve him. Only his true mate—the other half of his soul—will ever really deserve him. That’s clearly not you, and, regardless of what Greta seems to think, he can do better than you.”

“Huh.”

“Huh? Are you capable of saying anything else?”

“Um-hm.”

Avery turned to Tao, who had a hand over his face. “What, is she possessed by a mentally defective spirit?”

Riley frowned. “I don’t think it’s mentally defective.”

Avery glared at Riley, mouth tightening. “Really? Well, then, maybe the spirit can talk to me since all you seem to want to say is ‘huh.’”

“Hmm.”

She scowled at Greta. “I suppose it’s *your* influence that’s made her so bitchy.”

Riley’s frown deepened. “You can’t teach someone to be a bitch. They either have it or they don’t.”

Greta nodded. “Very true. Avery doesn’t have it.”

“Now that I’ve met you,” said Riley, “I understand Tao better. Studies show that ninety-two percent of males born to highly strung mothers grow up to become—”

“*Highly strung?*”

“Okay, everyone just stop,” ordered Tao. “Mom, trust me when I say this could go on all night. Let it go. Like I told you before, I’m an adult. I make my own decisions, not the ones you want me to make.”

Avery sniffed. “I don’t interfere in your business, but this is different. It’s bad enough when I thought that it was just a fling. If it’s more and you care for each other, that will make it even harder for both of you to see each other with whoever you mate. A lot of people will be hurt because of this.” She looked at Riley. “Including you. I’ll bet *your* mother would have the same concerns.”

Tao growled and snapped out, “Not another fucking word.”

Avery seemed surprised by the whip in his voice, but she challenged, “Am I wrong?”

“I guess we’ll never know,” said Riley. “She’s dead.”

All the bluster left Avery in a rush. “I’m sorry.”

Tao shifted to stand in front of Riley, eyes hard as he spoke to his mother. “You have two choices. You can drop this and sit down. Or you can go. One or the other. If you do stay, the conversation will not include any of the bullshit you just spouted. You made your point. We heard it. We’re ignoring it. So, what will it be?”

Lennon squeezed his mate’s shoulder. “Let’s just sit down, Avery. I understand why this is a sore spot for you. It’s not bad that you want to save him and his mate from what you endured, but you don’t have a prayer of



coming between Tao and the raven here. I can see it. Surely you can.”

“He’s right on that,” said Trick. He pulled out a chair and gestured for Avery to sit in it.

After a few moments, Avery said quietly, “Thank you, Trick.” She and Lennon both settled at the table. Everyone other than Tao and Riley did the same.

“I’m taking the kids to the playroom,” Riley told Tao.

He cupped her chin, hating that she was hurting at the mention of her mother. “Baby—”

“They’re a little wound up right now and I can’t guarantee that Savannah won’t bite your mom—or that I’d try to stop her.”

Tao didn’t want her to go, but he knew she wouldn’t want an audience for her pain. “All right. I’ll come to you when they’re gone.” He squatted to speak to Savannah and Dexter. “Thank you for protecting Riley. I need you both to look after her for me. Can you do that?” They both nodded solemnly, and he smiled. “Good.” Standing, he gave Riley a quick kiss.

The kids cast Avery a very unfriendly look before each taking one of Riley’s hands and letting her guide them out of the room.

Once they were gone, Tao took the seat opposite Avery. “So, what brings you here?”

“I can’t come visit my own son without needing a reason to justify it?” she clipped.

“Stop being defensive because you feel bad.”

Avery’s shoulders slumped. “I didn’t know her mother was dead. How did it happen?”

“That’s Riley’s story to share.”

“I could tell the comment hit her hard. I feel awful.”

“You should.” Tao had no sympathy for his mother whatsoever. “You couldn’t have known her mom was dead, but you *did* know that you had no right to direct your anger at your own past on Riley.”

Avery sniffed, but she didn’t deny it. “She’s a steady one, isn’t she? I stood there ranting and she just looked at me like I was the most boring thing she’d ever come across in her life.”

Lennon smiled. “Made you feel stupid, did she?”

Tao shrugged. “I tried to warn you.”

“I thought you were protecting her,” said Avery. “It wasn’t funny, Lennon.”

Chuckling, Lennon took her hand. “Maybe not from where you were standing, but I thought it was.”

“The kids are very protective of her,” Avery noted.

Tao nodded. “They’d have gone for your throat if you tried to harm her.”

“The little viper bit me once,” said Greta. “Hurt something awful. But she’s a sweet kid.”

Makenna sighed at the old woman. “Then maybe you could stop whining about it to her.”

Greta waved a hand. “You lot spoil her. She needs someone to exercise that vicious streak on now and then. If she has an enemy to turn it on, she won’t use it on anyone else here.”

Taryn looked at Greta, stunned. “Either you really do mean well in a twisted way, or you’re just somehow able to justify to yourself *anything* that you do.”

Greta smirked. “I guess you’ll never know which it is.”

Avery snorted. “It’s probably a bit of both.” Turning to Tao, she smiled. “Well, tell me about your raven.”

Liking the sound of “your raven,” Tao returned the smile and told his parents all about Riley. By the end of the conversation, his mother had softened to the point that she’d apologized for “being a bitch.” Like him, she found it hard to apologize, so he knew it was sincere.

Two hours later, once his parents left, he sought Riley out. She wasn’t in the playroom. Grace had taken over with the kids so Riley could have a shower—apparently Kye had gotten milkshake in her hair. Tao went to their room and, sure enough, she was in the bathroom. But it seemed that she’d decided to take a bath instead of a shower.

He frowned. “Why is the water purple?”

“I used a blueberry bath bomb.”

“Smells good.” He crouched at the side of the bath. “I like your smell better. My parents left. My mom really does feel bad for jumping the gun and upsetting you.”

“She’s not the first person to have mentioned my mom, taking for granted that she’s alive. I’m not going to break down.” Honestly, it hadn’t been the mention of her mother that hurt; it had been the simple reminder that Riley would never know how her mom would have felt about any of the choices she’d made. She’d never know if her mom would have been proud of

her, if she'd have liked Tao, if she'd have doted on Savannah and Dexter as Riley suspected.

Feeling Tao's hand dip into the water to stroke her leg, she met his eyes and said, "I'm okay, really."

"Give me your mouth." As soon as she sat up, he slid his hand around her nape and took her mouth. Slowly. Lazily. Just enjoying her taste. "Thank you for not clawing my mom's face off her skull." She laughed. "I like making you laugh. Your eyes light up, your little dimples peek out, and that husky sound . . . I swear it makes my balls tingle every time."

She found herself actually blushing. "Well, I like it when you make me laugh."

"I had a dream last night."

"Oh? Do tell."

He chuckled. "Not *that* kind of dream. We were in the little clearing near the river. I was lying on my back on the grass. You were sort of snuggled against my side with your head on my chest and your hair all spread out. That's it. That's really as much as I can remember. But it was just so . . . peaceful. We haven't had much peace lately. I was disappointed when I woke up and realized it was a dream."

"Maybe we can reenact it when all this crap is over."

He smiled. "Yeah. We'll do that." He kissed her again. Harder this time. Deeper. And said what he'd wanted to say all day. "I want to claim you, Riley."

Her heart slammed against her ribs and began racing a mile a minute. "What?"

"You heard me."

She licked her lips. "If this is to do with the stuff your mom said—"

"It's nothing to do with her. This is what I want." Tao hadn't thought she'd be so surprised. "What did you think would happen, Riley? I told you, we have something. It's good and it's real and it makes me fucking happy. I want to keep it."

She dug the heels of her palms into her eyes. "I should have known you'd do this."

"Do what?"

She looked up. "Move so fast."

"This isn't moving fast, it's taking action. I'm not a person who holds back when I want something—you know that. I don't see the point in

committing to someone unless it's on every level."

"Which is great, but don't you want to be one hundred percent sure that I'm someone you could care for enough to imprint with one day?"

He framed her face with his hands. "Riley, I'm sick in love with you. I don't know when it happened or if it was some gradual thing, but it's how I feel." He'd cared about people before, but what he felt for her made those feelings seem like a cheap imitation of what it meant to care for someone. "I love that you're smart and strong and fearless. I love that you're a sly little fighter and you don't sweat the small stuff. I love that you get me, accept me, and let my shit roll right over your head and just get on with your day."

Riley's eyes stung. He'd turned her to mush again. "You think that if we give in to this, a mating bond will snap into place, don't you?"

"I don't know. Now ask me if I care. Ask me."

She swallowed. "Do you care?"

"No. The whole true mate thing is overrated. Your old flock has it right. Fate doesn't always have to include a person's true mate. If you tell me *you'd* prefer to search for your true mate, I'll accept that. Okay, that was a lie, but it sounded good. Seriously, Riley, it's pointless to go through life searching for that 'click' when it's easy enough to walk right past your mate and not even recognize them for who they are—or who they should be—to you."

"It's not as simple as you make it sound." She wasn't concerned that he wasn't her true mate. Plenty of the couples in her flock had imprinted, including her own parents, so it was pretty much the norm to her. What concerned her was that . . . "If we claimed each other and it all messed up, we'd have to see each other every day. I'd have to watch you with another—"

"Never gonna happen, Riley. I don't want anybody else. Only you. I know I could never be happy with anyone else—not now that I've had you." He was utterly sure of that. "I want you to be just as happy. No, that's not right. I want to *make* you happy. Do I, Riley? Tell me."

"Yes. You make me feel happy and . . . safe." She glowered at him. "I don't need someone to make me feel safe."

He smiled. "Of course you don't, baby. But I'm glad that I do."

"What if a mating bond doesn't snap into place? I know you think it will, but what if it doesn't?"

"Hear me when I say this: It doesn't matter to me if you're the other half of my soul or not. You're *in* my soul. I don't know how you got there, I really don't, but you are."

Well, it wasn't just himself he needed to worry about. "And your wolf?"

"My wolf is crazy about you. He wants to mark and claim you just as much as I do." Tao stroked his thumb along her cheekbone. "How about your raven?"

"She already thinks of you as hers," said Riley. "She has for a while."

Relieved, Tao said, "So I want it, my wolf wants it, your raven wants it. Do you?" He held his breath, unsure what he'd do if she said no.

"I wouldn't be an easy mate, Tao. And I kind of come as a package deal."

He smiled. "It's about time you admitted those kids are yours. You think that would put me off? I adore the way you love those kids to distraction. I love how you stand guard over them." He wasn't at all surprised by the fear in her eyes. Her uncles had warned him that she found it hard to believe she could hold someone to her. It was only natural that she'd worry. "Look, this isn't something we have to do right now. I'll give you time to think about it."

She looked at him dubiously. Since when did he possess patience? "You will?"

"I'll give you until tomorrow night to think on it. That's as much time as I can give you without losing my mind. Then we talk it all out and I'll claim you."

"You're so certain I'll agree?"

He smiled. "Ah, baby, do you really think I'll ever settle for anything less than what I want? What I want most is you. And I'll get it."

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Watching the miniature pirate ship seesawing back and forth, Taryn shook her head. “I don’t know how they could go on that thing after an ice cream and not spew up.”

Riley smiled. “It’s moving pretty slow.” Still the young riders screamed, cheered, and laughed. Kye even daringly had his hands up.

Taryn gestured at a small ball pit. “Lilah would have liked that. Shame she wasn’t well.”

Riley had almost canceled the day trip, feeling shitty that Lilah would miss out, but Grace had insisted that it was best if the other kids weren’t around, or Lilah would never take a nap. Shifter children tended to recover quickly and could often sleep off bouts of nausea. Still, Riley had hesitated. The Alphas, however, had practically ordered them to go and had even come along. They’d been at the amusement park for hours and the kids had ridden everything from the carousel to the bumper boats. They should be tired and bloated after all the walking and junk food, but they were still bundles of energy.

“Look!” Dexter, who was currently taking a break to eat, threw one of his fries on the ground and laughed when a bird swooped down and grabbed it.

Riley chuckled. “Don’t forget to feed yourself.” Keeping a close watch on the cub, she spoke to Tao, who had his arm curled possessively around her. “They’re loving it, aren’t they?”

Tao tucked her hair behind her ear. “They are.”

When she’d woken up that morning, she’d expected to be dealing with a very pushy and impatient Tao. Instead he’d been calm and casual. He hadn’t

once bugged her to agree to mate with him. Hadn't once even mentioned their conversation of the previous night. She could almost think he'd forgotten it . . . except he cast her the occasional look of challenge, a dare to reach for what they both knew she wanted. Riley blushed every time.

"It's a nice park," Tao added.

"Aside from the bat cave, sure."

Tao smiled. "Why don't you like bats?"

Was that a trick question? "They carry rabies, and drink blood, and make horrible squeaky sounds, and their wings are weird. I mean, what kind of wings don't have feathers?"

"So you're scared of them."

"No, but I'll concede that I *might* have been scared of them if I was a lesser female. Anyway, bat cave or no bat cave, I'm glad we brought the kids here. They needed this."

"It has to be hard for them to be cooped up all the time," said Taryn, licking her melting ice cream.

"Our territory is vast," began Tao, "but being confined to it can make you feel like you can't breathe."

Trey absently nodded in agreement, busy eating the giant turkey leg he'd bought from one of the food vendors.

As Riley gave her surroundings a quick, surreptitious glance, Tao tugged on her ponytail. "Don't worry." She didn't *look* worried, but he could sense it. Massaging the tension from her neck, he kissed her lightly. "Ethan said all the ravens were on Exodus territory. He'll know the minute one leaves, and he'll contact us immediately."

"I know," said Riley. "But while the whole flock business feels up in the air, I can't relax. I'll try, though." Noticing the pirate ship slowing to a stop, she waited near the exit. The human operating the ride soon opened it, and Savannah and Kye came rushing out, not looking the least bit dizzy.

"Can we go on the teacup ride now?" asked Savannah in the sweetest voice.

"Seriously, it's like they *want* to vomit all over themselves," said Taryn.

Feeling a pat on his leg, Tao looked down to see that Dexter was pointing one of his fries toward the sky. A stray red balloon was drifting upward. "If we can get you a balloon from somewhere, we will," Tao told him. Dexter's answering smile tugged at Tao's heart. The kid was becoming more and more relaxed around him, and Tao had to admit it felt good. He

wanted Savannah and Dexter to see him and Riley as a unit. In order for that to happen, they needed to trust him as they did Riley.

Savannah would be a little harder to win over, Tao knew. But she was warming up to him little by little. The thought made him smile . . . right up until some of Dexter's ketchup dripped off his fry and splattered on Tao's jeans.

"Uh-oh," said the cub. "Sorry."

Tao tried to soak up the sauce with a napkin that Riley handed him. "It's okay, little man." Unfortunately, wiping at the sauce only succeeded in making the stain look worse. With a shrug Tao balled up the napkin and dumped it in a nearby trash can.

"Teacup ride! Teacup ride!" Kye fairly demanded as he madly twirled in a circle.

Trey snorted at his son. "No more sugar for you."

Kicking the brake off the rental stroller, Riley said, "Time to get moving, kids." Savannah and Dexter clambered into the double stroller while Kye climbed up his father's back. Once Trey had more comfortably positioned the pup on his broad shoulders, Tao gently bumped Riley aside and pushed the stroller as they began an easy walk.

The place was pretty busy, full of other families, groups of teenagers, and even couples. As a woman passed with two crying toddlers, Taryn said, "I think the kids have been really well behaved, especially considering it's hot."

Riley nodded. "They've impressed me."

Savannah leaned out of the stroller as she spotted a row of stuffed animals hanging around a game stall. "Ooh, can I have one?"

Tao brought the stroller to a halt and studied the basketball toss game. Nothing he hadn't played before, he thought. "Which one do you want?"

"The snake," replied the viper, eyes wide with excitement, as she leaped out of the stroller.

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" said Tao. He handed five dollars to the human manning the stall, who then gave Tao three balls and told him the rules of the game. As soon as Kye hopped down from Trey's shoulders and climbed onto the shelved barrier, Dexter deserted his fries and scrambled his way up Trey's back—no doubt to annoy Kye for the fun of it.

Keeping tight hold of the stroller, Riley watched as Tao stood with his legs almost shoulder width apart, flexed his knees, and basically shot all three



balls into the hoops like it was his job.

A bell dinged and Savannah released Riley's leg, squealing, "You won it!" As Tao handed her the stuffed snake, she wrapped an arm around his leg and gave him the most angelic smile. "Thank you!"

He tugged on her pigtail. "You're welcome."

"Damn," Taryn cursed quietly as a plop of ice cream landed on her shirt.

"I have some wet wipes in the mesh pocket at the back of the stroller," Riley told her. "Time to get back in the stroller, kids." Kye hopped off the barrier and turned back to Trey while Savannah slid inside the stroller with her snake. Dexter . . . Dexter didn't follow her. He was also no longer hanging off Trey's back.

He was gone.

Riley went cold from head to toe. She spun in a circle. "Where's Dexter?" The words came out quiet, shaky, but every wolf heard them. "Dexter! Dexter!" There was no sign of him fucking anywhere. Panic choked her. She grabbed Tao's arm, as if he could keep back the hysteria. "Where is he?"

Fighting the dread beating at him, Tao inhaled a deep breath, sifting through the scents. Catching Dexter's, Tao turned to their right. "He went this way."

"I've got the stroller, go," said Trey.

Riley, Tao, and Taryn sprinted down the path, following Dexter's scent. Whatever was on their faces made the throngs of people gasp and part.

"There's another scent tight with his," Riley realized. And both scents were leading to the exit. Riley didn't think. She just shifted right on the spot.

The raven shook off Riley's clothes and flapped her wings hard, pushing herself off the ground. She sailed through the air and over the exit of the park. Soaring above the rows of vehicles, the raven searched for the cub. She saw him. He was limp. An adult male was dragging him to a vehicle where another male waited.

The raven swooped down and knotted her talons in the male's hair. Enraged with this male who would try to steal the cub, she clawed at his scalp, drawing blood. With a loud cry of pain, he released the cub and slapped at the raven. She didn't let him go. She dug her talons in harder. Bit his fingers. Shrieked at him.

"Get the fuck off me!"

A burning pain blazed along the raven's leg and pricked her belly. She released the human and recoiled. He turned toward the cub, knife in a hand that dripped with blood. The raven blocked his path, aggressively flapping her wings at him.

"Leave the kid, Mathers! Get back in the car!"

The male glaring at the raven froze, looking from her to the cub.

"The others are fucking coming, *move!*"

The male spat a curse and hurried to the car. The raven wanted to chase him, wanted to pursue the vehicle as it raced away, but her human half urged her to stay with the cub and guard him—something her human half felt she'd failed to do herself.

Tao dropped to his knees beside Dexter and the raven, his lungs burning. He could see the gentle rise and fall of the cub's chest, could smell the drug. "He's unconscious, but he's alive." But that didn't calm Tao whatsoever, because he had the image in his head of the human pulling a knife on Riley. The tang of her blood scented the air. His wolf snarled, offended by the scent and wanting to hunt the human who would dare harm her.

Panicking that she might have been stabbed, Tao reached out to the raven, who stood on the grass. "Come here." She backed up instead. He gritted his teeth. "I need to check you out." She snapped her beak at him. "Riley, shift back for me."

"I'm not sure her raven will pull back anytime soon," said Trey. "Let's just get in the SUV and get out of here. Taryn can fix her when we get back."

Kye touched Tao's shoulder. "I want to go home."

"We're going home," Tao told him, gently scooping up Dexter, knowing the raven would follow. They all made a quick dash to the SUV. Trey slid open the side door and ushered Savannah and Kye inside. The raven followed and perched herself on a headrest.

Instead of hopping inside, Taryn spoke to Tao. "They're both okay, Tao. Please don't lose it on me."

"I won't," Tao ground out, hanging on to his control by the thinnest, most fragile thread.

"The raven's leg is bleeding and there's a little blood on her stomach, but I don't think he stabbed her or there would be a *lot* more blood. Dexter's drugged and unconscious, but he's otherwise fine. Don't get yourself wound

up. The kids need you to be calm while Riley can't be."

After Tao gave a curt nod, Taryn slid into the third row of passenger seats, where Kye was already waiting. Tao then sat in the second row, placing himself beside Savannah.

It was mere moments before Trey was in the driver's seat and they were on the road, heading home. "The scent on Dexter is human," said the Alpha.

"The guy who tried to take him was one of the people who were with Ramón that day outside the diner," Tao told him. Silently he cursed himself. He should have considered that Ramón might still present a threat. He hadn't even thought that Ramón could simply have been biding his time. He'd been so sure that they were fine, and now both Riley and Dexter were hurt.

Savannah clicked off her seat belt and moved to Tao, chewing her thumb and looking from the raven to Dexter. "Will they be all right?"

The tremor in her voice made Tao's chest ache. "They'll be fine. Dexter's just sleeping; he'll wake up soon. The raven's a little hurt, but Taryn can heal her as soon as she shifts back."

"Why won't she shift back now?" asked Savannah.

"She's angry and worried, so she wants to stay close and watch over you."

"But if she does that, Taryn won't be able to heal her because she needs their mouths to touch." Savannah crawled on his lap and stroked Dexter's hair. "You have to shift back," she told the raven, but the avian didn't.

Taryn leaned over the seat and handed Tao a T-shirt. They kept plenty of spare clothes in the pack vehicles. "Use this for her leg," she told him.

Tao shook his head. "There's no way she'll let me wrap that around her." The raven was strung too tight, so all he could do was hope she didn't lose too much blood and pass out.

The drive to Phoenix territory felt like the longest journey of his life. Dread. Rage. Anxiety. All of it clawed at him. The smell of Riley's blood kept his wolf pacing and snarling, but the raven refused to shift back for him.

After whipping the car into a free space in the concealed lot, Trey opened the side door. "Let me take Dexter," he said to Tao. "You try and get the raven inside—" The Alpha jumped back as the raven snapped her beak at him.

Unsurprised, Tao explained. "She's too on edge because she doesn't understand what's wrong with Dexter. I'll keep hold of him; she obviously trusts me with him."

The moment Trey stepped aside, the raven soared out of the SUV. Blood had soaked the headrest, making Tao grind his teeth. If that fucking bird didn't shift back soon so that Taryn could heal her, he'd go nuclear.

Once inside the mountain, they made a mad dash for the living area. Dante jumped to his feet, almost sending his mate crashing from his lap to the floor. "What. The. Fuck?"

"Ramón," Tao bit out.

"Long story short," began Trey, "one of his minions tried to take Dexter—it seems that they sedated him first to get him out of the park without him making a fuss. Riley stopped the human in her raven form, but the bastard pulled out a knife and slashed her leg and maybe even her belly. The wounds don't seem to be bad, but we can't get close enough to tell."

"Take them both to the infirmary," said Grace, all business.

Tao tightened his hold on Dexter. "No need. He's just unconscious, that's all." And, truth be told, he didn't want to release the cub. He was just so small and still . . .

Grace lifted her chin. "I'll be the judge of that, Tao Lukas."

Trey shook his head and gestured at the raven, who was perched on the arm of the sofa. "You're not going to be able to take him until the raven shifts back, Grace. She only trusts Tao with him right now."

Makenna approached the raven cautiously. "Riley, you need to pull her back. I know it must be hard, sweetie. She's no doubt an absolute wreck. But make her understand that Dexter needs to be checked out. That means Tao needs to be able to release him."

The raven puffed up her feathers, not looking pleased with Makenna.

At that moment Trick and Dominic entered the room and came to a stunned halt.

"Well, fuck," said Dominic. "What happened?"

While Trey relayed the story, Tao squatted near the sofa and whispered to the raven, "Come on, shift for me. You're bleeding all over the place, you need help." The avian just blinked at him. "Riley, fight her if you have to, but *shift*. If you're not healed soon, I'm going to lose my mind. Have pity on me."

The raven released a *toc-toc* that sounded like a harsh reprimand, but then feathers shrank and bones popped. He handed Dexter to Grace, distantly noting that the other kids followed her out of the room. Tao grabbed the throw blanket from the back of the sofa and wrapped it around a shivering

Riley. "That's my girl."

"I really fucking hate knives," she ground out.

"So do fucking I," Tao growled. "You're shivering." *Shock*, he thought. "Don't fall into a healing sleep."

"Not going to, the wounds aren't that bad. The knife sliced my leg and nicked my stomach, but that's all. I was moving around too much for the bastard to do any damage. Where's Dexter?"

"Grace took him to the infirmary. It's the best place for him to rest."

Riley stood, meaning to follow him, but Tao caught her around the waist.

"Oh no," said Taryn, "you need healing first." The Alpha tugged Riley behind the sofa and made her lie on the floor.

Tao, knowing the drill, opened the window and then watched as Taryn laid her palm over Riley's forehead. Luminous patches of light glimmered through Riley's skin, showing where the damage had been done. Not that Tao needed to see the lights. "*The wounds aren't that bad*," she'd said. There was a deep slice on her leg and a puncture wound on her stomach.

Taryn bent over, put her mouth to Riley's, and inhaled deeply. Then she lifted her head, turned it toward the window, and exhaled heavily. Black particles whooshed out of her mouth and flew out the window.

While the Alpha female repeated the process, her mate sidled up to Tao and patted him on the back. "You okay?"

"No, I'm not fucking okay," clipped Tao. "If that knife had hit an artery or stabbed—"

"It didn't."

"Nothing can happen to her, Trey."

"Nothing did. Look, she's fine now."

A little shaky on her legs, Taryn got to her feet. "I need water and chocolate."

"Any excuse for chocolate," teased Trey, supporting her weight.

"I'll get it!" Lydia volunteered before disappearing out of the room.

Tao pulled Riley to her feet and held her close. She was still trembling, but it was no longer from shock. It was from rage. He tightened his hold on her, rocking her from side to side.

Dominic folded his arms. "So, wait, someone tried to kidnap Dexter?"

"One minute he was clinging to Trey, the next he was gone," said Tao.

"Clinging to Trey?" Dominic rubbed his jaw. "Do you think that maybe

they thought he was Kye? I mean, they could have been thinking Taryn would be more likely to cooperate if they had her pup.”

Taryn shook her head. “Everyone knows shifters are protective of all members in their pack. Ramón will have known that I wouldn’t let any kid die for me.”

“What I don’t understand is why he won’t just approach another healer,” said Trick.

Trey narrowed his eyes. “Maybe he did. Rhett, check to see if any well-known, powerful healers have died recently.”

Their resident hacker got out his iPhone, presumably to search recent news articles.

Tao gratefully took one of the bottles of water that Lydia brought in from the kitchen and unscrewed the lid. “Here, drink this.”

Riley took a sip, still silently seething, so he gently rubbed her back.

“I’ll kill him,” Tao rumbled.

“Don’t go hunting Ramón,” Trey ordered. “I mean it, Tao. While we’re here, he can’t get to us. As much as I hate not being proactive, I refuse to put Taryn in a situation where she has to choose between her own life and that of someone from our pack.”

“Are we assuming that Ramón backed off so we’d slacken our security?” asked Gabe.

“I think it’s possible that he *did* back off for a while,” said Rhett. “Three healers in California died recently—one was a cougar, one was a bear, and the other was a fox. They all had brain hemorrhages.”

Tao turned to Taryn. “Could that happen to a healer if they burned out their gift?”

The Alpha female shrugged. “Probably, I don’t know. But it seems odd that three would die that way.”

Makenna leaned into Ryan. “The guy is obviously convinced you’re the one who can help his brother.”

“But I can’t,” said Taryn.

“People like him don’t accept ‘I can’t,’” said Ryan. “They’re used to having everything their way and to having people follow their orders without question.”

Taryn threw up her hands. “Surely watching three healers die would make him think that hey, shifters can’t heal diseases after all.”

“Maybe he’s just not prepared to give up on his brother and he’s willing

to exhaust every possible option,” said Rhett. “In a way, you’re like an experimental drug to Ramón, I guess. From his perspective, he has nothing to lose.”

Trey squeezed his mate’s shoulder. “He’ll try again.”

Rubbing at her forehead, Taryn sighed. “Trouble seems to be coming at us from all sides, and it’s pissing me off.”

Taking Riley’s empty bottle from her, Tao said, “Come on, baby, you need to rest.”

Riley frowned. “I need to see Dexter.”

“He’s probably still sleeping,” Tao pointed out.

*“I need to see Dexter.”*

He held up his hands, sensing that this was a fight he wouldn’t win and that she was very close to freaking out. “I’ll take you.” With a hand at her back, he led her to the infirmary. Inside, Dexter was lying on a cot while Grace, Hope, and the other kids looked on. The cub’s eyelids were fluttering and he made a mewling sound.

Grace smiled at Riley. “I was just about to call for you. Your name was the first thing he said when he woke up. He’s not very alert, but he’s all right.”

Riley kissed his head. “Hey, little man.” Her raven wanted to tuck him under her wing. “You okay?”

“Tired,” he whispered, as if he didn’t have the strength to talk. “Balloon.”

Tao blinked, surprised. “You’re right, we forgot the balloon.”

Riley smoothed the hair off his forehead. “We’ll get you one next time.”

The cub let out a little purr and closed his eyes. In mere seconds he was asleep again.

“I don’t think he remembers anything,” said Tao.

Grace fixed the coverlet. “It’s not uncommon with some tranquilizers. I’ll keep watch over him, Riley. You go rest.”

“But—”

“You’re wearing a blanket and you have blood on you,” Grace pointed out. “Go on, he’s fine. Scoot.”

After she’d given the other kids a quick kiss on the cheek, Tao led her out of the infirmary and to their bedroom, locking the door behind them.

Pacing, Tao shoved a hand through his hair and squeezed his eyes shut. “When I saw that bastard dragging Dexter away, I swear my heart stopped.

And then he pulled out the knife . . . I've never been so fucking scared in my life." Opening his eyes, he froze. Her stare was blank, her chin was tucked into her chest, and her stance was completely closed off. "Oh *hell* no." Advancing on her, he growled. "You don't get to beat yourself up about this. It was not your fault."

She swallowed, her rage and shame palpable. "I should have been watching him."

"You were. We all were."

"*They couldn't have taken him if I'd been watching.*" Riley inhaled deeply, knowing she was close to snapping. She didn't want Tao to feel the brutal edge of her anger, not when he hadn't done anything to deserve it. If he was there, she'd take it out on him. "I need to be alone for a little while." It wasn't a request.

He growled again. "Don't you fucking dare. Don't you pull away from me."

"I'm not."

"I can see you doing it. When you're hurting, you shut down. You retreat and pull away." Tao wouldn't allow that. "Talk to me."

She flexed her fingers. "I just want a little time alone. What's so bad about that?"

"Would you leave me alone while I was hurting?"

"This isn't about me! It's about a two-year-old cub who's already been through enough!"

"And you're hurting for him, but you're also blaming yourself. It. Was. Not. Your. Fault. You hear me?"

"I need some air." She whirled toward the balcony, but a hand snapped around her arm and spun her back to face Tao. Anger shot through her veins, making her extremities tingle. "Don't you fucking manhandle me."

"I didn't hurt you, I never would, but I'm not letting you go. I won't allow you to punish yourself, Riley. That's what you'll do if I let go. You'll shift and fly all over the fucking land until you've overexerted yourself."

He was right, she would. "Let go of me."

"Make me," he taunted. "Come on, Riley, rant. Get it out. If you don't, you're going to twist yourself up inside."

"I don't take my shit out on other people. That's your thing."

He smiled at the acerbic remark. "That's it, baby, keep it coming. What else do I do that pisses you off?"



“You want too much!”

“Damn right I do. I won’t be satisfied until I own every part of you, inside and out. Don’t stop there. What else?”

“You try bullying me into doing what you want!”

“I do. I’m doing it right now, as a matter of fact. Let’s hear the rest.”

God, she wanted to smack that smug grin right off his face. Or maybe just claw it off. He thought he was so freaking smart. “There’ve been times when I’ve mistaken lust for love, but this bone-deep loathing I have for you is definitely genuine.”

He just smiled softly. “You don’t hate me, baby. You love me and you know it, but you’re scared.”

She flushed. “Scared, my fat ass!”

“You are. You’re scared that I’ll leave you, scared that you won’t be enough for me in the long run, which is the most ridiculous fear you could have. I would *never* suggest claiming you as mine if I thought different.”

She snickered. “If you think I’ll ever let you claim me, you can kiss my ass!”

“So help me God, Riley, if you talk about your ass one more time I’m going to fuck it.”

She sucked in a sharp breath. “Bite me, Fenris.”

His chuckle held no humor. “Damn, you really shouldn’t have said that.” He shoved her against the wall, slammed his mouth down on hers, and drove his tongue inside. She fought him, clawing at his arms. But the fight quickly left her and she sank into him. The kiss was hot. Hungry. Greedy. He feasted on her, exploring every crevice of her mouth and sucking on her tongue.

Whipping off the blanket, Tao wedged his thigh between hers, pinning her to the wall. “Undo my jeans.” Instead she clawed off his shirt and bit down on his shoulder—a dominating move that told him he wasn’t in control here. Too bad for her that Tao wouldn’t be dominated.

Grabbing a bunch of her hair, he yanked her head aside and growled into her ear. “Fight me if you want, but you’re never going to be dominant in bed.”

She *did* fight him. She struggled. Scratched. Bit. Snarled. Even kicked at him.

Tao shackled her wrists with one hand and pinned them against the wall above her head. He collared her throat with his free hand and squeezed.

“Behave.”

“Fuck you,” she hissed.

“It’s not me who’ll be getting fucked.”

Riley was about to vow to rip out his throat, but then he gripped her hip and ground her clit against his thigh. The friction made her gasp. Again and again he did it, stealing every thought from her mind except how good it felt. Needing more, she took over, grinding herself harder, shuddering at the feel of the denim. He kissed her neck in reward and began to squeeze and plump her breast.

He flicked her nipple with his tongue. “Are you mine, Riley?”

His eyes glittered with warning. He wanted her to stop fighting him, she knew. But Riley wasn’t so easily controlled. “Sort of.” One brow lifted, and his mouth surprisingly curved in amusement.

“Sort of?”

“Sort of.”

“Well, while I’m watching you rub against my thigh and I can feel how wet you are through my jeans, it tells me that your body knows it’s mine.” He bit her lip. “And let’s be honest, baby . . . so do you.”

Tao picked her up and tossed her on the mattress. The sweet scent of her need made his head spin. He had to taste her. He fell forward and clamped his mouth around her pussy. Her hand fisted his hair as he licked and sipped and drank from her, drowning in the taste and scent of her. Wanting more, he drove her hard and fast into an orgasm that made her moan his name and almost yank a chunk of hair right out of his head.

Licking his lips, he shoved off the rest of his clothes. The sight of her there all flushed with her mouth and pussy swollen . . . His cock throbbed like a bitch. “Perfect. And all mine.” Draping himself over her, he growled, “Mouth, Riley.” She gave him what he asked for, moaning softly. “Ready for me to claim you? Because that’s what’s going to happen.”

At those words, Riley stilled. “If you leave a claiming mark on me, you can never take it back. It won’t fade, even if you change your mind about me, it will always be there.”

“Good, that’s exactly where it belongs.” He curled her leg around him. “I know you’re scared. But I promise you, baby, you don’t have to worry about me changing my mind. I don’t have the strength it would take to let you go.” It was the God’s honest truth. “I want to claim you because you’re my choice, because I love you. And you love me, don’t you?” She nodded.

“No matter what, I’m yours. Your turn—say it. Say it, Riley.”

She swallowed. “No matter what, I’m yours.”

“No walls, no doubts.”

“No walls, no doubts.”

He slammed home, jaw grinding as her pussy closed around him like a hot fist. Knowing he was about to claim her, that from this night onward she’d be irrevocably his . . . it sent his hunger raging and made his wolf’s control snap.

Riley clung to Tao, digging her nails into the hard muscle of his back, as he hammered into her, slamming deep. He was always rough, but this was different. Almost animalistic, as if his wolf was feeding his need to claim her. His thrusts were brutal, his pace was ruthless, and his features were set into a savage mask of raw hunger and pure possessiveness. And Riley loved every minute of it.

Feeling his climax creeping up on him, Tao scraped his teeth over her throat, right where he’d leave his mark. She moaned, arching into him, showing him she wanted it. That was all he needed. Tao sank his teeth down hard, licking and sucking to make a permanent, definitive mark that told the world she belonged to him. Her pussy heated, tightened, and rippled. She screamed, fisting his hair and digging her heels into the base of his spine. Then she reared up and bit down on his neck, claiming him right back. Tao jammed his cock deep and erupted, pouring himself inside her.

That was when it happened.

The breath slammed out of Tao as pain crashed into his head and chest. It felt like the world had tilted and faded. His vision dimmed and blurred. The only solid thing was the female beneath him . . . and the mating bond that suddenly bound them, strong and vibrant and complete.

Using what little strength he had left, Tao rolled onto his side, keeping her close. His wolf pushed against his skin, wanting to be near his mate. Tao hadn’t been lying when he said he wasn’t sure if she was his true mate; he also wouldn’t have cared if it had taken imprinting to permanently bind her to him this way. One very big advantage of their being true mates was that they wouldn’t need to wait for the bond to form. He loved feeling it, feeling *her* through their connection. He especially loved that their scents had mixed into one unique scent that would tell the world she was mated and belonged to him.

Shuddering with aftershocks, Riley licked her lips. “That was . . .

intense.” *For lack of a better word*, she thought.

Tao stroked his thumb over the bite on her throat. “The bond is fully formed, that’s why.”

Riley blinked, still a little in shock to discover they were true mates. Her raven was high on happiness. “Doesn’t it usually take certain steps to make it fully form?”

“Sometimes, but not for us. Maybe it’s because we made those vows before we claimed each other—there was nothing to mess with the frequency of the bond.” He’d always worried the bond would make him feel trapped, but he felt far from trapped. He felt whole and calm and happy, a little like in his dream, but better. And to think he might never have known this because he could be a dumb shit. “I can’t believe I tried to have you thrown off our territory.”

Her mouth curled. “I’ll never let you forget it.”

Tao was sure that Trick would never let him live it down either. “Our kids will enjoy the story.”

“Kids?”

“You want kids, right? I know we technically already have two—”

“I want kids.” She’d just been a little surprised by the enthusiasm in his voice.

“Good.” Threading his fingers through her hair, he kissed her. “It would be better if our little girl wasn’t a raven. She’d have all the boys chasing her just to play with her hair.” He found it mesmerizing and suspected other males would too.

Riley just rolled her eyes. “Think the pack will be surprised we’re true mates?”

“I doubt it. I doubt your uncles will be either.” Maybe Ethan and Max had been right and Tao had sensed on some level that Riley was his. He’d feared finding his true mate for so long that he supposed it was natural he’d feel threatened by her. Yet again, he’d been a dumb shit. “I guess we’ll find out in the morning. I want tonight with you.”

“Sounds good to—” She frowned as he flipped her onto her stomach. “Well, that was a little abrupt.” One finger sank inside her, swirled around, and then trailed up to the puckered hole at the back. She froze. “Tao . . .”

“I need this. I can’t explain why I need it so badly, I just do.” As if then he’d have claimed every single part of her. “You’ll love it, baby, I promise you. Trust me.”

Riley kept her forehead pressed to the bed as he slowly and gently prepared her, using first one wet finger, then two. It burned, though not in a bad way. But when she finally felt the head of his cock start pressing inside her a little while later, she wondered if it would be much fun after all. “Tao, I really don’t think this is going to work.”

He rubbed her back. “Your body’s made to take mine anywhere and everywhere, Riley. You know that. Just relax.”

*Relax?* She snorted. “I’d like to see *you* relax while you can feel a freaking barrel pushing into your rectum.”

He chuckled. “Push out as I push in; that’ll make it easier. Good girl.”

As his cock slowly sank into her ass, she held her breath. The pressure of his size and thickness burned, but he rubbed against all kinds of nerves that made her clit tingle.

Buried to the hilt, he slapped her ass. “Breathe.” When that ass clamped around his cock, he realized that hadn’t been the best idea. “Sorry, baby, but I can’t wait.” He pumped his cock in and out of her, claiming it just as he’d claimed her mouth and pussy. He could feel her pleasure through the mating bond—a pleasure that amplified his own and made his cock swell, ready to burst.

As she began to throw her hips back at him, Tao knew he wouldn’t last much longer. He reached around and rubbed her clit with his thumb and finger the way she liked it. Moments later her head fell back and her mouth opened in a silent scream. Tao slammed into her once, twice, and then exploded again.

She sank into the mattress. “Happy now?”

“Fucking ecstatic,” Tao slurred. “And drained. Shower, then sleep, then more fucking.”

“I can work with that.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



**I**t was rare for Tao to wake before Riley did, and waking to the feel of her breast filling his hand was guaranteed to make him smile. That smile widened as he felt the mating bond pulsing with life between them.

She belonged to him now. Utterly and completely. And he knew he'd kill, lie, steal—whatever it took—to keep it that way.

Feeling the wonder and vibrancy of the mating bond, Tao could appreciate just how difficult it could be for a shifter to survive the loss of it. It wasn't as if Riley were linked to him; it was like she was part of him, something he could feel inside him and around him. Something that warmed, anchored, and strengthened him. If anything took Riley from him, it would destroy him on every level.

He kissed her shoulder, but she didn't stir. He wasn't surprised. He'd woken her a few times through the night and he'd taken her hard each and every time. She hadn't once turned away from him or demanded he let her sleep, which was a true wonder to him. But then, Riley was a true wonder to him.

Ordinarily he wouldn't disturb her, but a quick glance at the clock showed they had about an hour before breakfast was over. He gently squeezed her breast and spoke into her ear. "Time to wake up." She mumbled something into the pillow. "You'll miss breakfast if you don't."

"I can feel your hunger through the bond," she griped. "That could get annoying." Riley didn't want to be craving food when it was actually *he* who was hungry. She hadn't imagined that the bond would be so . . . alive with emotion. It was a little overwhelming. "Do you think we'll always sense each other's feelings so strongly?"

“My mom and dad’s bond snapped fully into place, like ours did,” said Tao. “I remember they once said that because they hadn’t eased into it, every single feeling and emotion seemed magnified at first until they got used to the bond.”

Riley frowned as something occurred to her. “That could be bad for you. If I’m lying in bed wide awake, there’s a chance that I’ll wake *you* up.”

He shrugged. “I usually wake up when you do anyway. I’m a light sleeper, and you fidget when you can’t sleep.”

“That should be a complaint.” But he didn’t sound like he was complaining at all.

“Why would I complain? It’s not your fault. You didn’t ask to suffer from insomnia.”

For a guy with very little tolerance, he could be very understanding at times, she thought. Those times were few and far between, but still. Tugging on the hand gripping her breast, she said, “Let me go and I’ll get ready.”

Instead Tao hiked up her leg and drove inside her. “It’s not often I get to indulge in morning sex with you.” He fucked her hard and fast, drowning in the feelings and sensations that vibrated up and down the bond. Afterward he kissed a bite he’d left on the back of her shoulder. “Shower, then breakfast.”

“You go on ahead, I’ll follow you.” In about an hour or so.

“Come on, I’m hungry, you’re hungry.” And he wanted to share the news with the pack that he and Riley were mated.

She gave a long-suffering sigh. “Fine.”

After a quick shower, they both began pulling on some clothes. As Tao grabbed his socks, he turned away from the dresser with a rough sigh. “Okay, what did you do with it?”

Looking up from slipping on her shoes, Riley blinked. “With what?”

“Don’t. Just tell me where it is.”

“You really need to be more specific.”

He ground his teeth. “My onyx ring. You took it. I want it back.”

She cocked her head. “I’ve never seen you wear rings.”

“I don’t wear it, but I kept it because my mom gave it to me for my eighteenth birthday.” It had sentimental value to his wolf too, but the animal wasn’t so irritated, because he was actually amused by Riley’s antics nowadays.

“Aw, that was sweet of her.”

“So where is it?”

“Where is it usually?”

Pulling on his socks, he said, “I put it in the top drawer of the dresser.”

“Then it should still be there. Don’t blame me if you’ve misplaced your ring.”

He closed his eyes. “Too early for this shit, Porter. Too early. Just hand it over.”

“I wish I could help, I really do.”

Tao cursed, shoving his feet in his shoes. “You’re a pain in my ass.”

“Well, you were a pain in mine last night, so I guess that makes us even.”

Remembering exactly how that had felt, he smiled. “I was just claiming what already belongs to me. You liked it.”

He turned at the knock on the door. He was used to the kids turning up of a morning, but the knock was too heavy for it to be from one of them. Opening the door, he found his Alphas waiting. His wolf snapped to alertness. “Something wrong?”

“No, nothing’s wrong,” said Trey. “Can we talk inside?”

Tao stepped back to let them enter and then moved to Riley’s side, linking their fingers.

“Morning,” said Taryn. Her nostrils flared and she smiled, obviously able to tell that their scents had mixed. “Well, hell, can’t say I’m surprised. Congratulations!”

“Thanks,” said Riley.

“True mates?” asked Taryn.

“True mates,” Riley confirmed.

Taryn spun to face her mate. “You owe me fifty dollars, Flintstone.”

Pulling out his wallet with a heavy exhalation, Trey handed over the money and explained to Tao and Riley, “I said it would probably take imprinting for you two to mate. Taryn insisted you were true mates.”

“You shouldn’t bet against me.” Taryn flicked through the dollar bills, counting them. “I know my pack mates inside out. And now that you’ve mated Tao, you’re officially one of us, Riley.”

Tao arched a brow. “You know them inside out? Then please tell me where she hides the stuff she steals—”

“Borrows,” corrected Riley.

“—because I’d like my ring back.”

Taryn tapped her cheek. “Um, yeah, I don’t know.” She patted his arm.



“Riley will give it back. Eventually.” Turning to Riley, she told her, “We were hoping to catch you before breakfast so we could have a little chat.”

Riley stilled as she took in their serious expressions. “Chat?”

“It’s not bad news,” Taryn quickly added, hands held up in assurance.

Trey planted his feet. “We want to offer you the position of Guardian.”

Riley double-blinked. “I’m sorry, what?”

“You pretty much act as Guardian anyway,” said Trey. “This would just make it official.”

A Guardian watched over and supervised the children within the pack throughout the day. The Alphas would offer her such a position only if they trusted not only her ability to protect the kids but that she would do them no harm. Although Tao had told her that Taryn would probably offer her the position, Riley hadn’t been convinced, since she hadn’t expected that level of trust from them. It came as a definite shock now, since . . . “Dexter almost got kidnapped because of me.”

Taryn snorted. “He almost got kidnapped because Ramón is fucked in the head. You noticed he was gone, you tracked him, you saved him. If you hadn’t gotten to him as quickly as you did—” Taryn cut herself off and shook her head. “Let’s not think about that. You’re not at fault for what happened. You’re the hero of the hour and we want you as Guardian.”

As a thought occurred to Riley, she asked, “Would it mean that Tao lost his bodyguard position?”

“No,” replied Taryn. “Which means you’d be able to spend a fair bit of time together if you’re Guardian.”

Tao smiled, liking that idea a hell of a lot. “The position will suit you,” he told Riley, but she bit her lip, hesitating.

Trey’s brows creased. “Can I ask why you were so reluctant to join our pack?”

Riley scratched her nape. “It would have meant officially leaving the flock—a move that felt a lot like abandoning my uncles.” But if there was one thing her recent stay there had taught her, it was that there was no place for her there, Riley thought. Moreover, it didn’t feel like home to her anymore. Phoenix Pack territory felt like home.

Taryn nodded in understanding. “Well, now that you’re mated to Tao, you’re *officially* a pack member—not because you’re abandoning anyone, but because you’ve mated into the pack.” Taryn rubbed her hands. “So, do you want the position? It wouldn’t mean you’d be their main caretaker—everyone

likes having some time with them, and, hello, you have a life to lead. It would just mean you're their main supervisor. It makes perfect sense for it to be you. For one thing, Savannah and Dexter only recognize you as an authority figure. They're well behaved for us, but only because they don't want to disappoint you. Secondly, I don't think you'll want anyone else watching over them anyway."

Well, that was certainly true. Riley liked taking care of them, liked knowing where they were. Her raven was eager to pick up the mantle of Guardian, proud and honored. "I thank you for your offer . . . and I accept."

Taryn beamed. "Awesome!"

Trey nodded his approval. "We'll see you both at breakfast. Don't worry, we won't tell the others that you're mated. You can tell them yourselves."

Once the Alphas left, Tao tugged Riley close, aligning her body to his. "Accepting the position of Guardian was the right thing to do." The pack hadn't needed one before Riley came, because they'd had only Kye and Lilah. Tao suspected that Grace would have been made Guardian if Riley hadn't joined the pack. As much as Grace was amazing with the kids, she didn't fit the position in the same way that Riley did. "What would make the morning even better would be if you handed over my damn ring."

"You're barking at the wrong raven, Fenris."

Tao growled. "It's a good fucking thing you're worth this trouble, Porter. I need coffee and food." In one swift move, he slung her over his shoulder, ignoring her horrified squeaks, and strode out of the room. He didn't put her down until just before they reached the kitchen. Cutting off the insults she would have slung at him, he kissed the breath out of her. "You know better than to call me Fenris."

"But it's fun."

He sighed. "Whatever." Linking their fingers, Tao drew her into the kitchen. The pack looked up and either nodded or gave them an absent smile. It wasn't until they'd neared the table that heads snapped up. Eyes wide, the pack were instantly on their feet, congratulating them. Well, apart from Greta and Dominic.

Slumped in his chair, Dominic looked at them with a baffled expression. "You've mated? Really? Weird. I always figured you were a ghost," he told Riley. A grin spread across his face. "You haunt my dreams every night."

Tao growled, clenching his fists against the urge to slap the enforcer.

“Dominic, why do you hate yourself?”

“You really have to be suicidal to persist with this, Dom,” said Marcus. The others nodded or murmured their agreement.

“Ah, come on!” said Dominic. “Can you really blame me for finding her hot? Sometimes I wish I was cross-eyed so I could see her twice.”

Out of patience, Tao reached over and slapped the enforcer over the back of the head. Dominic just laughed, thoroughly pleased with himself.

Lydia sighed at Dominic. “Honey, you’ve had so many people whack that crazy head of yours that I’m surprised you don’t have special needs.”

Dominic paused in chewing his sandwich. “Actually, so am I.”

Rolling her eyes at his antics, Riley turned to Savannah and Dexter. Neither had offered any congratulations. They were both still in their seats, eyeing her and Tao warily.

“You’re mates now?” asked Savannah.

Tao crouched down. “Riley’s still yours,” he told both of them. “We just share her now. It means there’s always someone to take care of her. Right?”

Savannah thought about it for a moment and then grinned. “We’re like Team Riley.”

Tao nodded. “Exactly.” He ruffled Dexter’s mop of curls. The cub offered him an acorn from his pocket, which Tao decided to interpret as a sign of acceptance, so he gratefully took it.

Greta gave Riley one of those condescending head-to-toe looks. “Fate let you down big-time, my boy,” she told Tao.

“Here we go,” mumbled Taryn.

Riley glanced at Makenna and crossed her eyes. The old woman might have told Avery that Tao could do worse, but it was unlikely that Greta would ever actually like Riley. Even if she did, she’d still always be vile toward Riley just because the crone was crazy.

“She’s a raven, for God’s sake,” Greta complained.

Riley snorted. “At least I’m not the mascot for California’s Psychotic Bitch Department.” Ignoring the woman’s horrified gasp, Riley turned to Tao. “I’m going to call my uncles.”

“Okay.” Tao kissed her and then gave her ass a gentle pat. “Don’t be long.” Pulling out the chair next to Trick, he sat down.

“I told you,” teased Trick with a smirk.

Tao shot him a look of disgust. “What are you, twelve?”

Unoffended, Trick bit into his toast. “It’s still weird that your wolf didn’t like her at first.”

“Maybe our animals don’t always know when they’ve met their true mate.” Or maybe Tao’s wolf had been as wary of mating as he was, though Tao doubted it. Their animals were more elemental in their way of thinking. They didn’t really have “issues.” Tao couldn’t know for sure. What he did know was that the wolf’s only current problem was that his mate, standing in the corner of the kitchen, was too far away. Clingy bastard.

The phone only rang twice before Ethan picked up. “Morning, sweetheart,” he greeted her.

“Hey,” said Riley. “Call Max over and then put me on speakerphone so I can talk to both of you.”

Ethan whistled. “Riley wants to talk to us!”

“Okay, I’m here,” Max announced a few moments later.

Riley smiled and took a deep breath. “I have some news.”

“You and Tao are mates,” said Ethan. “Ow! What was that for?”

“You could have let her tell us,” Max reprimanded him.

“Why, when we already knew?” Ethan seemed genuinely confused.

“So she could have that moment of giving us the good news.”

Riley sighed. “Since neither of you are complaining about the mating, I’m guessing you’re both good with this.”

“We like Tao,” said Max.

“We like him for you,” Ethan added. “Promise you won’t have the mating ceremony without us.”

“I have no intention of throwing the ceremony until all this crap is over,” she assured them. She thought about telling them what had happened at the amusement park, but she saw no need to worry them further. It would only hurt them that they couldn’t be here to protect her because they needed to keep watch on the other ravens. “All the flock still accounted for?”

“Yes,” said Ethan. “We’re in constant contact with Hugh and the enforcers—everyone has been vigilant, but there have been no problems so far.”

“I’m guessing more and more people are thinking Dana was right and that I was behind the shootings, then.” It was more of a question than a statement.

“I’d say our trigger-happy friend has gone quiet to cast suspicion on you

and make us stop watching everyone so closely.” Ethan was no doubt right about it.

“You don’t deny that people suspect me,” she began, “so I’m guessing I’m right.”

“It’s mostly just Dana, Shirley, and Cynthia.” Max’s derision was clear in his voice. “Don’t let it get you down, sweetheart. They’re not worth it.”

“Don’t waste your thoughts on them. You’ve just mated, enjoy it,” Ethan urged her.

She smiled. “Will do. Love you both.”

“You too, sweetheart,” said Ethan.

“Love you, Ri.” Max made a kissing noise just before the line went dead.

Returning her cell to her pocket, she crossed to the table and took the seat beside Tao. He’d already poured her coffee and filled her plate with pancakes drizzled in syrup. “Aw, thank you.” She didn’t miss Gabe mouthing, “Whipped” at Tao, but her mate just snickered at him.

“How are your uncles doing?” Tao asked.

“They sound good for two people who no longer trust most of their flock mates.”

“You told them we mated?”

She forked up a small chunk of pancake. “Yep.”

“They’re happy for you?”

She smiled at the “They’d better be happy for you” note to Tao’s voice. “For *us*, yes.”

“Good.”

“I think they might be a little disappointed that I’m no longer part of the flock, but they did their best to hide it from me.” She simply knew them too well.

“Did you tell them about Ramón?”

“No. It would have just frustrated them that they couldn’t be here to help, not to mention make them worry about me even more than they already do.” She sipped her coffee. “You planning to call your parents and tell them we’re mated?”

“Yes. After that . . . how about we let our animals out to play?” His wolf was craving it. “We’ll stay close to the mountain.”

Her raven perked up at that idea. “All right.”

Once they were finished with breakfast, Tao went off to call his parents

while Riley settled the kids in the playroom with Grace and Rhett. To Riley's utter surprise, both Avery and Lennon insisted on speaking with Riley to offer congratulations and promised they would visit soon. Well, it was good to know she wouldn't forever be at war with her mother-in-law.

With all that done, she and Tao made their way out of the caves. At the clearing near the lake, he began removing his clothes. Riley was so distracted by the flow of muscle rippling fluidly beneath his skin that she just stood there, practically drooling.

Naked, he grinned at the hunger in her eyes. "We'll get to that later. My wolf wants time with you first." He pulled back and gave his wolf the reins.

Riley squatted to pet the wolf. She loved his thick, midnight-black fur. Loved sifting her fingers through it and hearing him rumble contentedly.

She laughed as he did a complete circle around her body, rubbing himself against her. "Someone's possessive," she teased. He playfully bared his teeth, so she did the same. Then Riley stripped and gave her raven freedom.

The wolf padded through the woods, hopping over logs and thick tree roots. The scents of pine needles, moss, and sun-warmed earth spoke to him. But it was the scent of his mate—their combined scent—that stood out above all else for him.

Her shadow moved over his as she soared above. She was agile. Graceful. Called to him to play. With a playful growl, he gave chase. She swooped low. The wolf bounced up to swat her. He missed. She was fast, sneaky.

The raven flew in circles around the wolf, taunting him. Then they raced through the woods alongside each other. Tired, the raven perched herself on his back as he padded back to the clearing. On their way, they passed two enforcers.

Dominic blinked at the sight of them. "Now that's something you don't see every day."

Trick raised a brow. "Or ever."

Deep inside the raven, Riley smiled.

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



The next day Trey and Taryn called a strategy meeting in Trey's office. The Betas, the enforcers, Tao, Riley, and Makenna were all invited. In addition, Nick and Shaya, the Mercury Pack Alphas, were included in the meeting via teleconference.

Leaning against his office desk, Trey ran his gaze along everyone as he said, "Taryn and I have been talking about the best way to deal with Ramón. We can all agree that he's not going to give up, and ignoring what he's doing will give him the impression that we're scared. We need to retaliate, but we need to do it in a way that's smart. He'll be expecting an attack, so he'll be prepared for it. Besides, his residence is locked up tight and well guarded, which means that trying to infiltrate it would be difficult. And I don't know about the rest of you, but, honestly, I'm sick and tired of war."

Nick spoke. "I know what you mean, I feel the same way. But it just seems like everyone keeps bringing the fight to us." His redheaded mate, Shaya, nodded, her elfin face grim.

Marcus looked from Trey to Taryn. "What kind of retaliation did you have in mind?"

Taryn, who was sitting on the desk and swinging her legs, replied, "We thought about pretending to back down so we could get close enough to get a grip on him, but he won't buy it. Not after how long and hard we've fought him, and *especially* not while he knows we'll be righteously pissed at him for trying to snatch Dexter."

Shaya leaned forward, brow creased in concern, as she looked at Riley. "How is the little cub?"

"He doesn't seem to remember any of it, and we think the drug they

gave him is to blame for that. He wants to go back to the park so he can get a red balloon.” Riley had wondered if the memories would come back to him, but they hadn’t. It was a blessing, really, because what two-year-old wouldn’t be frightened after almost being snatched? Savannah had been watching him like a hawk, as if afraid he’d disappear if she didn’t. It broke Riley’s heart a little.

Tao, doodling lazy circles on her nape with his thumb, spoke. “We need to scare the shit out of Ramón like he scared the shit out of us when his men tried to kidnap Dexter and gut Riley’s raven open.”

“Spooking Ramón is exactly what we need to do,” said Trey. “But it’s not easy to scare someone like him.”

Nick tilted his head. “Maybe we should have someone sneak into his home and leave a message, show just how easily we could get to him, despite all his security.”

*Not a bad idea*, thought Riley. “I could do it.”

Linking his fingers with hers, Tao shook his head. “He’ll know to look out for a raven. He’ll tell his men to shoot any birds on sight.”

“Ryan can get in and out of anywhere without being seen,” said Taryn.

“I wasn’t thinking about Ryan,” said Nick.

Shaya’s gaze sharpened on her mate. “You’re thinking about Harley’s cousins.”

Nick lifted his shoulders. “Isn’t sneaking into their enemies’ homes and killing them in their sleep what they do?”

“Yeah, because margays don’t believe in war,” said Shaya. “But you’re talking about leaving Ramón a message. Seriously, Nick, there’s no guarantee her cousins won’t just kill the bastard. They’ll despise him for trying to kidnap Dexter.”

Makenna raised her hands. “I got no problem with them killing Ramón. Just putting that out there.” Ryan grunted.

“I doubt killing him will help,” said Nick. “There is always someone who’ll step up to the plate in a lifestyle like that. Someone else will take over and they’ll likely seek to avenge him. Your best bet of completely avoiding any war would be to scare him into backing off.”

Taryn raised a brow. “And if he doesn’t?”

“Then we fight him,” replied Nick.

Lips pursed, Dante spoke. “I like this idea. If he realizes a shifter got inside his home, it’ll shock the shit out of him. An act like that says, ‘We can



kill you anytime we want, you arrogant bastard; you're nothing to us.' It'll remind him who he's fucking with. Not humans, but shifters—the ultimate predators.”

Taryn's mouth curved. It was clear that she was warming to the idea. “Shaya, do you think Harley's cousins will agree to do it?”

The redhead grinned. “Oh yeah. They'll enjoy the challenge.”

“Talk to them,” Trey said to the Mercury Alphas. “If they're happy to do it, we'd appreciate it.”

Nick inclined his head. “We'll have Harley call them and we'll get back to you soon with an answer.”

As Trey switched off the monitor, Riley turned to Tao and said, “Involving Harley's cousins might actually work.” She sincerely liked Harley, who was a margay wild cat. They'd sort of connected . . . maybe because they both knew what it was like to live in a pack of mostly wolves. Riley had briefly met her cousins at Harley and Jesse's mating ceremony. They were all very different and quirky in their own individual ways. They were also incredibly lethal—though at first glance they didn't look it. None of them appeared to be 100 percent sane either.

“Let's hope so,” said Tao, “because we need—” He frowned at the sound of her phone chiming. “Is it Ethan?”

Looking at the screen, Riley shook her head. “No, it's Lucy.” They'd spoken a few times since Riley left Sedona. “I'll just be a minute.” She walked out of the office and swiped her thumb across the screen. “Hey, Luce.”

“I just spoke to Ethan and Max,” said Lucy. “I can't believe you didn't call me to say that you're mated.”

Riley winced. “Sorry, there's just a lot going on.”

“Hmm, well, I'll forgive you because I love you,” Lucy said, a smile in her voice. “I wanted to say congratulations. I have to say, it comes as a shock that Tao was your true mate. You're just both very different, but I guess that's often how it works with predestinated mates. I really am happy for you.”

“Thanks, Luce.” Riley leaned back against the sandstone wall. “Are you fully healed now?”

“Yes, thanks to Max. He truly is a gem.”

Riley smiled. “Yep, he is.”

“Both your uncles are awesome. They've been like watchdogs since you

left.”

“Aside from your wound, how’ve you been?”

“Good. Just . . . nervous, you know?” Her voice shook a little. “It’s still hard to wrap my head around the fact that someone here actually shot me. I *hate* not knowing who it was, hate that I could be smiling at the person who did it. And I’m utterly pissed that some of the flock are trying to pin the blame on you.”

“Join the club.”

“I don’t think they really believe what they’re saying. I think they just want someone to point the finger at so they can convince themselves that the threat has gone. But that doesn’t make it okay.”

No, it damn well didn’t. “How’s Sawyer?”

“He’s fully healed too. He doesn’t believe it was you either, by the way.”

“I don’t suppose you have any theories on who it actually is?”

Lucy paused. “If I’m honest, I would have suspected Cynthia if I hadn’t been shot. I mean, she could have deliberately missed you because all she really wanted was to piss you off, right?”

Riley blinked. She hadn’t actually considered that. “Right,” she agreed.

“I don’t think Cynthia would ever try to kill me. Not even for what I did,” she added in a low voice.

Riley frowned, echoing, “What you did?”

Another pause. “Rhonda Lincoln . . . she started a petition.” Rhonda was one of the ravens who had been killed at Alec’s party.

“What sort of petition?”

“She wanted Cynthia gone from the flock,” Lucy explained. “Rhonda was tired of Cynthia taunting her about how she’d had her mate, Richie. You know Cynthia took particular joy in tormenting any females who’d mated one of the guys she’d slept with.”

Yeah, Cynthia had *loved* that she could hurt the others that way. She hadn’t cared that it left her with only a few friends or that it lost her the respect of many. A dominant female shifter had her pride, but Cynthia’s pride either wasn’t easy to chip at or was somehow completely nonexistent.

“She somehow got Rhonda’s number and repeatedly sent her cruel text messages with all kinds of explicit details about her time with Richie.”

“Yeah, I heard about that. Rhonda hit breaking point and told your parents.”

“Yes,” said Lucy. “They told her they’d make Cynthia stop, but they didn’t. Or maybe they tried and Cynthia just didn’t listen. Rhonda went to them two more times for help, but nothing changed. That was when she started the petition. The other females were happy enough to sign it. Most of the guys also signed it because they didn’t want their future mates to have to deal with Cynthia when they claimed and brought them to the flock. Even Sawyer signed it, though I think that was more because Richie was his friend than anything else, since Sawyer doesn’t intend to take a mate.”

“I didn’t even hear about the petition.” Given that Riley despised Cynthia, she figured that the other females would have considered her the best person to go to for support.

“Rhonda knew you were loyal to me; she was worried that you’d tell me because, as Cynthia’s sister, you felt I had a right to know what was happening. Of course, I’d have then been pissed as hell and told my parents. So Rhonda came to me first and tried to talk me into signing it . . . She made some really good points—things I wouldn’t have thought of myself.”

In other words, Rhonda had done her best to turn Lucy against her own sister. It sounded as if it had worked. “What points?”

“Imagine being me, Riley. Imagine that your sister has fucked every guy in the flock. It would feel a little bit weird being with any of them, wouldn’t it? Imagine that you push past that awkwardness and take a chance, but then those guys compare your performance to hers. Imagine how smug your sister would be, knowing you had her castoffs. That was my reality. You *know* how bad it was.”

Riley bit her bottom lip, hating the pain in Lucy’s voice. Several guys had teased Lucy that her sister was a better lay. It had been cruel, and Cynthia had been delighted about it.

“Rhonda was right: if I mated any of the guys in the flock, Cynthia would be sure to constantly remind me that she’d had him first. And he would compare us, wouldn’t he? And she’d flirt with him and try to seduce him, and just maybe he *would* cheat if she really was the amazing lay all the guys said she was. Even if my mate came from another flock and *wasn’t* someone Cynthia had slept with, she still would have been all over him.”

Riley truly couldn’t deny any of that. “You signed it, then.”

Lucy hesitated. “Yes. I was going to tell you about the petition and ask you to sign it too, even though I doubted that you would—you’re a very forward person; you don’t go behind people’s backs. But then the shootings

happened and the petition just went right out of my head. It was a moot subject at that point anyway. Hell, I'd forgotten all about it until about six months after the shootings, when Cynthia came to me. She'd found out—I'm guessing it was Duncan who told her. Hypocritical bastard. He signed it too."

"Duncan? I can't imagine that he'd *ever* want her to leave."

"Now you're missing *his* reality. The female he wants makes a point of fucking every male in his flock. She tells him again and again that she's done with that now, that she only wants him. But she never keeps to her word, and she's too obsessed about getting the one male into bed who won't touch her. Duncan cares for Cynthia, but I think he'd just had enough."

"I guess I can understand that." It would have gutted Riley to have Tao do that to her.

"Cynthia thought you were behind the petition, that you gave Rhonda the idea. I told her that you weren't, but she wouldn't believe me. When you were shot at, I *did* wonder if maybe she was just trying to get back at you or something. I even said as much to my dad, but he was reluctant to accuse her without proof."

As much as Sage's refusal to act on Lucy's concerns pissed Riley off, she had to admit that he truly couldn't have accused anyone without evidence. After all, several people had blamed Riley for what was happening, but he'd never once accused her of anything. "But you don't think it's Cynthia anymore?"

"No. She wouldn't shoot me. Not even to divert the blame to someone else." Lucy paused. "Right?"

"I would have said Wade would never walk into a house and shoot nine people. I think anyone's capable of anything."

After ending the call, Riley stood there for long moments, wondering what to make of what she now knew. Eventually Tao came looking for her. His face darkened at her expression.

"What the hell did she say to upset you?" he demanded, eyes flashing wolf.

"Nothing." Riley pushed off the wall. "I'm not upset, I'm just surprised and confused." She told him all about the petition.

Tao edged closer, mind working overtime. "You think that maybe Cynthia found out *before* the shootings? That maybe she had Wade do her dirty work for her?"

"No. Having a bunch of people killed for signing a petition is a little

extreme.”

“Depends how far that particular person would go to have the thing they want most.” Tao would have done whatever it took to get Riley, just as he’d do whatever it took to keep her. “From everything you’ve told me, all Cynthia ever wanted was to be Beta.”

“Yeah, it was all she ever talked about. While the other girls were imagining what their mates would be like, she was imagining what it would be like to be Beta.” Still, Riley wasn’t convinced Cynthia would go that far.

“Was she ever an enforcer?”

“No. She never even applied to be one.”

“So unless she mated the flock’s Beta, she didn’t have a prayer of getting that position.” Tao looped an arm around Riley and drew her close. “Were any of the females who died in the shooting enforcers?”

“Some were training to be enforcers.”

“So they’d have been much better suited to the position of Beta. Cynthia would have known that. And since Sawyer had never succumbed to her charms, he would have chosen them over her . . . unless she was the only highly dominant female left. So just maybe she made sure she was the only one.”

“It still seems a little extreme to me. But not impossible.” Riley slid her hands up his chest. “I do think it is indeed possible that she’s the one who shot at me, Lucy, and Sawyer. She could be punishing us all for what part we played in the petition. I didn’t sign it, but she thinks I’m behind it.”

“If Duncan signed it, he’ll probably be next.”

“I don’t know if she’d ever hurt him. She cares for him in her way.”

“I’m sure she cares for Lucy in her way too.” But the female had still ended up with a bullet close to her heart. He smoothed his hand up Riley’s back. “You don’t want it to be Cynthia, do you? Why?”

“Nine people died that night, Tao. We lost Wade too. So many deaths, so much pain and misery . . . I’d just hate to think that all this was about nothing more than power.” Surely Cynthia, bitch though she might be, wasn’t really *that* cold. “What’s so great about the position of Beta anyway?”

“It’s probably not about being Beta. It’s probably about having control over everyone. Sleeping with all the males was a form of domination to her, remember. Being Beta female would have given her domination over the females.”

Riley tilted her head, conceding his point.

Tao nipped Riley's lower lip and then laved it with his tongue to soothe the sting. "Someone should tell her that being Beta isn't as great as she imagines."

"Haven't you ever wanted to be Beta?"

"No. You can lose yourself in a position like that until it becomes your life. It had been that way for Dante until Jaime showed up and changed everything for him."

"You already live for your pack," Riley pointed out.

Tao pulled her closer, drew her scent into his lungs. "I did. Now I live for you, for us."

Smiling, Riley slid her hands around his neck and lightly fisted a hand in the back of his hair. "You know, you can say the sweetest stuff—and yeah, I know you're not being complimentary, you're just being direct, but it's still sweet. Then other times you come out with utter tripe and make me wish I had more middle fingers."

Tao shrugged, mouth curving. "I could tell you that will change, but it won't." He rubbed his nose against hers. "One thing I've never been is tactful. But you love me anyway."

"Yeah, I do."

"So all is good."

"I guess it is."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN



While her mate lay next to her on his side, Riley was flat on her back, staring up at the ceiling. It was two thirty in the morning, and her brain was working a mile a minute. A kaleidoscope of images and thoughts seemed to be swirling around her mind.

The shootings, past and present.

Dexter almost being kidnapped.

Ethan lying in his bed, injured and sleeping.

Lucy taking a bullet right in front of her eyes.

So much had happened, and Riley was able to do so very little about it. She felt powerless. Useless, even. Those feelings rubbed her raw and pricked at her raven's pride.

It had been three days since the pack had the video conference with the Mercury Alphas. Harley's margay cousins had happily taken on the job of spooking Ramón. They also hadn't wasted any time in acting. Just yesterday they had broken into his home and wrecked his bedroom with claws and teeth—creating a mess that could only have been made by animals or shifters.

Ramón wouldn't know margays had caused the damage, but he would know the Phoenix wolves had retaliated. He hadn't called to complain or threaten the pack, but it was too early to tell if their plan would pay off or if Ramón would seek—

Tao gently tapped her temple. "What's going on up here that woke you?" His eyes were closed and his voice was deep and throaty with sleep. As always, it made her tingle in lots of interesting places.

"Nothing in particular." She kissed him, feeling bad that she'd disturbed him. "Go back to sleep." She started to slip out of bed, but he splayed his

hand on her stomach.

“Stay,” he coaxed.

“There’s no point. I’m wide awake.”

“Just lie here with me.” He grazed her earlobe with his teeth and turned her on her side to face him. “I like having you next to me.”

“But then I’ll be bored and fidget and keep *you* awake.” Which never seemed to bother him but eventually would, the longer they were mated. “If you’re not getting enough sleep, you won’t be completely alert and you’ll tire quickly when you’re working.”

“Just stay.”

“God, you’re stubborn.”

“Are you only learning this now?”

She snorted. “No, I learned that when I first arrived on your territory and you argued with the Alphas to have me removed, no matter how many times they said no.”

Tao smiled. “You just had to bring that up, didn’t you?” He traced the length of her spine with his finger. “If it makes you feel any better, the whole time I was working to make Taryn and Trey change their minds, all I wanted was to be buried balls deep in you.”

“Even though you didn’t trust me as far as you could throw me?”

“Even though.” He licked over his claiming mark. “I love looking at this. I love that our scents are mixed.” He raked his teeth over the bite as he closed a hand around her breast. “I love that you’re all mine.”

“I don’t think you’re going to be able to fuck me back to sleep this time,” she warned him. She was simply too wired.

“I do love a challenge.” He was just about to roll her onto her back when his cell phone beeped. Grabbing it from the nightstand, he tapped the screen. As he read the text message from Gabe, every muscle in his body tensed.

Sensing the change in him, Riley frowned. “What’s going on?”

“Someone’s at the gate.” He jumped out of bed and began pulling on some clothes.

“Who?”

“I’m about to find out. I shouldn’t be long; I just have to—why are you getting dressed?”

Dragging on a T-shirt, Riley flicked her hair out of her collar. “You’re going to the security room to check out the cameras, right? I want to know



who's here."

Yeah, well, Tao didn't want to drag her into the matter in case she insisted on getting involved in something dangerous. "You're better staying here."

"Should I remind you that I'm Guardian? I need to know if there's a risk to the children so I can get them to safety."

Tao swore, unable to deny that. "Fine. Let's go."

A minute later they were entering the security room, located near Trey's office. Rhett was there, his fingers tapping crazily on the keyboard of his computer. Trey, Jaime, Dante, Makenna, and the other enforcers were also present. They'd undoubtedly all received the same warning from Gabe, who was manning the perimeter gate.

Riley glanced around. "No Taryn?"

"Kye had a nightmare, so he ended up in our bed," said Trey. "She's staying with him while I find out what's happening."

Tao went straight to the wall where all the monitors were positioned and homed in on the screen that displayed footage of the gate. Gabe was standing just outside the security shack, his eyes locked on the visitors standing behind the locked gates. "Is that . . . ? That's a police car."

Rhett nodded. "Yep. They got here a few minutes ago."

Tao looked at Trey. "What do they want?" His stomach dropped when his Alpha turned to Riley.

"They've asked to speak with you," Trey told her.

Riley pointed to herself. "Me? Are you sure?"

"The cameras have audio," said Rhett. "We heard them ask for you."

His wolf growled, and Tao slashed a hand in the air. "No fucking way is she going out there."

"Definitely no fucking way," agreed Jaime. "This could be someone trying to get Riley out into the open so she's an easier target."

Trey rolled back his shoulders. "I'll speak with the humans and, basically, tell them to fuck off." He ran his eyes along Tao, Dante, Ryan, and Trick. "Follow me."

While Makenna and the other enforcers argued to go along, Tao gave Riley a quick kiss and said, "Don't bother insisting on coming with us. I genuinely think the police are just bait to flush you out."

"I wasn't going to ask to go with you," said Riley honestly. "I need to call my uncles and find out who's missing from the flock. Someone sent the

police here. I want to know who it was.” And she wanted to throttle the fucker for daring to bring danger to her home.

“Text me when you know.”

“Okay. Be careful.”

“Always.” Tao gave her one last kiss and then followed Trey and the others out of the room.

Keeping her eyes on the monitor, Riley pulled out her cell and called Ethan. “Hi, I know this isn’t a great hour to call, but we think there’s a good chance that someone from the flock is missing.”

“Somebody’s on your territory?” asked Ethan, both worry and anger in his tone.

“Not yet, but they’re close, and we think they’re trying to draw me out.”

“I’ll call you back in a minute.”

Riley bit down on her thumb as she waited for the Phoenix wolves to appear at the gate. Makenna, Jaime, Roni, Marcus, and Dominic gathered around her, all completely focused on the monitor.

“I’m pissed that I have to hang behind,” grumbled Marcus.

Dominic folded his arms. “Trey was right in what he said. If he takes too many wolves with him, it’ll look confrontational. It’s better to just get rid of the humans than to antagonize them.”

Roni nodded in agreement, briefly leaning into Marcus. “They’re just pawns anyway.”

Riley shifted from foot to foot. It was possible that someone was hovering around those gates with a freaking rifle, waiting for her. She doubted that they would shoot at one of the wolves in lieu of her. If hurting someone else to hurt *her* were enough for them, they would have gone after Max or Ethan. They wouldn’t have followed her all the way here just to settle on shooting someone else. Still, she got more and more nervous with each minute that went by. Her raven was just as uneasy; she wanted the freedom to explore the territory for the threat.

Taryn strode into the room. “What the hell is hap—where’s Flintstone?”

“He went to talk to the police and get rid of them.” Rhett gestured to the monitor. “They want to talk to Riley.”

Taryn swore. “The asshole should have taken me with him. We’re the Alphas, we should always present a united front.”

“I suppose he thought it wasn’t worth dragging you away from Kye just to go send the humans away,” said Makenna. “Where is Kye?”

“Still asleep in my bed. I had to know what was happening.”

As the monitor showed Trey, Tao, and the others finally nearing the security shack, Riley blew out a breath. She couldn't quite shake off her apprehension. A bolt of reassurance shot up the mating bond and a half smile curved her mouth.

They'd be fine, Riley told herself. They'd all be fine. And if something *did* happen to anyone, Riley would raise fresh fucking hell on the trigger-happy fucker.

Tao and the enforcers flanked Trey as they strolled to the security shack. Despite the darkness, Tao could clearly see the two humans behind the iron gates, standing beside a police car. One was tall and lean, the other was balding fast and had a thick, old-fashioned mustache.

Trey spoke to Gabe at a volume that wouldn't meet the humans' ears. “Have they said anything else since we left the caves a few minutes ago?”

“Not to me,” replied Gabe. “But they keep talking into their radios. They obviously know how acute a shifter's hearing can be, though, because they've kept their voices quiet.”

Trey nodded. “Wait here, Gabe.”

Again Tao and the enforcers flanked the Alpha as they approached the closed gate. Both officers strode toward them, their gaits casual and easy, their perceptive eyes scanning each and every wolf. Tao's wolf sniffed in annoyance as the wind carried the scents of fast food and cigarette smoke that clung to the humans.

The taller of the two studied Trey carefully. “You're the Alpha?”

“I am,” said Trey.

“I'm Officer Brown. This is Officer Taylor.” His tone was as casual as his stance. Apparently the guy was trying to put them at ease and pretend to be their friend or something.

Taylor, chewing gum, simply inclined his head.

Brown looked at Trey expectantly, as if waiting for him to introduce each of the wolves. He didn't.

“What brings you officers to my territory?” Trey asked.

Brown glanced past him to where Gabe stood. “As I told your pack mate, we'd like to speak with the raven you have staying with you.”

“Riley Porter isn't staying with us. She's part of my pack. That's different.”

The officers exchanged a brief look, and Tao got the feeling they hadn't actually known that. Maybe they'd assumed that each breed of shifter stuck with their own kind.

"In any case, we'd like to speak with her," said Brown.

Trey raised a brow. "Regarding?"

"A complaint was made against her by Ramón Veloz. He believes Miss Porter broke into his home and vandalized it yesterday afternoon."

*Motherfucker.* Tao should have considered that the bastard would do something like this. Ramón would have many people in his pocket. He probably thought Riley had flown into his home and let the wolves inside since, as an avian, she had the best chance of entering undetected. He had no reason to believe that the pack had any connection to a group of crazy-ass margays.

"Does he now?" Trey's tone was bored.

Brown widened his stance. "We'd just like to have a quick chat with her so we can get all this straightened out." As if he were on their side and believed it was one big, terrible misunderstanding.

"You don't need to chat with Riley," said Trey. "I can tell you myself that Ramón's wrong."

"You can verify Miss Porter's whereabouts?" asked Brown.

"She was here," said Trey.

Taylor lifted his chin. "Mr. Veloz strongly believes that Miss Porter was to blame."

"And many believe that Bigfoot walks the earth. Doesn't make it true or really mean anything—it's just a belief."

Taylor licked his front teeth. "Still, we'd just like to speak to Miss Porter and hear the story from her."

Tao gave a slow shake of the head. "Not happening."

Taylor's eyes narrowed on Tao. "Is she fine with you all speaking for her?"

Tao ignored the taunt, though it made his wolf bare his teeth. "You won't pass through this gate. You're wasting your time here."

Straightening to his full height, Brown sighed at Trey. "Mr. Coleman, my job is to—"

"I know what your job is," said Trey. "I know about your laws. And both of us know that shifters don't answer to your laws. We have our own. That means you don't have any authority whatsoever here."

A flicker of movement caught Tao's eyes. A black SUV with blackened windows was creeping up toward the gate. The hair on his nape and arms lifted. In the distance a flock of birds squawked, as if spooked by something. Alarm shot through Tao and his wolf. He wasn't completely sure what exactly was happening or where the real threat was coming from, but he knew it was there. "It's a setup, Trey. *Move.*"

Just as the wolves all dived aside, the officers opened fire. Bullets pinged as they bounced off the security shack. A screech of tires was followed by a crash as two black SUVs burst through the gates and sped up the rocky path toward the mountain.

Tao's stomach knotted. The humans would follow the tracks in the path, and that would take them straight to the rest of the pack . . . to his mate. His wolf shoved to the surface, demanding freedom.

The last thought Tao had before shifting was that he hoped the pack remembered what to do in the event of a breach.

Listening as Trey spoke to the police, Riley put a hand to her stomach. Something about the whole scenario didn't feel right. In fact, it felt . . . off. She told herself she was being paranoid, something that was perfectly understandable given how often she'd been targeted of late. Nonetheless, unease crept up her spine—both hers and Tao's, she quickly realized. Her raven was just as on edge, though Riley wondered if it was her own feelings rubbing off on the avian.

She heard her cell phone ring and dug it out of her pocket. *Ethan.* "Hello."

"Cynthia's missing."

"Shit." Not that Riley was all that surprised. "I can't really talk right now, I'll call you back later." She ended the call and leaned toward the screen as she noticed Tao's focus shift to something past the police. Something that caused his body to tense and—

The squawking and flapping of wings outside the mountain made her heart jump and her raven's head snap up. *Fuck.* A mere moment later, the wolves sought cover and two SUVs surged past the gates while the police opened fire.

"Son of a bitch!" Taryn pushed a button on the wall, and an alarm blared throughout the caves. "Rhett, grab Kye on your way to the panic room." As the male disappeared out of the room, Taryn whipped out her

phone and swept her thumb over the screen. “Shaya, we need backup. No, it looks like Ramón and his men are on our territory. Get here as soon as you can.”

Marcus turned to Taryn, jaw hard. “The whole thing was a setup. Ramón figured you’d go to the gate with Trey and you’d be easy to grab. Only you didn’t go, so now they’re on their way here and the most powerful of the wolves within the pack aren’t around.”

“Two wolves just took down the police,” said Roni, watching the screen. “The rest are chasing after the SUVs.”

Riley glanced at the other cameras, occasionally catching a glimpse of the SUVs whizzing past with wolves hot on their tail.

“We need to get out there and hold off the humans,” said Dominic.

“That’s exactly what we’re going to do,” Taryn told him, her voice a little bloodthirsty. “Riley, you get Savannah and Dexter and take them to the panic room.”

Riley nodded. “Don’t let the fuckers get in.” Heart pounding, she raced out of the room and through the tunnels. This wasn’t the time to panic, she told herself. She had to stay calm or she’d scare Savannah and Dexter.

Reaching their bedroom, she swung the door open. The sight she found made her skid to a halt. Dexter was lying on the floor, unmoving, with a pool of red around his head. Savannah was hissing at the female smirking behind her, who had one of the viper’s pigtails wrapped around her fist and a razor-sharp talon pointed at Savannah’s neck.

Rage. Dread. Disbelief. Panic. Each emotion hit Riley like a rock to the solar plexus and sent her raven into a rage. Her chest tightened until her breastbone hurt. Taking a deep breath, she flexed fingers that suddenly tingled. She was gripping her phone so hard it was a wonder that it hadn’t cracked.

Only two things stopped Riley from losing her shit: Savannah wasn’t bleeding, and she could hear Dexter’s heartbeat.

“I didn’t mean to bash his head so hard against the wall, but those claws of his are a hazard.” Shirley’s stare was fevered, unblinking. And in those eyes there was a hint of something, something not altogether sane, that made Riley’s stomach twist. “Expecting Cynthia?”

“It did look more and more like she could be behind all this,” said Riley.

Wind gusted through the open balcony door behind Shirley. Clearly the

lock hadn't stood up all that well to shifter strength. "I was flying around the perimeter of your territory, wondering just how I'd be able to cross over without being sensed, when I noticed the humans at the gate. They provided a nice diversion."

Riley kept her voice a flat monotone, giving Shirley no emotion to work with. "So, what, you're punishing people for not helping Wade?"

"He didn't need *help*. He needed people to stop messing with his head and manipulating him. It was one of you. It had to be."

"So you just figured you'd shoot us all to be sure the person responsible was punished."

"You and Lucy spoke to him most often. Sawyer was spending time with him, though. Wade told me that Sawyer just wanted to help him to impress *you*. Cynthia was calling him all the time, telling him that you and Lucy were laughing at him behind his back. I can believe that."

"You don't believe it, though," Riley said. "Not really. It wasn't the first time Cynthia tried coming between me and my friends, and it wouldn't have been the last."

"She swears she didn't give Wade the gun and tell him to do it . . . I think she was actually telling the truth."

"But you hurt her anyway, didn't you?" Which explained why Cynthia was missing.

"I wasn't going to take the chance that she was lying. One of you did it."

"Wade did it, Shirley."

"Wade was—"

"Depressed. Troubled. Full of anger he couldn't get out because his nature was just too sweet. It built up inside him until he burst like a volcano. I think he wanted to die. I do. I think he just also wanted to take with him the people who'd made him feel that way." It was a sad truth, but it was the truth all the same.

"No." Shirley's voice shook. "*No.*" Her grip must have tightened on Savannah's hair, because the little girl whined and tried pulling her ponytail free. The sound made Riley's heart squeeze. Her raven flapped her wings and released a guttural rattle.

"Let her go." It was hard to keep the plea out of her voice. "She's not who you've come all the way here for."

Shirley tapped her talons against Savannah's fragile neck. "I don't know

. . . I think hurting her will hurt you, so maybe I should just do that.”

It took everything Riley had not to lunge at the bitch. Her muscles literally ached from the strain of keeping still, but she feared making any move that could set Shirley off. “That wouldn’t be enough for you. It’s me you want. Why wait all this time to hurt me? Why not do this years ago?”

“It’s *your* fault,” Shirley spat. “Seeing your face, having you around . . . it brought it all back. Everything went straight back to the way it was—Sawyer wanting you, Cynthia arguing with you, your uncles adoring you. But no Wade. No. While you’re all moving on with your lives, he’s *dead*.”

“But you didn’t kill us.” Riley paused, hearing tires screech and wolves growl just outside. Her stomach knotted at the sound of bullets firing, but she took comfort in the fact that none had hit her mate—she’d *feel* it if they had. “I don’t think you really want anyone to die, Shirley. You wanted people to remember Wade, to remember what he went through, and feel *your* pain.”

“Don’t kid yourself. I wanted you all dead. Especially *you*. You were supposed to be his best friend, but you did *nothing* to help him, just like you did nothing to help Daniel.” Shirley sneered and gave a quick snort of disgust. “Your mother never deserved him.”

The jealousy in the latter words made Riley frown. “Why?”

“He wasn’t hers anyway. I knew as soon as I saw Daniel that he was mine.” Shirley’s face actually lit up a little. “I didn’t need to feel the tug of the mating bond—I just knew. My raven knew.” The light on her face died an abrupt death. “But he didn’t. He felt *something*, I could tell, but he only had eyes for Anabel.” Her mouth curled in contempt. “*Everyone* had eyes for Anabel.”

Shocked, Riley was struggling to keep up. “You think my father was your true mate?”

“I *know* he was.” Shirley’s voice was like a whip. “He was mine, and she stole him from me. I had to watch them together. I told him he was my mate. He wouldn’t believe me and neither would she. She said I was just trying to break them up out of spite. I did try breaking them up after that, I really did, but—as he was so fond of saying—she was his world. They imprinted, and then they had you and you were *both* his world. Me? He avoided me like the plague.”

Now that she was mated, it was impossible for Riley not to appreciate just how agonizing that must have been. Shirley’s eyes were so wet and dull that Riley might have felt sorry for her if it weren’t for the talons aimed at



Savannah and the fact that she'd hurt Dexter.

Shirley pressed her trembling lips together. "When Anabel died, I thought, 'He can be mine now.' Her death was fate at work, Riley. Fate punishing her for taking what wasn't hers to take." A flush crept up her neck and face. "I could have saved him. If they'd let me see him, let me speak to him, I could have brought him out of that state. He would have lived for me. *I was his mate*. But it was *you* the flock pinned their hopes on. They wouldn't listen to me. Wouldn't let me in to see him. 'Riley will bring him back,' they said. But you didn't. So he died. Maybe fate was punishing him too for turning his back on what it offered him."

"Are you forgetting that *you* were mated when he came to the flock?"

A dismissive sound. "I would have gotten rid of Dean for him. Dean never loved me anyway. He liked his girls young. Once I was too old for him, he lost interest."

Riley got it then. Not only had Shirley been rejected by her true mate, but the male she'd taken as her mate had withdrawn from her. Wade had been Shirley's anchor, her reason to live. And then she'd lost him. It would seem her grip on her sanity had slipped a little. Just maybe that grip had increasingly loosened as time went on, because the woman in front of Riley—a woman hurting children in a way that went against a raven's nature—was definitely not stable . . . which was why it was absolutely imperative that Riley get the bitch away from the kids *fast*.

Shirley narrowed eyes that glittered with loathing. "I hated seeing you near Wade. I didn't want *anything* of your mother touching my son, but he wouldn't listen. He'd always find a way to sneak off and be with you and Lucy. He never defied me over anything else."

Riley caught sight of Dexter stirring slightly in her peripheral vision, and her heart slammed against her ribs. She was relieved that he was conscious, but she was also frightened that he might draw Shirley's attention.

"I don't blame Wade for what he did that night," Shirley went on. "None of them cared about him. They deserved to die and you should have died with them. Now you can."

"You loved Daniel. I'm part of him."

Her eyes flashed with scorn. "You had no right to be born. You should *never* have been born. They had no right to be mated."

Riley threw her phone at Shirley. Instinct had the woman reaching to catch it. Savannah dropped to the ground and Riley charged at Shirley,

sending them both toppling over the balcony. Riley shifted midair and shook off her clothes. Shirley did the same, and the ravens clashed in a fury of talons.

## CHAPTER TWENTY



**T**he black wolf bolted through the trees, teeth bared. His pack mates ran alongside him, keeping pace with the cars that raced toward the mountain. His muscles burned. His lungs felt raw. His heart beat too fast. But the wolf did not slow. He pushed on, veins buzzing with adrenaline.

Two humans leaned out of the car windows, guns in hand. The wolves did not retreat. They kept moving, using the trees for cover. Bullets slammed into the ground. Others hit tree trunks; pieces of bark flew. A burning heat grazed the wolf's shoulder, but he ignored the pain. He had to. Echoes of his mate's fear and anger sliced at him. He needed to reach her.

More bullets were fired. A yelp came from behind him. It made the wolf's heart stutter, but he could not pause to help his pack mate. He had to reach those who were unprotected, he had to help his mate.

He put on a burst of speed as the cars reached the mountain. Several wolves rushed out of the parking lot and charged at the first car. They knocked it down, sending it sliding off the path. The other screeched to a halt.

Humans aimed their guns out the windows of both cars, but the pack attacked as a unit. Fast. Cold. Brutal. Without mercy.

With a vicious growl, the black wolf dived at the second car. He sank his teeth into an arm, tasting blood, enjoying the cry of agony. A gun fell at the wolf's feet, but he kept his grip on the human.

The male punched him, spitting harsh words. Snarling, the wolf bit down harder and yanked. The human slipped out of the car, banging his head on the ground. The wolf wasted no time in tearing out his throat, but he felt no triumph. It was the leader he wanted.

The car rocked as the Alpha dragged another human from it. The white

wolf helped her mate slash and maul their prey. His screams split the air, joining the growls, snarls, yelps, shouts, and sounds of bullets firing.

Some bullets hit the ground or the cave wall. Others sank past the fur and flesh of his pack mates. But the wolves did not retreat. They gave no reprieve. Blood, sweat, and rage scented the air, feeding his fury.

The wolf scrambled to get inside the car to reach the human hiding there, but the male stumbled out the other side and tried to flee. The Beta wolves quickly took him down, slashing his back and pitilessly ripping into his shoulder.

Another human leaned out of the other side and aimed his gun at the Beta pair. Heart beating fast, the black wolf rounded the car and lunged. The human heard his growl and turned. Eyes wide, he fired. A burning heat skimmed his ear, but the wolf bit down on the human's hand. The male cried out, but he did not drop the gun. He moved it to his other hand and—

The car rocked again, making the human lose his balance and topple out. A she-wolf appeared and slashed their enemy's throat again and again, until he was choking on his own blood.

A female scream made the black wolf's head snap up. His mate and another female were falling off a balcony. They shifted midair into ravens and attacked each other. Their wings flapped in a frenzy, and feathers seemed to burst off their bodies.

The wolf watched as they bit and stabbed each other with their beaks. Watched as they repeatedly clashed, raking each other with their talons. He could feel his mate's pain. Despite it, she did not weaken. Did not ease back. She fought harder. More brutally. More—

The wolf's breath left his lungs as something hard and hot smashed into his shoulder. Despite the blinding pain, he spun to find his attacker. The human was hanging out of the car roof, gun still pointed at the black wolf. Then he was gone—yanked back inside by a wolf whose jaw was locked around his ankle in a crushing grip.

Taking a moment to look around, the wolf growled. Most of the humans were now dead, but many of his pack were hurt. Some were hobbling. Others were weak from blood loss. One wolf had fallen and was being guarded by pack mates.

A howl split the air. Not one of triumph. Not one of grief. One of frustration. Following the sound, the black wolf ignored the burning pain in his shoulder as he ran to his Alpha male. The wolf paused as he caught

another scent. It was a scent he knew, a scent that made him growl with a cold rage. It was the scent of the human who had wounded his mate and tried to snatch the cheetah cub.

With a snarl the wolf changed course, following the scent past the car and over to—

A loud bang was followed by a squawk. The wolf halted and looked up, panting. His heart leaped as the tangled ravens dropped from the sky. He *felt* his mate's head slam on something hard not just once but twice; he winced at the echo of her pain.

His leg muscles tightened as the urge to run to his mate took over. He rushed into the woods, skirting trees and kicking up dirt.

Gunfire cracked the air. A force slammed into the wolf's thigh, making his leg almost crumple beneath him. More gunfire. Pain after pain exploded in his flank. His world tilted, grayed, became diagonal. And as he landed on his wounded shoulder, a crippling agony radiated through him. His vision blurred and faded until it was almost black.

The wolf lay there, sides heaving, breaths bursting in and out of him. Except for the ringing in his ears, everything seemed quiet. Too quiet. He could not seem to move, not even when he heard footsteps rustling in the grass.

“Don't. Move.”

The voice sounded distorted and far away, but the wolf knew it was the leader, the one they called Ramón. The human that the wolf most wanted to rip apart with claws and teeth.

“Now, which of the pack would you be?”

The wolf did not understand the words, but he snarled. He wanted to rise, to attack. But his leg, shoulder, and flank pulsed with white-hot pain. Warm blood kept pumping out of his wounds, soaking his fur and the ground beneath him.

Another human walked through the trees, holding a limp raven by the talons. It was the same male who had tried to snatch the cub. “You shot it right out of the sky, sir. The little bitch deserved it after what she did to me.”

Ramón smiled at the black wolf. “Is that why you came running this way? You were looking for the raven? How sad that you couldn't save her.”

The wolf didn't panic at the sight of the dead raven. He knew his mate was alive. She was in great pain and barely conscious, but alive. The wolf wanted to go to her, to help her, but he could barely move. Fear skittered

through him. The wolf had been hurt many times before, but this seemed different. The blood would not stop pumping out of him. He felt wet. Cold. More tired than he had ever been.

“Put down the bird. Let’s get him in the car.”

The wolf snarled, but the humans grabbed his legs. The wolf reared up with a growl, teeth bared, but a crippling pain lanced through him. Everything started to fade. Darken. Then there was nothing.

Something buzzed at Tao, prodding him awake. *Not an insect*, he thought as he gathered his jumbled thoughts. Not even a sound. But what was it?

It happened again. A spurt of strength buzzed all the way up the mating bond. It was like being given a shot of adrenaline.

Fuck, he was cold. Heavy. Sluggish. Digging deep for energy, he tried to move, and pain rolled over him in waves. Never-ending waves that made his stomach churn and his head spin. He breathed deep, taking in the scents of blood, oil, leather, and . . . Ramón.

Tao forced his eyes open, and there was the bastard—sitting on a bench inside a van, pointing a gun at him. Tao really was damn tired of guns.

The arrogant piece of shit hadn’t even put any restraints on Tao, so sure he was in the position of power. And fuck if Ramón *wasn’t* in the position of power. Tao had little to no energy in his system and, honestly, he was pretty sure he’d pass out again if he moved.

Only once in his life had he felt this weak—the night he’d almost died.

“You’re awake. Good. I didn’t know your kind could shift while unconscious.”

It happened occasionally.

Ramón smiled. “I must say, you and your pack mates are much more vicious fighters than I gave you all credit for.” There was actually a little respect in those words. “I’m pretty sure me and my driver are the only survivors.” And that didn’t seem to concern him.

Tao’s upper lip curled. “Maybe if you hadn’t come *after* the others and then hidden in the trees like a couple of pussies, you’d be just as dead as them.”

Ramón’s anger rose up in his scent. “I’ll let that comment slide, since I’m quite sure this has been a trying evening for you.” His brow creased. “It’s been just as trying for me. Things didn’t really go to plan.”

“You mean Taryn didn’t go to the gate, so you couldn’t snatch her and

then leave all your friends to keep the rest of us occupied while you drove away with her in the van.”

“Yes, that is what I mean. But I’m an adaptable person. When it became clear I wouldn’t be able to get to your Alpha female, I decided I’d just have to grab another one of you to make her see reason. It was purely by chance that the wolf I managed to catch is you. It’s fitting, really.” He gave Tao a look of reprimand. “You really did let me down, Mr. Lukas. Things didn’t have to be this way.”

A bump in the road jarred the van, and Tao ground his teeth against the pain that jolted him.

“They know I’ve taken you,” Ramón went on. “One wolf saw us leave and tried to give chase. Probably would have caught up to us if their leg hadn’t been lame. I suppose we’re now about to find out just how valuable you are to your pack—or what’s left of it, anyway.” His smile was falsely sympathetic. “Oh, I really am sorry about your pretty raven.”

Tao didn’t correct him. It was better to let the guy think he didn’t need to be on his guard. But he *did* need to be, because Tao was sensing a lot of things from his mate at that moment—rage, pain, fear, but not panic. Riley knew where he was, he’d bet money on it. “You won’t live through this night.”

Ramón grinned. “Oh, I assure you I will. Sadly, I can’t say the same for you. You’re looking a little worse for wear. Maybe your Alpha will arrive in time to save you. I’m in a good mood, I’ll allow her to heal you before trading places with you.”

“Taryn can’t help your brother. She can’t heal diseases, it’s not—” A bullet sank into Tao’s side. His whole body jerked, and agony rippled through him, snatching the breath from his lungs. The world went dark for a few seconds.

“She *can* heal my brother and she *will*. Or both he and you die. That’s the—”

A loud thud shook the van. The tires screeched as the van swerved, jerked, and bounced to a halt—causing Ramón to fall back against the side of the van and grab on to the bench for purchase. The gun clattered to the floor, landing not far from Tao. Adrenaline spiked through him. He lunged for the gun. Missed. Stars burst behind his eyes and his stomach churned, but the adrenaline dimmed the pain. He heard a man scream, wondered if it was the driver.

Ramón dived, reaching out to grab the gun. Tao reared up and slammed his elbow into the bastard's face, making him stumble back. Ramón's ass hit the floor of the van with an awkward thump. He kicked at Tao's face, but Tao seized his ankle and twisted it sharply. Bone snapped and Ramón cried out through his teeth, making Tao's wolf bare his teeth in a feral grin.

Ramón tried to regain possession of his leg, but Tao kept a tight grip on it. The human pitched forward and made a grab for Tao's hair, missing by mere inches. Tao bit into his hand, and Ramón snatched it back with a growl of outrage. The smell of the bastard's blood was almost better than the look of pain on his face.

Cursing, Ramón swerved, kicking out with his good leg. His boot smacked Tao's head hard.

"Motherfucker," growled Tao. He tightened his grip on Ramón's broken ankle until the human screamed. Ramón kicked out with his other leg again, but Tao was ready; he blocked the move with his arm and then slammed his fist into Ramón's jaw.

The human grunted, snarling. He dove for the gun, knocking Tao on his back as he did so and causing more blinding pain to ripple through Tao. Ramón's fingers brushed the butt of the gun—

Metal screeched as the doors flew open and light blasted into the van, causing Tao to double-blink. And there was his mate. Naked. A bloody mess. And in an absolute rage.

Ramón turned just as she sprung into the van. He tensed, prepared to launch himself at her, but she moved too fast—crashing into him and sending him sprawling flat on his back.

Seething, Riley wrapped one hand around the human's throat. She wanted to snap his neck. Instead she held him in place—letting him struggle, letting him try to free himself. She might be female and she might be hurt, but she was still stronger than a human. She let him see that for himself. She could see the moment it sank into this arrogant fucker's brain that he was being overpowered by a woman.

Ramón reached back, curling his fingers around the butt of his gun. Riley sliced out her talons, letting them dig right through his throat—slashing skin, cutting muscle, and severing arteries. She didn't look away, watched the life bleed from his eyes. Honestly, she was a little annoyed that it had to end so soon. She'd have enjoyed delivering some additional pain to the asshole.

Satisfied he was dead, Riley wiped her blood-soaked talons on his shirt



and sheathed them. She then moved to Tao's side, breaths sawing in and out of her chest. All the rage and bravado left her in a rush as she took in the bloody sight of him, leaving only soul-deep terror. "Oh God, you're a mess."

As Tao stared at his mate's battered body, he forgot his own pain. "Jesus, baby, so are you." She was covered in rake marks, bites, and puncture wounds—all were deep and bleeding badly. A clump of blood matted the hair at the side of her head, where he suspected there was a massive wound. What worried him more was the blood pouring out of her ear and nose.

"Tao . . ." Her voice shook. Never—not when her parents died, not when Ethan was shot, not even when Dexter was almost taken—had she felt such an incapacitating fear. It was a living, breathing thing inside her. His face was haggard and pale, his heartbeat was much too damn slow for her liking, and every breath wheezed out of him. There were so many wounds, so much blood, and she had no idea what to do. "Shit, shit, shit."

"Don't panic on me, okay, I'll be all right. Fuck, baby, what did she do to you?" He could smell Shirley on her.

"When she was shot, the bitch dug her talons into my wing to drag me to the ground with her. Hit my head on a branch as we were falling." It had hurt like a motherfucker. Still did.

Tao tried to sit up, and his own pain came flooding back. He clenched his teeth, waiting for his head to stop spinning. It was like there was a burning-hot balloon inside him that kept on inflating. He gripped her hand, as if she could beat back the darkness creeping around his vision.

"Tao, you have to hold on for me."

Her fear pierced him worse than any pain. "I'm holding on. Don't you worry about that. I'm not going anywhere." He refused to acknowledge just how badly he was hurt, or that a numbness was creeping in; he would think of her—just her. She'd lost too many people; he wouldn't let her lose another, just as he wouldn't let death take her from him.

"It's okay," she said, voice still shaky, lying beside him. "Taryn will come. The others will be here any second now. They've been following me." She'd only dropped out of the sky to grab the dead raccoon from the road and, in a moment of inspiration, thrown it at the van to spook the driver.

"What's wrong with your eyes?" he asked. Not only was one of them bloodshot, but her pupils were unequally sized.

Riley blinked, looking at him through blurred vision. "Nothing. Don't worry about me. I'm fine."

“You’re lying.”

She was. Pain was *blasting* through her head, as if someone were taking a sledgehammer to it. If she had to guess, she’d say she had a fractured skull. Her stomach was heaving with nausea, her wounds burned like holy hell, and she was starting to feel a little dizzy. But he didn’t need to know any of that.

“Taryn will come.” Riley would just have to keep him alive until she did. Staring into his eyes, Riley pushed energy down the mating bond, strengthening it, strengthening him. Lights flashed behind her eyelids and wooziness racked her brain, but she sent him more. She couldn’t let him die, not if she could help it. He *had* to live. He was too damn important to her. Hell, he was *everything* to her.

Energy pulsed down the bond right back to her, sharp as a slap. She scowled. “Take it.”

“No. You’re as weak as I am. You’re trembling.” It was worrying the shit out of Tao.

“I’m fine. Take it.” She forced a strong pulse of energy down the bond—a pulse so strong he’d be too weak to reject it. A wave of nausea hit her hard. She was just so damn dizzy and disoriented . . . which was helped along by her head injury and just how exhausted she was.

He growled. “I don’t want you to die for me.” But that was what would happen. In trying to keep him alive, she was essentially giving her life for his.

“I get it now,” she whispered. “I get why my dad couldn’t hold on when she died. It wasn’t that I wasn’t enough—it wasn’t about me at all. He just couldn’t be without her. He couldn’t. It was really just that simple.” Her voice cracked. “I don’t want to be without you.”

She was breaking his fucking heart here. “You’re wrong about your dad. It wasn’t that simple. Yes, he didn’t want to be without her. He still should have fought. He didn’t, because he was selfish. I’m not him. I’m not leaving. Listen to me. You don’t have to hold me here. *I’m* holding me here.”

“No, I have to keep you here.”

“And I have to keep you here, so let’s do that.”

With a nod she shoved energy up the bond, sending a brief surge of strength through his system. He sent a spurt of energy to her, giving her body that same boost. They each did it again and again, as if they were breathing for each other. It was working; it was also weakening her fast because the effects of her head injury were hazing her thoughts and leaving her feeling hollowed out. What’s more, her natural urge to sleep while injured was trying

to take over.

“Keep fighting.” Tao could sense darkness pulling at her, threatening to take her from him, and it was freaking him the fuck out.

His wolf’s ears pricked up at the sound of footsteps shuffling along the road. The van shook, as if something or someone was bracing their weight against it. Moments later Mathers stumbled into their vision, bloody and scratched to hell.

Riley hissed at the human. “You should be dead.”

He sneered. “So should you.” He lifted his gun, aimed it at them.

For Tao everything went quiet. Slow. Just as it had the last time death came calling for him. He wanted to push Riley out of harm’s way, attack and maul the son of a bitch before shooting him with his own damn gun. But his energy level was simply too low.

“This is for Ramón.” Mathers’s grip tightened on the gun and—

A large gray wolf smashed into Mathers’s side, sending him flying out of their sight. Tao knew that wolf. *Dante*.

Relief washed through Tao. “Just hold on for me, baby. Taryn’s here.” But it wasn’t Taryn who climbed into the van. It was Ally, the Mercury Pack’s Beta female. She also happened to be a Seer and had the gift of healing.

The brunette paled as her eyes danced from Tao to Riley. “Oh God, shit!”

Riley slurred, “Heal him first.”

“No, heal *her* first,” Tao ground out.

Riley shook her head. “He’s been shot at least three times and he’s lost a lot of blood; he needs you more.”

“No, heal—” But Ally laid her hands over Tao, ignoring his protests. He felt Ally’s healing energy buzz through him, tried to push it down the mating bond, but it wouldn’t work. The energy wasn’t *his* to direct; it was Ally’s.

Riley rolled onto her back, releasing a pained hiss. “I’m gonna sleep now.”

He squeezed her hand. “Not yet. I know it’s hard, but you have to stay awake for me.”

“Okay.” But even as Riley said that, she could feel herself beginning to pass out. She felt as if she could just drift away . . . and that scared her. She didn’t want to drift away; she wanted to be with Tao.

“Open your eyes, Riley.”

She forced them open. “Sorry.” It just felt like weights were hanging from her eyelids.

“Ally, go to her! You’ve healed me enough, now help her! Fucking now, Ally!”

Soft hands touched her head, but Riley was too tired to even flinch. A strange energy flowed through her like warm honey. It both soothed and healed, calming her raven. When Ally sat back, Riley slurred, “Thanks. Now I really have to sleep.”

Feeling heavy and uncoordinated, Tao sat upright and gathered her to him. “That’s okay, baby.” He kissed her temple. “You can sleep now.”

“Awesome,” she breathed. Then it all went black.

“I can hear her breathing,” Savannah whispered, standing beside the bed on which Riley was sprawled, hair fanned out all over the pillow.

Crouched beside Savannah and Dexter, Tao nodded. “See, she’s just sleeping.” But he understood why that didn’t chase away their terror. He needed to look into her eyes, hear her voice, to truly believe she was fine. “We can’t wake her, though. She needs the rest. The more sleep she has, the faster she’ll get better.”

Biting her lip, Savannah asked, “Can we come see her when she wakes up?”

“Of course you can. You two will be the first people she wants to see. What she needs most now, though, is for you to take care of each other while she sleeps. Can you do that?” At their nods, he smiled. “Good.” Tao gently touched Dexter’s hair. “How’s your head, little man?”

“Better,” said the toddler, sucking on his thumb.

Tao had expected to be dealing with a traumatized child, given that Shirley had burst into their bedroom and slung him at a fucking wall, but either Dexter was good at blocking out stressful events or he’d simply become extremely resilient after surviving alone on the streets. Then again, all cheetahs were physically and mentally tough like that.

“The bad lady’s gone now,” said Savannah. “Riley made her go away.”

“She did,” Tao confirmed. He looked up as Makenna poked her head through the partially open door.

“There you both are,” she said. “Grace wants to know if you want to bake cookies with Kye and Lilah.”

Both children looked at Riley, loath to leave her. Tao put his hands on

their shoulders. "I'll come for you when she wakes up," he promised them. "Okay?"

"Okay," said Savannah. Taking Dexter's hand, she tugged him toward the door.

As they reluctantly left the room, Makenna walked in and peeked at Riley. "She's been asleep for quite a while now."

At least twelve hours, Tao estimated. He'd have panicked, but . . . "It's a healing sleep."

Makenna's brow creased. "A what?"

"When ravens are injured, they go into a deep sleep to help them recover. Max confirmed that she'll be fine." The uncles had gotten a scare when she hadn't called them back last night, so they'd both rushed to Phoenix Pack territory. The first thing they'd done was check on Riley. The second thing they'd done was yell at Tao, blaming him for her injuries. Then they'd apologized profusely for yelling at him and congratulated him on the mating.

"Her wounds have faded," Makenna noted. "So have yours. That's good."

"Yeah, that's very good." Ally hadn't fully healed Riley or Tao, needing to save energy for the rest of the injured, so they had both been left with some superficial cuts and bruises.

"So many were injured, Tao. Almost everyone was at the very least *skimmed* by a bullet. I honestly thought we were going to lose Trick. Taryn barely managed to heal him in time."

Tao had already heard the story from Taryn, who was swamped with guilt for being too weak from healing Trick to go to him and Riley. She'd actually been in tears, apologizing for not being able to get to them. It had taken a good half hour to convince her that she had nothing to apologize for and that he wasn't angry with her. She'd sent Ally to them, which had saved them. "Thank God for Ally."

"Hell yeah," agreed Makenna. "She healed me not so long ago. I would have died if it weren't for her. She's saved a lot of lives, including Shaya's." Makenna hugged herself. "You know something? It didn't occur to me that Ramón would try to invade our territory. I knew he was a danger, but I truly didn't credit him with that much power."

"We think of humans as weaker than us—physically, they are. That means we can sometimes forget that they can be much more dangerous."

She nodded. “Do you think Ramón expected to get out of that alive?”

“Yes. He was proud and arrogant, and he’d probably thought of himself as not only untouchable but invincible.” It had been his downfall in the end.

“I would have liked to be the one to kill him, so you can tell Riley I’m totally jealous that she was the one who did.”

After Makenna left, Tao slid under the covers and gently tugged Riley into his arms. She didn’t even slightly stir, which would have been worrying if he hadn’t known for sure that it was normal for ravens.

He lay there for what could have been hours, watching her sleep and reassuring himself that she was fine. It was hard, though, because he kept seeing flashes of her in the van, hurt, bleeding, and weak. Kept remembering how often their mating bond had flickered as the darkness pulled at her. As fear clogged his throat, his arms flexed around her. Her eyelids fluttered halfway open, and two pools of violet locked on him.

“Hey, baby.” He kissed her, needing her taste, needed that affirmation that she was well and with him. He rested his forehead on hers. “What a fucking night, huh?”

“You’re okay,” she said, relieved. Then she scowled. “You weren’t supposed to almost die again.”

He rubbed his nose against hers. “I’m too stubborn to die before I’m ready.”

She took stock of herself. No aches or pains, and . . . “You showered me.”

“I showered us both. We were covered in dried blood.”

Her eyes snapped fully open as a memory came to her. “Dexter—”

“He’s fine,” Tao reassured her. “He had a bad wound on his head, but Ally healed him. He’s not traumatized or anything, though I think the whole thing definitely shook up Savannah. She’s good at hiding it, though.”

Her nostrils flared. “I smell them.”

“They were worried about you, so I let them come in to see that you were just sleeping.”

Her mouth curled. “You’re good with them.”

“You’re better.”

Her brow creased. “I smell Max and Ethan too.”

“They panicked when you didn’t call them back last night and they hauled ass here.”

“Shit, I didn’t get the chance to call them.” Everything had happened so

fast, Riley remembered. Everything had seemed completely out of control. “How did they take the news about Shirley?”

“Not too well. They’re annoyed with themselves for not figuring out that it was her. Their money was on Cynthia. Am I right in thinking Shirley just wanted to punish you all for failing Wade?”

“There was a lot more to it than that.” Riley told him everything that Shirley had said, and about how unstable she’d seemed. “Wade was the one good thing she had. He was her anchor, I guess.”

Tao curled her hair behind her ear and stroked his fingers down the side of her neck. “That had to have been hard on Wade.”

“A lot of things were hard on Wade.” She frowned. “I’m still a little in shock to hear that my father was her true mate.”

“She could have been wrong, Riley.”

“If nothing else, she truly believed it. And she blamed me for his death. When I put it all together, I think Shirley was driven to do what she did because she was just so angry about so many things. She couldn’t let go of that anger and heal. The wounds just festered and got worse and worse. I don’t think she really cared about anything anymore.”

Tao smoothed his hand soothingly up and down her back. “She’s gone now. She can’t take out that anger on you ever again.” He kissed her again. “My wolf tried to get to you when he saw you drop out of the sky, but Ramón got to him first.” He just had to thank the fucking universe that Ramón’s bullet had hit Shirley, not Riley.

“I know. My raven saw him put you in the van and pretty much squawked in front of Trey’s face to get his attention. He’d shifted back to his human form by then to hold Taryn after she’d healed Trick. Trey ordered a bunch of wolves to follow the van, and Taryn asked Ally to go along with them. Another wolf was already trying to follow—I think it was Dominic—but his leg was hurt.”

“So the wolves followed you.”

“The van was too fast for them to follow, so I stayed high up where the wolves would see me.” And where the driver wouldn’t notice her.

Tao stroked his thumb across her cheekbone. “Thank you for coming for me. But I can’t thank you for almost dying for me. Don’t you *ever* do that again.”

“I wasn’t trying to die for you—my death would have killed you anyway. I was just trying to keep you alive until someone came.”

“Yes, but you were panicking that you wouldn’t be enough to hold me there, and that was making you reckless.”

Thinking back to last night, she frowned. “I guess I was.”

“You were no more responsible for my life than you were for your father’s. I swear I could kick Sage’s ass for making you think differently.”

“I’ve forgiven him now. Not Sage, my father. I didn’t really understand just how hard it would be to lose a mate. I mean, I knew *intellectually* that the breaking of the bond would be difficult to survive. But I’d never felt just how strong the bond was, never knew just how it made your mate feel a part of you.” She traced the shell of his ear. “I’d already feel half-dead if I lost you. It would be so easy to just slip away.”

Tao grabbed her hand and kissed her palm. “He was still selfish to have wallowed in his own grief and not even tried to fight the urge to slip away.”

“Maybe, but I still forgive him.”

“And you realize now that it was nothing to do with you—it wasn’t that you weren’t enough to hold him here, it was that he chose to slip away.”

“Yes, I realize that now.”

“About fucking time.”

Riley bit her lip. “I’m scared to ask if everyone’s okay . . . which I guess is me sort of asking.”

“A lot of people were hurt, but they’re all alive,” he assured her. “With the exception of Ramón and his minions, obviously.”

“What are we going to do with all the bodies?”

“Ally knows someone who can deal with them.” Her foster brother, Cain, was part of The Movement—a band of shifters who retaliated against the extremists. They were used to getting rid of dead bodies. “They’ll be collecting the bodies of Ramón and his men sometime today. We’ve handed the bodies of Officers Brown and Taylor over to the police, though.”

“Will their deaths bring us trouble?”

“We have security footage to back up our story that they opened fire, unprovoked, and then moved aside to let Ramón’s men pass.”

“Didn’t the police ask for the bodies of Ramón’s men?”

“Sure they did. We told them that we chased the humans from our territory. They don’t believe us, of course—especially since Ramón and his men are nowhere to be found—but they’re also happy to have a drug lord and his minions off the streets. They didn’t seem upset about the deaths of Brown and Taylor either.” Tao guessed they’d known they had moles in the station



and might even have suspected that Brown and Taylor were those moles.

“So, basically, the pack never admits to anything.”

“We don’t have to answer to human laws. But the minute we start explaining ourselves and justifying our actions, we’re effectively answering to them. Besides, what we did is really no different than a human shooting an intruder for trespassing.”

“True.” She took a long breath. “I’m glad there’ll be no undeserved repercussions. I’m glad it’s all over.”

“Me too.” He cupped her chin. “I need your mouth again.” The kiss was soft, slow, a lazy exploration. He slid his fingers into her hair, touching where the horrid bump had been the night before. It was gone now—no scab or inflammation, as if the wound had never been there. But it had, he’d nearly lost her, nearly died right along with her. His chest ached at the thought.

Tao rolled her onto her back. “I need to be in you. Then we shower, eat, and see the kids before they turn up again and break down the door to check you’re okay.” At that moment there was a light rap on the door. “Spoke too soon,” he choked out.

Slipping out of the bed, he opened the door to find two little people waiting. Seeing that Riley was awake, they dashed inside and literally leaped onto the bed. Tao smiled, heart squeezing as they hugged the breath out of Riley and peppered her cheeks with kisses. Dexter even gave her a slice of apple that, surprisingly, looked fresh.

Savannah cast Tao a severe frown. “You said you would come for us when she woke up.”

“I was just about to, so I’m not happy that you beat me here. You psychic or something?”

Savannah giggled and then turned to Riley. “Tao says the bad people are gone now.”

“They’re gone,” Riley confirmed.

“I wanted to help when the bad lady came to our room.”

Riley brushed the little girl’s hair away from her face. “You couldn’t have helped, sweetheart. She was much bigger and stronger than you are. But she really is gone now—she’ll never harm you again, I promise.”

Dexter cocked his head, looking at her bare shoulders. “Naked?”

Riley chuckled. “Yes, I am. Do you think you could give me a few minutes to get dressed?”

Savannah sighed. “You have to be fast.” She frowned at Tao. “And no

kissing.”

He raised his hand. “Yes, ma’am.” Closing the door after the kids, he smiled at Riley. “We’ll never be bored.”

“Never,” she agreed.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



*One month later*

**D**o you hear that?”  
Snuggled into Tao’s side with her head on his chest as they lay on the grass in the clearing, Riley opened her eyes. “What?”

“Exactly,” said Tao. “Nothing except for the sounds of nature. No kids squealing. No pack mates nattering. No Greta being a pain in your ass. Just us.”

With a smile Riley closed her eyes and inhaled the fresh air, letting it fill her lungs. “So this matches up to your dream?”

Fingers working through her hair, Tao said, “No, it’s even better.”

When she’d months ago suggested they enact the very peaceful dream he’d had about them lying here just like this, she hadn’t expected to feel so . . . serene. Being surrounded by nature always relaxed her, but as she nestled against her mate, enjoying the warm kiss of the sun on her skin and the surprisingly relaxing sound of the river water flowing across the rocks and boulders, she was sure she could easily drift into a dreamless sleep.

Makenna and Ryan had taken the kids off her hands for a while, since it was the one-week anniversary of Riley and Tao’s mating ceremony. The pack had promised to give them time alone—something they didn’t have often, given that they both had demanding positions. They saw plenty of each other; they were just often surrounded by others, mostly children.

Tao picked up his mate’s hand and traced the wolf tattoo on her inner arm. She’d gotten it done the day after their mating ceremony, while he’d had a raven tattooed on his chest, just above his heart. “Did you have this done on

your inner arm to help cover your scar?” He didn’t think the scar was bad, but it *was* a reminder of what Shirley had done to her. Tao would have wanted to cover it too.

Sage and Ruby had been disappointed to hear that Shirley was dead. Since she’d attacked both their daughters, the Alphas had wanted to kill her themselves. Cynthia had taken a bullet to the stomach, thanks to Shirley, but she was okay—albeit allegedly shaken up. Like Tao gave much of a shit either way.

“No, I thought about having the tattoo done on my chest like you did,” said Riley, “but I want it where I can look at it whenever I want to.”

Tao smiled. “I guess you picked a good place for it, then.” He could remember the ceremony as if it had been yesterday, remember the violet dress that matched her eyes, remember the tender look on her face as she’d spoken the ceremonial words, and remember the huge celebration that had followed.

In addition to the pack, lots of other people had been present—including his parents, his brother, Max, Ethan, Lucy, Madisyn, and the Mercury Pack. Max and Ethan had already been on their territory, since they’d turned their brief visit into an extended stay. They didn’t leave until a few days after the mating ceremony, taking Lucy with them.

His mother *loved* Ethan and Max. Literally adored them. She’d had them over for dinner five times during their stay with the pack. She’d also made a full apology for her behavior to Riley, whom she’d promptly fallen in love with. Riley seemed to have forgiven Avery for her initial rudeness, and there had been a couple of occasions when they’d banded against Greta for the sheer fun of it. He suspected that Greta, being a little warped, had enjoyed the sparring just as much as they did.

Greta hadn’t made many disparaging comments at the ceremony, though—that was probably because her boyfriend, Allen, had been there. She didn’t seem to like exercising her bitchy muscle when the guy was around, which meant the females were all hoping Greta and Allen imprinted on each other at some point; maybe then they’d all get a damn rest from Greta’s bullshit.

Tao frowned as he heard the crunch of twigs and pine needles. Whoever was walking around these parts better head the other way; he wanted time alone with his mate. “Do you realize something?”

She propped her chin up on his chest. “What?”

“Three times this week”—a leaf fluttered down from a branch and landed in her hair, so he plucked it out and put it on the grass—“you slept the entire night through.”

“Sort of.”

He frowned. “Sort of?”

“Well, I did wake up, but I managed to get back asleep using the mating bond.”

He blinked. “I don’t understand.”

“The first time I woke up, I was totally wired and decided to just get up, but I was afraid of waking you. So I tapped into the bond, into *you*, to check how deeply you were sleeping. I felt how tired you were, how at peace your mind was, and how relaxed your body was. The next thing I knew, my eyelids were heavy and my mind had calmed down a little. It had to have been less than a minute before I fell back asleep.”

Hope shimmered through him. “And it worked three times?”

“Yeah. I thought the first time was a fluke, but apparently not.”

“This is fucking great news; why didn’t you tell me?”

She touched his face. “You have to understand that I’ve had insomnia for a *long* time. I’ve tried pretty much every supposed ‘remedy’ you can think of, and none of them worked. The idea that I might have found a way to fall back asleep that *didn’t* involve disturbing *your* sleep . . . I didn’t want to jinx it.”

“I get it.” He kissed her. “Let’s hope it keeps working . . . although I really have no issues with fucking you back to sleep.”

She smiled against his mouth. “Well, I have issues with you having too much broken sleep, so I truly hope this continues to work.” He kissed her again, deeper this time. She moaned as his fingers sank into her hair, holding her close as he took and tasted. Her insides melted even as her body flared to life.

A twig snapped close by, and then there was a loud *hmpf*. “Here I am going for a walk, minding my own business, and I come across *this*. Must you do it out in the open where all and sundry can see you?”

With a sigh Riley glanced over her shoulder and squinted as shards of sunlight danced off the river, framing the old witch standing over her in judgment. “You say that like you caught us having sex.”

“Look at you, lounging all over him. This wouldn’t have happened in my day. *Nooooooo*. People were more reserved and believed in keeping

certain things in the privacy of their own home. *You* have no self-respect at all.”

Riley rubbed her forehead. “I’m not saying you don’t have the God-given right to be neurotic, but must you really exploit the privilege?”

“If I were you, Tao, I’d be railing at fate for letting me down so dramatically.”

Riley closed her eyes. “I’m getting that déjà poe feeling.”

“Déjà poe?” Tao echoed.

“The feeling that I’ve heard all this bullshit before.”

Greta gasped. “How dare you!”

“Look, Gretchen—”

“*It’s Greta.*”

“I don’t care.”

At that moment, Dominic and Trick came traipsing out of the woods. Tao ground his teeth. What the fuck happened to having alone time with his mate? He scowled. “What are you doing out here?”

Grinning, Dominic kicked a pinecone into a bush. “Searching for treasure. Can I look around your chest, Riley?”

Stifling a smile, Riley sighed and patted her growling mate. “Dominic, please find the will to live.”

Trick cast them an apologetic look. “We didn’t mean to interrupt. We were just looking for Zac—he’s out here somewhere in his wolf form.”

“We haven’t seen him,” said Riley.

Dominic gave her another grin. “You know . . . you have a really sexy voice. It would sound even better if it was muffled by my co—”

“*Dominic.*” Tao looked at Trick. “If you don’t kill him, I will.”

Trick shoved a laughing Dominic ahead of him. “Let’s just go before you get yourself killed. Come on, Greta.”

Once the three wolves disappeared into the trees, Riley felt Tao relax beneath her. “Peace again.”

He let out a long breath. “Yeah. Peace.” She rested her head on his chest again, so he closed his eyes. The cool breeze fluttered over his skin, easing the prickling heat of the sun and carrying the scents of pine, sun-warmed rock, and wild herbs. Branches creaked, leaves rustled . . . and someone laughed somewhere in the near distance.

Tao hissed through his teeth. All he wanted was to be alone with his mate for a while. He didn’t think it was such a big thing to ask of the

universe. But mere moments later, Makenna stumbled into the clearing.

Her eyes widened. “Sorry, I didn’t know you guys would be out here. We’ll get out of your way.” Ryan stepped into the clearing with Kye on his shoulders, Lilah clinging to his chest, Dexter wrapped around his left leg, and Savannah coiled around his right leg. He grunted at Tao in what could have been a greeting or a plea for help.

Spotting Riley and Tao, Dexter jumped down and bellowed, “Incomin’!” The cub flung himself at Tao, who caught him around the waist and held him high above his body while tickling his sides.

Knowing what was coming, Riley sat up just in time to catch Savannah as she leaped. “Hey, sweetheart.”

The little viper grinned. “You kissing again?”

Riley chuckled. “Yep.”

“Ew.” Savannah playfully hissed at Tao and then scrambled up a tree.

Tao sighed. “Let’s just go inside, we’re not going to have any peace out here.” He got to his feet, grabbed Dexter by the ankle, and dangled him upside down, making the cub laugh hysterically. Lots of bits of food fell out of Dexter’s pockets, unsurprisingly.

Makenna grabbed the little boy and righted him. “You two go off and be alone. The kids are fine with us.”

Riley blew a kiss at the kids and waved. She and Tao walked into the woods, leaving Savannah hanging upside down from a tree while the other kids climbed Ryan like he was a tree. Riley skimmed her hand over a weathered oak, feeling the rough edges of the bark. The woods really were beautiful and . . . and Tao was no longer beside her. Looking over her shoulder, she lifted a brow at him. He was wearing his “I’m thinking about sex” smile. “What?”

“You know watching you walk makes me want to throw you on the nearest surface and take you hard.”

“What’s stopping you?”

Tao was about to say nothing, but then he heard a wolf padding toward them. He halted, cursing. “I can’t take any more. I just can’t.”

She clamped her lips together, battling the urge to laugh. Then he suddenly swung her around and began dragging her deeper into the woods. “Where are we going?”

“To get some damn privacy.”

The trees thickened as they walked farther and farther, and then Riley

stumbled into a cave, mouth open. Dead leaves crackled beneath their feet as he guided her inside. “I never saw this before,” she told him.

“You haven’t been on our territory long enough to explore every little crevice.”

She stiffened. “There are no bats in here, right?” Because if yes, she was so gone. Just thinking of their creepy, fanged faces made her shiver. She couldn’t smell any guano, but still . . .

“No bats,” he assured her, drawing her close.

*Thank God.* She glanced around the cave, trying to get a sense of how far back it went. There were claw marks all around, no doubt made by the pack.

“It’s not deep,” said Tao. “It doesn’t lead anywhere.”

“And there are no bats?”

He chuckled. “No bats.” He backed her against the cold, bumpy stone wall. “Just you. And me.” Which was just the way Tao wanted it. He slammed his mouth down on hers, feasting on her with a greedy, primal hunger that never went away. It was always there, always tempting him to taste and take what was his.

Riley slid her hands under his shirt, touching sleek, hot skin. Raw need licked at her flesh, making her nerve endings burn. She curled her leg around his and ground against his cock. He was hard and ready, and she needed him now. She dug her nails into his chest—a feminine demand for more that made him growl. She swallowed the sound, gasping as he shoved a hand under her shirt and gave her breast a possessive squeeze.

“I should have known you were mine by just how well this fits in my hand.” He rocked his hips into hers. “And by just how well this pussy fits my cock.” Tao whipped off her shirt and latched on to her nipple, sucking and nipping. “You really do have phenomenal breasts. And the softest skin. Perfect for licking and biting.”

“Tao, the compliments aren’t necessary—you’re gonna get laid.”

He gave a dark chuckle. “Oh, I know that.” Snapping open her fly, he thrust his hand into her panties and sank two fingers inside her. He groaned at how hot and slick she was, loving how her pussy clenched around his fingers. “You’re going to come for me. Then I’m going to fuck you.”

“I have no absolutely no issue with that, just in case there was any doubt.”

His lips curved. “There was no doubt, baby.” He fucked her with his



fingers, kissing her hard. Her mouth was soft and hot and tasted of everything he wanted, of everything that belonged to him.

Tao hooked his fingers, finding that spot that made her gasp. She tried riding his hand, frantic for more, so he gave her more—thrusting his fingers faster and harder. Her pussy fluttered and contracted around them as she came, moaning into his mouth. There was no holding back any longer. He had to have her. “Jeans. Take them off.”

Panting, Riley blinked, still recovering from those skilled, sure fingers. He’d totally overwhelmed and devastated her senses, leaving her a little off balance. She toed off her shoes and unbuttoned her fly. He helped her shove down her jeans and then kicked them aside. He spun her around, and she slapped her hands against the stone wall.

“That’s it.” He thrust hard, burying himself balls deep, and her pussy clamped around him. “Fuck yeah.”

Riley let her head fall back as he fucked her hard, fingers digging into her hips. Every thrust was deep, bold, possessive. She bit her lip to hold in her moans, knowing they would echo, but she feared she wouldn’t manage it long. Not while he was mercilessly slamming into her pussy at this frenzied pace.

Tao raked his teeth over her pulse. “You’re ready to come, aren’t you?”

Hell yes, she was. “Not gonna last much longer.”

He took one of her hands and brought it down to her pussy, using her finger to play with her clit. He growled into her ear. “Come for me, baby.” Through their bond he felt her climax hit her, felt wave after wave of agonized bliss crash into her. It vibrated up the bond and slammed into him as he slapped his hand over her mouth, muffling her scream. Burying his face in her neck, Tao exploded deep inside her, growling as her pussy squeezed and milked his cock dry.

When he could finally move again, he curled his arms around her and kissed the side of her neck. “Mating you was the best and smartest idea I ever had.”

She smiled, panting a little. “I thought you didn’t like trouble.”

“I like your brand of trouble.” He nuzzled her. “Actually, no, I love it, just like I love you. I wouldn’t change anything about you. Not a thing.”

“Not even that I keep wearing your shirts?”

“No.”

“Not even that I have a raven inside me who keeps tormenting you?”

“No.”

“Not even that I borrow—”

“Steal.”

“—your stuff?”

“No.” She’d given his onyx ring back eventually. Besides . . . “What’s mine is yours.”

She melted into him, happy, mellow. But she had to ask, “Are you *sure* there are no bats in here? I really think I heard something.” An ominous squeaky sound.

He sighed. “Woman, there are no bats.”

“*Woman?*”

“Are you not a woman?”

“Are you not smart enough to sense the tone? And it was a valid question. It’s a cave. Bats inhabit caves. Do you want rabies?”

Honestly, Tao felt like banging his head on the wall. “Not all bats carry rabies.”

“Ninety-eight percent of rabies cases are caused by bats.”

“They are not.”

“They could be.”

He growled. “You’re a pain in my ass, Porter.”

“If you ever again want to be a pain in mine, you’ll get me out of this damn cave before the bats wake up.”

“Insane. Fucking insane.”

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



**I**n terms of research, it wasn't just Google that was a big help this time, it was also Bing, so major thanks to you both.

Now that thanking nonhuman entities is out of the way, I want to say a super big thanks to my family—they're seriously the best people ever, and I hugely appreciate their patience and support.

Also, big thanks to Melody Guy—I've said it before, Melody, and I'll say it again: you *have* to write your own book, I am waiting impatiently to read what I know will be fantastic.

Thanks to the Montlake Romance team, especially Christopher Werner and Jessica Poore. A writer can't ask for a better team of people.

Of course, I want to say a humungous thank-you to everyone who's taken time out of their lives to read this book. You're all total rock stars, so don't let anyone tell you different. If you wish to contact me, you can reach me by e-mail at [suzanne\\_e\\_wright@like.co.uk](mailto:suzanne_e_wright@like.co.uk) or via social media.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*Photo © 2012 Steven Wright*

**S**uzanne Wright can't remember a time when she wasn't creating characters and telling their tales. Even as a child in England, she loved writing poems, plays, and stories. As an adult, Wright has published sixteen novels: *From Rags*, *Burn*, *Blaze*, five *Deep in Your Veins* novels, six books in the *Phoenix Pack* series, and two books in the *Mercury Pack* series. Wright lives in Liverpool with her husband and two children. Visit her online at [www.suzannewright.co.uk](http://www.suzannewright.co.uk).