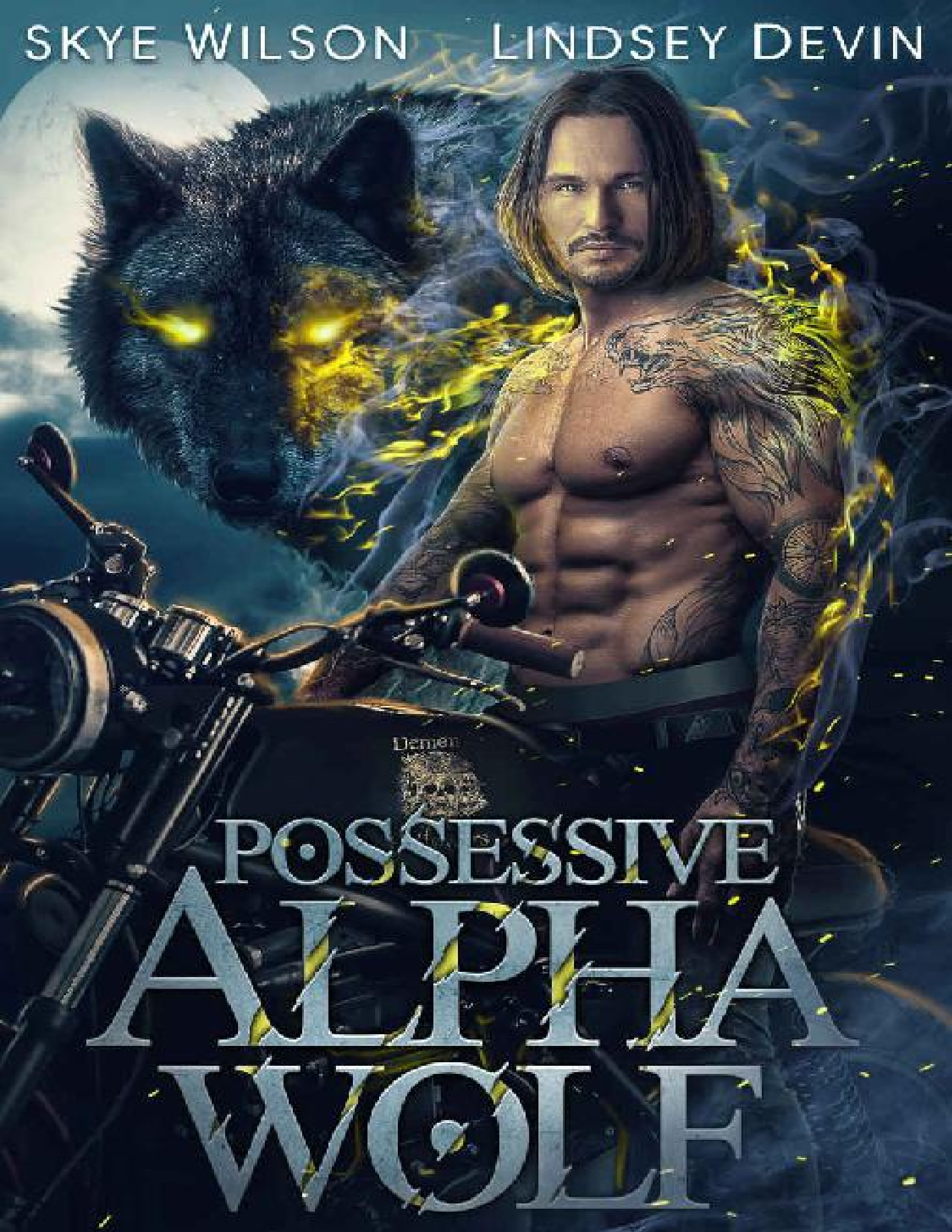


SKYE WILSON LINDSEY DEVIN



POSSESSIVE
ALPHA
WOLF

POSSESSIVE ALPHA WOLF

DEMON HOLLOWERS MOTORCYCLE CLUB: BOOK 1

SKYE WILSON
LINDSEY DEVIN

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ONE

SERENE

“**W**here is your husband now, Ms. Duran?”

Tommy was only five, but his questions always packed a punch. I smiled—what else could I do?—and ignored the tightness in my chest. Slowly, I looked up from the picture book to the five-year-olds gathered at my feet. They sat on the carpeted floor of the story nook, eyes wide and ears perked up, but they were no longer interested in Papa Bear’s adventures.

“I don’t have a husband,” I replied, and Tommy’s hand shot back up in a flash. “Nor do I have a boyfriend.”

His hand went back down, and a puzzled look washed over his freckled face. He mulled over my reply for a second, then asked the question every child has been preprogrammed with. “Why?”

I looked down at the picture book, where Papa Bear and his family sat around a pop-up picnic table, but I found no help there. Papa Bear’s tale contained all the platitudes a five-year-old needed to hear about friendship and family but offered no wisdom to a twenty-nine-year-old schoolteacher with no dating prospects.

“I just haven’t found the right person,” I replied, and the tightness in my chest became even worse. I wasn’t lying—you can’t really fool children—but that didn’t make the truth any easier to bear. I had spent my twenties dreaming of a busy family life, with a loving husband and children of my own, but that dream remained out of reach.

“Don’t you want children?” Anika leaned forward, elbows propped up on her skinny knees. Much like Tommy, she was far more interested in my personal life than in Papa Bear’s adventures. She tugged on the end of her

ponytail, bit on the corner of her lips, and frowned. “My mom says she hasn’t had a good night’s sleep ever since I was born. If I couldn’t nap, I wouldn’t want children either.”

My smile widened, and this time it was a genuine smile. “Napping has nothing to do with it.” I tapped the illustrated pages of Papa Bear’s Adventures with one finger. “Now, who wants to know if Papa Bear brought some honey to the picnic?”

There were only a few nods, but it was all I needed.

I took my time with the storybook, deepening my voice every time Papa Bear had a line, and that did the trick—my attentive audience forgot all about my lack of a family. Kids are like that. They value the present moment and don’t let their minds run in endless circles. Maybe that’s because they have their whole lives ahead of them, or maybe they’re just content with whatever explanations the adults have to offer them. Whatever it is, they’re immune to the anxieties of the adult world.

I envied that.

All my life, I’d wanted nothing more than to build a family. No, I didn’t want to be barefoot, pregnant, and chained to the kitchen sink—but I did want someone I could love and raise children with. The problem was love had always eluded me. I should’ve already made my peace with it, but I still couldn’t let go.

Maybe it was my fault.

I didn’t like thinking of myself as picky, but I also wasn’t the kind of woman who’d settle just because she wanted a family. Of course, that didn’t make things any easier for me—as picture-perfect as the small town of Brightenville was, there weren’t a lot of options here for a single woman in her late twenties. Not that I could complain. I was a schoolteacher at Brightenville Elementary, which meant I had plenty of kids to educate and pamper, even if they weren’t my own.

“And that’s it.” I closed the book and looked up. “You know what happens now, so get to it.”

The children, twenty-four in all, jumped to their feet and rushed toward the study area. Tommy led the pack, skipping his way to the painting kit drawers, and took it upon himself to distribute the crayons and blank pages they’d need for the activity.

While they busied themselves with drawing their favorite part of Papa Bear’s Adventures, I rearranged the pillows in our story nook. Some had

edges frayed, others were stained with old blotches of ink, but only one of them needed stitches. I made a mental note to carry that pillow home, then tidied up the rest of the room. I wasn't a mother, but I knew the importance of squeezing in simple tasks whenever the children were distracted.

By the time they were done with their activity, most of the children's parents were already at the door. I gathered all the drawings so we could go through them the following day, then started grabbing the backpacks from the labeled hooks by the door. It took a lot of kisses and hugs, but fifteen minutes later, I was done with my workday.

Outside, I pulled my bike from the rack, stuffed the torn pillow into the front basket, dropped my bag over it, and hopped onto the seat. The warm days wouldn't last forever, so I made a point of riding my bike to and from work as much as possible, enjoying the feel of the bright California sun on my face.

The late afternoon sun was still shining when I rode out, casting the shadow of the quaint, red-bricked school over the road. Perfectly nestled among manicured gardens and tree-lined sidewalks, Brightenville Elementary looked more like a country cottage than a school. That was just how I liked it, and the kids shared that sentiment. For them, coming here was coming home.

Unfortunately, the school's rustic appeal extended to its inside. The desks were old and scratched, there was no whiteboard, and computers were novelties that belonged to the outside world. Even my teacher's desk had a lean to it, which I'd fixed with a folded-up newspaper. I would've gladly furnished the entire school myself, but that was impossible on my teacher's salary. Every now and again, I'd buy supplies for the less fortunate children, but my bank account balance didn't allow for more than that. Brightenville Elementary remained one of those schools where chalk and a blackboard reigned supreme.

I rode down the street, the wind whipping my blonde hair around my neck, and breathed the salty air into my lungs. The rustling of the waves reached me not long after, and at a bend in the road, the blue-green of the ocean unfurled before me. A wooden fence followed the zigzagging road, separating the bike lane from the warm sand that led into the Pacific, and I followed it all the way home.

My little cottage sat on the other side of the road, a stone's throw away from the beach. Unlike the red brick houses that could be found further inland, the cottage had been built with flat-sawn boards, overlaid in rows.

The paint was already starting to peel, but the vibrant coastal blue I'd painted the house with still showed. It had a fisherman's charm to it with its crooked shutters and salt-licked walls, but I liked it all the same.

With the pillow tucked under my arm, I chained the bike next to the old Jeep Wrangler I'd inherited from my father right after graduation and climbed the stairs onto the porch. Like always, I had to give the door a hard push before it opened, and only then did I slip into the breezy embrace of the living room. It wasn't much of a living room, as it competed with the kitchen for space, but it was my safe place. It was there that I had my meals—no room in the kitchen for that—and wrestled with my unfinished novel.

Glad to be home, I dropped my keys in the hollowed conch I'd scavenged from the beach and stretched my back. I was about to head into the kitchen when I noticed something on the floor, right by the entrance. It was an oversized beige envelope, and it looked completely stuffed. I threw the pillow onto the couch and bent down to pick it up. On the left upper corner was a Philadelphia address I didn't recognize, and it showed Horace Samuels as the sender.

My first thought was that the mailman had made a mistake—I didn't know anyone in Philadelphia—but my name and address were there too. Serene Duran, Brightenville; check and check.

"All right, Serene," I muttered, ripping the seal on the envelope. "Let's see what's up."

Sitting on the edge of my couch, I emptied the envelope onto my lap. The first thing to come out was a legal notice on letterhead, straight from the offices of Horace Samuels. According to the words typed beneath, a man by the name of Bryan Atwater had just died, and Horace Samuels had been named as the estate's administrator. Why that was relevant to me, I had no idea.

I skimmed the rest of the notice until the words jumped out from the paper and grabbed me by the throat. The name Serene Duran was there, and right after it were the words 'Bryan Atwater's biological daughter and heir.' My hands started trembling so much that I crumpled the edges of the paper. Could this be a mistake?

It *had* to be a mistake.

I put the notice aside and grabbed the rest of the documents, which turned out to be Bryan Atwater's detailed will. It was hard to follow and understand all the legalese, but I got the gist of it quick enough—according to the will, I

was heir to an incalculable fortune. I couldn't really put a number on it, but the liquid assets alone ranked in the millions. Then there were the properties, stocks, ownership interests, bonds, and antiques.

"This can't be right," I said, grabbing the notice again. I went through it two more times, just to make sure I hadn't misread anything...but I hadn't. The words 'biological daughter' and 'heir' were there, plain as day.

I closed my eyes and thought back to my childhood.

There was nothing suspicious there. My first memories were of my parents—Ana and Michael Duran—and of Brightenville. I had no recollection of ever living someplace else, nor did I remember anyone other than my parents. Still, did that really prove anything? They could've adopted me when I was just a baby, far too young to hold any memories.

But if so, why had they never told me about it?

Still with my eyes closed, I took a deep breath and tried to clear my head. I needed to get to the bottom of this, and there was only one way to do it. I gave myself an encouraging nod, put the letter and the will back inside the envelope, and jumped to my feet. I grabbed my car keys, and less than a minute later, I was pulling the Wrangler out of the driveway.

I was so nervous that I forced myself to go as slow as I possibly could. Still, disoriented as I was, it felt like the whole ride happened in the blink of an eye, the streets passing me by in a blur until I pulled the car into my parents' gravel driveway and killed the engine. With my hands still on the sun-cracked steering wheel, I looked at my childhood home and tried to make sense of what was happening.

My mother must've recognized the low rumble of my Wrangler's engine, as she appeared in the front door shortly after I parked. Slightly taller than I was, she had a slender figure any fifty-year-old mom would envy; her almond-shaped eyes were a deep brown, much like her hair, and her warm smile was a permanent fixture. I had the same warm smile and lithe figure, but as for the rest...

"I wasn't expecting you today." My mother's smile widened, showing me a glimpse of a barely noticeable snaggletooth, and she waved me over as I stepped out of the car. Before I could say a word, she laced her arm in mine and dragged me into the house. "Came to get some dinner? I can heat something up. Your father and I had some lasagna for lunch, and there's still some left."

"Right," I mumbled, having no idea how to broach the subject. Clutching

the envelope in my hands, I followed my mother into the kitchen. I went past the beige-carpeted stairs that led up to my old bedroom and smiled as I remembered the way I always used to trip on that damn carpet. Somehow, that memory relaxed me. No matter what the truth was, this remained my childhood home. Nothing would ever change that.

My father was already in the kitchen, sitting at the table with a cup of black coffee. “Hey, honey.” He put his newspaper aside and got up to kiss my forehead, then gave me a wink and went back to his coffee.

Dad’s salt-and-pepper hair was already thinning, and he was wearing the reading glasses the ophthalmologist had prescribed him a few years back, but he remained as handsome as ever. Broad-shouldered and with a sharp nose and jawline, his looks straddled the thin line between brawn and brains. Much like my mother, though, there wasn’t a single golden hair on him, nor did his features resemble mine.

I had always blamed that on funky genetics, but now...

“Wildberry tea, right?” My mother waltzed around the kitchen, popping the lasagna into the oven and turning the kettle on. She had never learned how to stand still, and there was always a whirlwind of activity whenever she was in the room. Now that I’d moved out, she turned it up a notch every time I swung by the house.

“Yeah, sure, Mom.” I placed the envelope on the table but kept my hands on top of it, as if part of me wanted to hide it. My mother still hadn’t noticed it, but it was different with my father—his eyes had darted toward the envelope the moment I entered the kitchen.

“Is something wrong, honey?” he asked, looking at me over the rim of his glasses. He was more perceptive than my mother, and he always knew whenever I was struggling with something. During my younger years, that had felt like magic. A bad day at school? Dad knew about it. Boy trouble? Dad knew too. Just found out that I was adopted, and my entire life was a lie? Yeah, there was no hiding it from him.

“I just got this in the mail,” I replied, my stomach tied in knots. I pushed the envelope across the table and fought against a wave of nausea. “I... I don’t understand it, Dad.”

“A letter?” My mother stood behind my father, looking over his shoulder as he read the notice. She was holding the teacup with her right hand, and the left was on my father’s shoulder. “What is it...? Bryan Atwater? Never heard of him. And what’s that on the...?”

She pressed her lips together and trailed off, her fingers tightening on my father's shoulder so much that her knuckles turned white. As for my father, his face remained impassive. Once he was done with the letter, he folded it up carefully and pushed it back toward me.

"Serene..." He looked up, the creases around his eyes deepening. "I'm sorry you had to learn about it this way."

"I don't understand," I repeated, even though I did. I just didn't want to face it. "Dad...this can't be true, right? This is a mistake. Somewhere, somehow...someone must've messed up. They mistook me for the wrong girl, and..."

"I'm sorry," my father breathed out. He reached across the table and laid his hand on top of mine. "We wanted to tell you, we really did, but it never seemed like the right time." He shook his head, and reaching behind him, grabbed my mother's hand, too. "I knew it, though...the truth would have to come out eventually."

I looked up at my mother; part of me expected to find her laughing. There was no other explanation for this—my parents were pulling some kind of elaborate prank on me. But that was silly, of course. One look at my mother's face and I knew this wasn't a prank. Far from it.

"I'm sorry, honey," she whispered, her eyes bright with tears. "I'm really, really sorry."

She put the teacup down on the table and stared at it for a long moment, watching as the steam funneled up in front of her eyes.

"I'm not mad." I leaned forward and took her hand in mine. The words spilled from my mouth before I could even process them, but I knew them to be true—no matter what the story was, nothing would change the fact that these were my real parents. "It's okay, it really is. I just...I just want to know."

"We couldn't get pregnant." My mother's voice was frail, nothing but a faint little whisper. "We tried, Serene, we tried for a long time. I went for some tests, and we found out that I—"

"We decided to go the adoption route," my father cut in, gently taking over for my mother. "We found a private agency who guaranteed us they could fast-track the process. Everything was done behind closed doors, and we didn't know who your birth parents were...and we didn't care. We were just so happy to have you, Serene. That first time we saw you, we fell in love with you right then and there. You were so tiny, so fragile, but you reached

out and wrapped your little fingers around my thumb and...”

I had never seen my father shed a tear.

It didn't happen when he tripped down the stairs and broke a leg. It didn't happen when he was laid off and had to change careers, and it didn't happen when his own mother died. My dad was the textbook definition of a stoic man, someone who knew how to keep a lid on his emotions, but now...

“It's okay.” My voice trembled as I said it, and the saltiness of my own tears coated my tongue. I bit my lip, attempting to rein my emotions in, but it was impossible. Overwhelmed, I rose from my seat and went around the table. I fell straight into my mother's embrace, and no more than a second later, my father had his long arms wrapped around us.

“You're our daughter,” my father said. “No matter what that letter says, you're still our daughter. We're a family.”

“Yes,” I half-whispered, half-sobbed against my mother's blouse, “yes, we are.”

I'm Serene Duran, I told myself, clinging to that name as if it were a life raft, *not Serene Atwater*. No matter what my name was, though, one thing was clear—my hidden past had come knocking, and it demanded my attention.

Whether I liked it or not, my life was about to change for good.

TWO

TEVIN

My prey wasn't far.

I padded through the underbrush, keeping my figure low as I crept toward a ridge of woody hills. There was a slight breeze in the air, and with it came the musky scent of my prey. It was a strong scent, heady and intoxicating, and it turned my heart into an anxious war drum.

I kept to the shadows of the lush pine trees, weaving myself into the patches of darkness, and stopped. The wind was shifting, which forced me to take an alternative path. I went around the ridge, down a rocky trail that plunged into a small box canyon, and that's when I saw him.

The buck was massive, close to three hundred pounds, and it sported a vicious-looking rack. The antlers were large and thorny, like cleavers made of bone, and they promised a challenge. If I missed the buck's throat, he'd impale me without a second thought, and I'd die a long and agonizing death.

But we won't miss, a harsh voice growled inside my head, the words blending in with my own thoughts. *We never miss.*

Slowly, I approached the buck from behind, navigating the dry foliage with maddening patience, careful not to make a sound, and trying to rein in my wolf's thirst for blood. It was hard. When fully shifted, his violent instincts became my own, and they overpowered all my rational thoughts. My wolf was vicious and feral, and he refused to accept me as his master—ours was a partnership of equals.

The buck raised his head suddenly, sniffing at the air. I ducked low, hiding my hulking wolf form in a dense thicket, and waited. I was no more than a quick dash away from him, but I needed to be careful when choosing an opening. Even my wolf knew enough not to charge us to our death.

The buck walked past the canyon's opening, its enormous figure cut against the setting sun, and finally lowered his head.

Now, my wolf demanded, kill him now.

I bared my fangs, turned my spine into a coiled spring, and readied myself for the kill. This was it. The scent of the buck was so powerful now that it clouded my mind, driving my wolf mad with bloodlust.

I was about to spring forward when the thunderclap of a shotgun exploded in the air. It was a distant sound, but it was still loud enough to scare the buck. Surprisingly nimble for his size, he jumped over a rotten log and trampled the underbrush, cutting a path through a maze of redwood trees.

Part of me wanted to follow it, to make sure my wolf's hunger would be sated, but I knew better. That shot belonged to a Mossberg 12-gauge shotgun, which only Hal wielded, and there had been no subsequent gunfire. *We need you*—that's what that shot said.

Angry, I turned around and rushed through the woodlands, moving like a silent but deadly shadow. After stalking that buck for almost an hour, moving so slowly it pained me, I relished the sensation of power that now coursed through my limbs.

Ten minutes later, I reached the trailhead that overlooked the valley. The incline leading into it was dotted with log cabins, all built by my pack brothers, and I headed toward the farthest one. It was small, made of rough wooden logs, but its exterior was spotless. There were no old bird nests under the eaves, and there wasn't a single leaf on the porch. Even though I barely spent any time here, I made sure to keep the cabin spotless. Breathing hard from my run, I climbed the steps onto the porch, pushed the door open with my muzzle, and shifted into my human form.

There was a momentary burst of pain as my bones and tissue shed their wolf-like power, and I stretched my neck as my muzzle receded into a chiseled jaw. Lazily, I raked a hand over my face, groaning as I felt the prickle of my stubble under my fingertips. Still naked, I padded into the living room and grabbed a pair of jeans and a black shirt from the hook behind the door. I put on my steel-toed boots, grabbed my 9mm Glock from underneath the entryway floorboards, and headed back out.

My custom-built Harley-Davidson was outside, leaning on its kickstand, but I walked around it and followed the backroad that led into the valley. There were no signs of the others here—we usually gathered at the MC this late in the day, where our pack lands met the freeway leading into

Brightenville—but I knew I'd find Hal and Ben in the main cabin.

I followed the bend in the road and, much like I suspected, found two Harleys by the side of the main cabin. Larger than the other cabins, this one doubled as Ben's house and office, and it was from here that he coordinated most of our pack's operations. MC business mostly happened ten miles north, where we had the bar and our full-service body shop, but it was here at the cabin that Ben preferred to handle more sensitive matters. Our pack lands comprised around a thousand acres, offering us enough freedom to roam around without worrying about humans, and Ben's cabin had been erected right at the center—the alpha's cabin was our pack's nerve center, both figuratively and literally.

Hal was leaning against the deck railing on the porch, his hulking arms flexing as he folded them across his chest, and his shotgun sat against the weathered pillar beside him. “Where the hell have you been, Tevin? I called the MC, but the guys told me you weren't there. You had me shooting into the air like a goddamn idiot.”

“I was hunting.” The wolf inside me stirred as I remembered the imposing figure of the buck I'd been stalking, and it took a conscious effort to rein my wolf's anger in. There was nothing worse than a failed hunt. “I came as soon as I heard it. Is there trouble?”

“Not exactly,” Hal replied, shrugging his meaty shoulders. He ran a hand over his shaved head and scratched the back of his neck. He was almost as tall as I was, but he made up for those missed inches in width. Despite his baldness, he sported a white beard that brushed against his protruding belly. If Santa rode a Harley, had a penchant for loud shotguns and drank whiskey around the clock, his name would be Hal. “We were about to join the others at the MC, but we just got an important call. Terrible timing, if you ask me. Max has these girls coming in for a little party, and I was looking forward to —”

“Is Ben inside?” I cut Hal short and climbed onto the porch. He'd never shut up if I let him run his mouth, so it was better I tackled this head on. Hal might be our alpha's right hand, but he wasn't one for expediency.

“Yeah, he's waiting for you.” He took a step back and pushed the door open with his shoulder. “Go on.”

The two-story cabin, massive as it was, barely had any rooms. It had an open floorplan with tall wooden pillars supporting the crossbeam ceiling, and the walls were lined with hunting trophies. Ben had given up hunting after

taking over the pack, but he'd been one of the best before that. At least that's what I'd been told; back when I was still an angry pup and joined the Newhaven pack, Ben was already its alpha—not only that, but he was already the Demon Hollower MC's president. The youngest ever, I'd been told. But he'd paid for those positions with blood and sweat, and he was well-respected for it. Now thirty-five, he was feared and respected by all my brothers.

“Hunting again?” Ben Sage sat behind the mahogany desk that dominated the far end of the room wearing his standard jeans and tee with a Demon Hollower MC vest. The club's emblem of a snarling wolf with glinting ruby eyes was on its right lapel just below Ben's title: *Pres*. His voice was rough, but his words always carried a note of self-amusement with them. “Any luck?”

Broad-shouldered and with a lantern jaw, he exuded pure confidence; there were faint creases on his forehead and around his blue eyes, and his hair and short-cropped beard glinted gold in the sunlight streaming through the window. In all the years I'd been with the pack, no one had dared challenge Ben's dominance. More than just looking strong, Ben was fearless. Anyone who dared mess with him would do so at a cost.

“I found a buck,” I admitted, “but it ran off when Hal fired his shotgun.”

“Don't blame him for it,” Ben said. “He was in a hurry to find you. We have something better for you to hunt than a buck.”

He reached into one of the drawers on his desk, retrieved a manila folder from inside it, and pushed it across the table.

“What's this?” I turned the folder around and a couple of photographs spilled out. They were all of the same woman, a slender blonde with soft features and an easy smile. She looked young, probably still in her mid-twenties.

“A target package,” Ben replied. “That's Serene Duran, a schoolteacher at Brightenville Elementary. Her father left her a fortune, and her stepmother isn't too happy about it. She wants the girl gone, and she's willing to fork over a decent sum for this job. We need the money, if we're to secure that arms deal with the Russians, so...”

Ben held my gaze, and I understood why he was asking me to take the job. As cold-blooded and devoted to the pack and the MC as my brothers were, even they would be squeamish about murdering an innocent schoolteacher. That's why Ben had summoned me here—he knew I wouldn't give two shits about it. Whatever the pack needed of me, I did. They'd taken

me in, become my family despite my near-feral wolf, and I was nothing if not loyal.

“I’ll do it.” No second-guessing it, no hesitation. My wolf was pleased. “Anything else I should know about the job?”

“No.” Ben shook his head, still pinning me with his intense gaze. “Just make sure the girl doesn’t suffer. We’re doing it for the money, but that doesn’t mean we have to be brutal about it.”

Ben took his role seriously, and at times I wondered how he actually felt about the assignments he handed out in the name of business, but he never revealed his true feelings. In the end, all that really mattered was he was a good alpha, a man I respected. So I did as I was told.

“Got it.” I nodded. “Consider it done.”



I PUSHED the kickstand into position and killed the engine. I left the Harley directly outside my motel room, where I’d be able to reach it if anyone decided to get handsy with it, and went inside. The room I’d booked and paid for with cash was crappy, with stained bedsheets and ancient wallpaper, but it’d suffice. If things went well, I’d just hole up here for a couple of hours and then leave under cover of darkness.

I drew the curtains and sat at the edge of the bed, the folder with the target package on my knees. I reviewed all the information we had on the woman—her work history, known routines and addresses—and focused on her picture. Someone had snapped it early in the morning, probably when Serene had left for work, and she was riding up the bike lane in front of her house. Her golden hair spilled down her shoulders, and the wind lifted the hem of her dress to reveal a few inches of smooth skin.

She looked like the textbook definition of innocent, and I was willing to bet she was completely oblivious to the forces gathering around her. More than just looking the part, though, she seemed *genuinely* innocent. There was nothing in her profile that hinted at shadowy connections, nor anything that merited a bullet to the back of the head. The only thing putting her at risk was that damn inheritance...and a greedy bitch of a stepmother.

That’s none of our business, my wolf snarled, sensing a hint of hesitation. I could feel him tugging at his leash, aching to be let loose. It was one thing

to prowl through the pack lands in search of large game...but it was an entirely different thrill to go after a human being. Luckily, my wolf's rage was in alignment with the pack's interests. There'd be no hesitation from me tonight.

That wasn't always the case, though. My wolf was a feral beast, vicious and impossible to tame, and I knew it was only a matter of time until he'd force me to make a mistake. Once that happened, I'd be put down. Pack law demanded it. I ground my teeth together, ignoring the twinge in my chest. Knowing the law and accepting it were two different things. I knew what my end would look like, but that didn't mean I liked it. Still, I intended to use my remaining time on this Earth contributing to the pack's future. They were my brothers, my family, my world. Which meant it was time for me to get to work.

I put the folder away and grabbed my Glock 17. I ran my fingers over the barrel, feeling the cold metal against my skin, and my wolf grunted his approval. I gave myself a nod, tucked the gun into my belt, and left the room.

A family of five was unloading a station wagon on the other end of the parking lot, and the kids all stopped to gawk at me. Brightenville was a cozy small town, a quaint pearl of suburban life in Northern California, and I stood out like a sore thumb. I was taller than most men, and my tattooed arms just added to my threatening figure. Throw in the Harley, the leather jacket, and the permanent scowl, and I looked like someone who'd taken a wrong turn somewhere on the way to a gang district.

At least the humans were unaware of my inner wolf.

If they knew that shifters walked among them, the world would lose its collective shit. Thankfully, Ben had always made sure we kept our lives a secret. That's why he'd reinvested most of the MC's profits into a thousand acres of woodland, giving us enough space to let our true selves roam free while keeping the humans at bay.

"C'mon, let's get inside," the mother said, suddenly realizing her kids were gawking at me. With a hurried gesture, she herded them into the motel room and locked the door behind her. Typical.

I hopped onto the Harley and cranked the ignition. My nostrils flared as the pungent scent of gas fumes hit me, and I pulled out of the parking lot with a jerk. The tires skidded on the asphalt as I rolled the throttle, and with a fluid turn, I joined the early evening traffic.

I escaped the freeway as soon as I could, trying to avoid the traffic, but it

was almost impossible. As small as Brightenville was, it was lively. I didn't particularly care for this busyness, and it didn't help that I could feel the other drivers' eyes on me as I passed them. Brightenville wasn't a place for someone like me, whether I was on foot or riding my custom-built Harley. Even my wolf sensed it, his angry unease flooding my system.

To make sure neither my Harley nor my appearance would give me away and scare the target, I parked a couple of streets from Serene's address and walked the rest of the way. Instead of going down the bike lane that followed the beach, I stuck to a narrow side street on the opposite side of it.

Hidden from sight by a garden wall, I leaned against it and snuck a peek at Serene's house. It was an old beach house, but its coastal blue tones ensured it fit in with the rest of the neighborhood. It looked like the kind of place a free-spirited woman in her twenties might have; not large enough for a family, but definitely large enough to house a lifetime of dreams and ambitions.

There was a chained-up bike beside the rickety porch, but no car in the driveway. According to Serene's file, she drove a '92 Jeep Wrangler, so this probably meant she wasn't home yet. The house was dark, too, with no light coming from the windows, which confirmed my suspicions. I glanced at my wristwatch—it was almost ten o'clock—and prepared myself for a long wait. I didn't know why a schoolteacher would be out and about this late in the evening, but that didn't matter in the slightest. I wouldn't leave before I was done with my assignment.

I didn't have to wait long.

No more than ten minutes later, I heard the familiar growl of an old engine coming up the road, and its headlights shone over the asphalt shortly after. Serene pulled into the driveway and I instinctively reached behind my back. I wasn't going to shoot her out in the open—I'd wait until she was inside—but old habits died hard.

My heart beat faster as she opened the car door, and I took a step back, retreating into the shadows. Serene was by herself, which made my job easier; witnesses always complicated things. My eyes were drawn to the envelope she carried in her delicate hands, then to her slender waist, and finally to the curtain of gold that partially obscured her face. She turned, and a faint breeze caught her scent, carrying it toward me, and then...

My world came crashing down.

My wolf went absolutely crazy, whining and biting at my consciousness

as I tried to process the barrage of sensations coursing through me. Her scent, lightly floral, seemed to seep into my pores and cloud my ability to think. Every fiber of my being came alive at once, my skin feeling like it was burning from the inside out. A primal compulsion drawing me toward her nearly had me leaving my hideout. It was as if an invisible thread were strung between us, one end tied firmly around my heart.

What the fuck?

I sucked in an unsteady breath as heat prickled my spine, my wolf dangerously close to the surface. I was so drawn to Serene that I was on the verge of coming apart at the seams.

She's ours, my wolf snarled, you have to go claim her. Now, do it now!

"Shut the fuck up," I muttered under my breath, slipping deeper into the shadows and flattening myself against the rear wall. I shoved my fingers into my hair and held my head with both hands, as if to stop it from imploding, and squeezed my eyes shut. It couldn't be, it simply wasn't possible. None of this made sense. And yet...there was no denying that scent, my reaction to Serene.

This woman—a *human* woman—was my mate.

Not yet, my wolf insisted. First, you have to bite her. You have to make her yours. You must. Claim her now!

"No," I growled, even as my wolf's hunger sank its hooks into my mind. If I went into the house now and tried to claim Serene, the only thing I'd manage to do was kill her. She'd be powerless beneath the might of my untamed wolf. The control I had over him was flimsy at best, and I wouldn't risk letting him loose around the woman. He wouldn't be able to control himself.

Hell, I could barely control myself now as I heard Serene's door shut and the lock click into place behind her. Not that a lock would stop me or the feral beast I shared a soul with. Her scent still lingered on the air, driving me crazy.

Knowing I was coming unhinged and the best way to keep Serene safe was for me to get the hell out of here, I ambled back to the Harley, every step of the way like a battle unto itself. I had come here to kill Serene, but now things had changed irrevocably. I knew in the depths of my being that I could never hurt my mate. Such a hideous act went against every single one of my instincts. On that, both my wolf and I were in agreement. Serene was my mate...

But she was off-limits. How could I trust myself around her? Not only would it be impossible to resist her, but there was no way I'd be able to keep my wolf a secret. Not when it was taking superhuman willpower just to keep from shifting right here and now. Humans could never learn of the existence of shifters—our lore and near extinction was enough to show how badly that could go.

But not only that, I didn't trust myself to be near her. Danger followed in my wake. Hell, *I* was the danger, the bad guy parents warned their children about. My life had no room for someone as innocent as Serene. Already, the knowledge that she was my mate had come along with a fierce protective instinct.

I would keep her safe from any and every threat—especially myself.

THREE

SERENE

“Are you sure you’re okay? You can take more than just a day off, Serene.”

“No, no,” I replied, putting the phone on speaker as I paced the living room. “It’s just...there’s a little something I need to deal with, that’s all. I’ll be back tomorrow. Again, I really hate to be calling at such short notice, and I promise you that—”

“No need to worry,” Louise hurried to say. She was a good ten years older than I was and had been at Brightenville Elementary for almost twenty years, but she remained an absolute sweetheart. “You’ve *never* taken a personal day before, Serene, and you’ve been with us for a long time now. If you need a day off, just take it. Melanie’s coming in today, dear, so she’ll cover for you. Just do what you need to do, all right? We’ll handle the rest.”

“Thanks, Louise,” I said, my stomach tying itself in knots. I hated to do it, but I couldn’t drag myself into work this morning. The kids would know something was up right away, and the last thing I needed was to be battered with endless questions. “I really appreciate this.”

I threw the phone onto the couch and paced around some more, feeling like a caged animal before the slaughter. I’d spent the entire night tossing and turning, replaying the conversation with my parents on a loop, and it seemed like today would be more of the same. That shouldn’t surprise me—to discover that your parents aren’t your real parents, and that you’re the heir to an incalculable fortune...well, anyone would have a hard time digesting news like that.

Even though I had no appetite, I forced some orange juice and two pieces of half-burnt toast down my throat. After throwing the dirty glass and plate

into the sink, I flopped onto the couch and propped my feet up on the coffee table. I perched my laptop on my knees and fired it up. Lazily, I went through the few social media accounts I had—most of them half-abandoned—then checked my email. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, and yet...everything had changed.

The envelope with the will sat on the coffee table, right next to my feet, and I thought of going for it. The lawyer's number was there, like an invisible anchor that kept me tied to a secret life I didn't even know I had. He was expecting me to call him, and for a moment, I considered doing it.

I didn't really care about the money, nor was I that curious about my biological parents, but at the same time...just a fraction of my inheritance would be enough to change a lot of lives, especially those of the children in Brightenville Elementary. I could furnish the entire school, maybe even build a computer lab, and make sure all supplies were freely provided. Sure, money was the root of all evil and whatnot, but it could also be used for good.

Any other day, I would've just called Melanie up and talked things through with her. We'd known each other since we were kids, had gone to school together, and now we both worked at Brightenville Elementary; aside from my parents, there was no one else I trusted more. Unfortunately, today she'd be covering up for me at school, so I couldn't pester her with this. I'd need to find some other outlet.

On a whim, I went into the bedroom and rummaged through my closet until I found something comfortable to wear that was a little more presentable. I settled on a yellow dress with a flowery pattern, then tied my hair into a ponytail. One little twirl in front of the mirror and I was ready to go. I didn't look like a bombshell, but today wasn't about pumping my self-confidence up; today was all about trying to clear my head of all this clutter.

I stuffed the laptop into my bag and stepped out onto the porch. The sun was already shining, and there wasn't a single cloud in the sky; there was only that bright blue overhead, an endless canvas of summer that promised a warm day. I closed my eyes and breathed in deeply, hoping to dispel the cloudy mood I was in. It didn't really help, but I figured a creamy cup of coffee would do the trick.

I decided to leave the Wrangler behind, hopped on my bike, and rode out. Even though it was still early in the day, the beach was already dotted with colorful parasols; in the distance, a couple of surfers paddled toward the waves, hoping to catch a lucky break. It was a day like many others, with

Brightenville being true to itself, but my inner world was in complete disarray.

I pedaled into the town center, sticking to the dappled shadows of the oak-lined square, and made a beeline toward Bean and Leaves. It was only Tuesday, but the little coffee shop always had that Sunday morning vibe to it.

The speakers were alive with jazz, the sun filtered through the open windows, and the potted plants brightened up the room with their lively green tones. The coffee-brown furniture was eclectic, a mishmash of little chat tables and patterned sofas, but that just added to the charm of it all. Whenever I wanted to distract myself and pretend that I was any good at being a writer...there was no better place to be. Distraction was key today—I had so many thoughts tumbling around in my mind about what to do with my newfound knowledge of my parentage and the fortune that came along with it. It was overwhelming, and the idea of getting lost in my writing sounded like the perfect solution.

“Serene!” Paul, the young college student *slash* barista, perked up when he saw me come in. The shop was still empty, so Paul was leaning against the counter, mindlessly scrolling through his phone. “Takin’ a day off? Can’t say I expected to see you here today!”

He smiled, then pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. The frame was a size too large for him, and he was always struggling to keep it snug to his face.

“Just needed a break.” I looked up at the blackboard behind the counter, where Bean and Leaves’ endless list of coffee and teas was listed. “Can I get a...café mocha? Feel free to go nuts on the chocolate.”

“You got it.” Paul gave me a little wink and turned on his heel. The coffee machine hissed, a plume of steam rose high, and the scent of hot chocolate wafted in the air. Moving with practiced speed, Paul pushed a tall cup across the counter with one hand, using the other to push his glasses up again. “A café mocha, heavy on the chocolate. Need anything else?”

“Can I get one of those glazed donuts as well?” I asked, pointing at the display window. Once I had my donut and mocha, I headed straight to my go-to table, right by one of the paneled windows. Sometimes I’d choose one of the couches on the other side of the room, but I preferred this little nook when I was by myself. If I hit a snag with a complicated scene in my novel, all I needed to do was look out the window and zone out; usually that helped get my creative juices flowing again.

I set up my laptop, laying my leather-bound notebook right by its side, and devoured my donut while I waited for the hard drive to boot up. I wouldn't have a productive writing session today, not with all I had on my plate, but I just needed a distraction. My brain loved diving into new worlds, and with a little bit of luck, I'd be able to forget all about Bryan Atwater and the fortune that was supposedly mine.

I was halfway through my mocha—and about to start writing—when the door chimed. I looked up on instinct, half-expecting to see a young college guy with a messenger bag strolling in, but I found myself staring at someone to whom the hipster label absolutely wouldn't stick.

He was tall, well over six feet, and he had the broad shoulders of a wrestler. His black t-shirt snuggled up to his biceps and stretched tightly across his chest, which I imagined to be covered in the same dark tattoos his forearms were, but his powerful frame had an outdoorsman quality to it. As fit and athletic as he was, he didn't look like someone who'd waste away the day under the fluorescent lights of a gym.

Out of nowhere, an image of that body hovering over me flashed through my mind. My cheeks suddenly felt hot, and my chest felt tight as I fought to breathe. I pressed my lips together as a liquid pull ignited my entire body.

The man walked over to the counter, his lips set into a tight line, and asked Paul for a coffee—black and with no sugar, and I watched the way he moved, unable to tear my gaze away as I drank him in. His dirty blond hair was dark, almost brown at first glance and cut short. It matched the color of his light stubble, which covered his sharp jaw and outlined his full lips. The desire to know if they were as soft as they looked was strong. Dark jeans and heavy boots finalized his rough and tumble demeanor, giving him the appearance of someone who preferred practical clothing over something more fashionable.

Despite all that, he was more handsome than anyone I'd ever seen at Beans and Leaves—no, not just handsome, this man was sexy.

My face felt even hotter at the thought. What in the world had gotten into me, having these thoughts about a complete stranger?

I looked away then, suddenly aware that I'd been staring at this guy ever since he'd come in. Nobody had ever described me as creepy, but my gawking was definitely crossing a line here.

Behave, Serene, I thought. Don't be like one of those old ladies who gawks at the out-of-towners.

Easier said than done, though, especially since most of the men who came from out of town didn't look this good. Even so, I forced myself to focus on the blinking cursor on my screen. Immediately, my brain got busy trying to figure out a way to turn this tall, dark, and handsome stranger into a character who'd fit into the narrative.

“Hello.”

I pulled my hands back from the keyboard, surprised that the man was addressing me, the voice deep but smooth and charged with that self-assuredness his posture telegraphed to the world. I was even more shocked when I realized he was standing right in front of me, his shadow tumbling over me and the laptop.

“Hello,” he repeated, and his lips pulled back into a restrained smile, showing just a hint of his pearly white teeth.

“Hi, hello,” I mumbled, shifting my weight on the chair. “I mean, hey.”

Holy shit, I thought, get it together, Serene.

His smile widened a little, and he gestured at my laptop. “I hope I'm not interrupting you.”

“No, not at all,” I hurried to say, slamming the lid so fast I almost knocked over my cup of mocha. Somehow, I didn't want this man to look at my screen and see my laughable attempt at a novel. My self-confidence as a writer still had a long way to go. “It's nothing important.”

I cleared my throat, having no idea what he wanted from me, and looked straight into his brown eyes, my heart thundering. They were perfectly still, betraying almost no emotion, but I could sense a raging storm hiding behind them. Or maybe that was just my overactive imagination playing tricks on me. Recalling my salacious thoughts from moments ago, I willed myself not to blush.

The man looked down at my laptop, which I was now clutching against my chest, charger and all.

“Nothing important, huh?” A spark of amusement flashed in his eyes, bringing them to life. “I didn't mean to disturb you. I just saw you here and I...”

He trailed off, but there was no lapse in his self-confidence. He pressed his lips together and held my gaze for a long time. The intensity of it was enough to render me speechless. I took in the sharpness of his jaw, the light stubble on his cheeks, and lingered on the perfect arch of his lips. He looked every bit like a bad boy, down to the cocksure way he stood in front of me,

but there was an unseen depth to him that made me reevaluate that notion.

I was just being an idiot, of course. I had no idea who this man was, or what he wanted, and to think I could psychoanalyze him like this was just ridiculous. Despite that, I felt insanely drawn toward him. It was a magnetic pull, as if his whole body had an electric charge that matched my frequency.

It was weird...but it was also sexy.

Before I knew what I was doing, my imagination took hold once more as I thought of those lips of his pressed against mine. More red-hot images flashed behind my eyes, most of them involving those tattooed arms of his wrapped tight around my body, and warm blood rushed to my cheeks. It took a very conscious effort for me to look away from him. Nervously, I grabbed my mocha and brought the cup up to my lips.

“So,” I finally managed to say, “is there anything I can help you with?”

“Maybe.” He grabbed a crumpled-up piece of paper from his back pocket and reached across the table. He picked up my pen, jotted down what looked like a phone number, and pushed the paper toward me. “That’s me.”

I didn’t even think about it.

I opened my notebook, tore a page out, and scribbled my phone number on it. I smiled, probably more excitedly than I should’ve, and folded the page up. When I pushed it into his hands, my fingers brushed against his, and that electric charge from before cycled through both our bodies. It could’ve been just my imagination before, but this time I was sure of it—there was something here, and it was as real as it could be. Either that or this secret adoption thing was already taking a toll on my mind.

“And that’s me,” I croaked, my fingers still lingering on his.

A sliver of warmth slipped into his expression. “I have somewhere to be, but...” His eyes lingered on mine once more. “I’ll give you a call.”

With nothing more than that and a cocky half-smile, he turned to leave.

“Wait.” I leaned forward, as if to grab him, not quite ready for him to walk away. “You didn’t tell me your name.”

He looked back at me over his shoulder, and while there was definitely desire in his gaze, he looked distressed, somehow.

“It’s Tevin,” he said, already taking a step toward the door. “Tevin Novak. And you are...?”

“Serene,” I breathed out.

“Serene,” he repeated, and the way my name rolled off his tongue sent a pleasant shiver up my spine. I kept my unblinking eyes on him until he left

the coffee shop; only when he vanished from sight did I realize just how fast my heart was beating.

“You okay over there?” Paul asked me, elbows propped up on the counter. “That guy wasn’t bothering you, was he?”

“No, not at all.”

“He looked kinda rough.”

“Yeah,” I admitted, “he did...”

And I liked that, I thought, I liked it a lot.

FOUR

TEVIN

“**F**uck.” I stopped beside my Harley-Davidson, still reeling from my encounter with Serene. I knew it wasn’t smart to follow her around like this, especially in the light of day, but I couldn’t help myself. When I saw her enter that coffee shop, my feet carried me there almost automatically. After that, it was all a blur.

My wolf had thrashed inside me, demanding I make a move, and it had been almost impossible to think straight. Before I knew it, I was talking with her, and now I had Serene’s phone number in my back pocket. Not that I didn’t already have it before—the target package I’d been given was pretty thorough.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, hard enough for me to feel a stab of pain, but that didn’t help me clear my head. If anything, the pain just added to the whirlwind of thoughts and emotions cluttering my head. I’d realized she was my mate after I saw her and *smelled* her that first time, but after seeing *and* talking to her...only now was I starting to realize the magnitude of it. It was an intoxicating feeling to find one’s mate, and it felt as if I had burning poison inside my veins.

It’d been almost impossible to leave her at the coffee shop. Every fiber of my being demanded proximity, and it took all that I had to counter that desire. Serene was the perfect mix of sexy and sweet, and even her voice brimmed with kindness. She represented everything I lacked, and that just made me want her more. It was pure insanity.

“And that’s why I can’t do anything,” I muttered, already feeling my wolf tugging at his leash. He wanted Serene so damn bad, more than anything he’d ever wanted, but I knew he’d just corrupt her...or even worse. And could I

corrupt such a creature? Did I even *want* to?

My best move here was to keep my distance from Serene. I'd told myself I would do just that. Yet here I was with her number in hand. The expectancy that I'd call her was there. That something more might come of our encounter today. And that was at the heart of the problem—I clearly couldn't resist the pull of my mate. No matter how much I knew I should stay away, I wasn't sure I'd be able to. My wolf demanded more of her, and if I tried to refuse him...I'd come apart at the seams.

I hopped onto the bike, turned the ignition on, and rolled the throttle.

The engine came alive with a stutter, which quickly turned into a violent roar that matched the raging beast demanding I go back to my mate, and I sped out of Brightenville's town center. A few heads turned in my direction, and a couple of elderly ladies even offered me well-timed frowns. I paid it no heed. This town would never love me, and I was more than okay with that. I had my pack, and that was all that mattered.

And now you have your mate too, my wolf was quick to add...as if I could forget about Serene. I was still thinking of her when I pulled into the Bentley Motel parking lot. The station wagon that belonged to last night's family was already gone, and in its place was a dented SUV from the late '90s. Aside from my Harley, the SUV, and a couple of sedans, the parking lot was deserted.

The Bentley Motel was old, probably a holdover from the '60s, back when Brightenville had been an industrial hub. Sixty years later, the town's steel plant had disappeared and given way to a services economy, with a lot of it depending on tourists looking for reasonably quiet holidays. This motel hadn't gotten the memo, though. The décor remained old-fashioned, the windows were grimy, and its location translated into a twenty-minute ride to the beach. I figured that in a couple of years, the owners would finally admit defeat and close doors for good.

I parked the Harley outside my room and went inside, locking the door behind me right away. I threw the Glock onto the queen bed, grabbed Serene's target package from underneath the mattress, and sat by the window. There was a small table with two chairs there; together with the two bedside tables, they comprised the only furniture in the room. Nothing fancy, but at least everything was clean. Sure, the bedsheets and the curtains needed to be set on fire, but the room itself had been dusted off and kept organized. And thank God for that—my wolf had a chaotic nature and, to help keep that in

check, I needed to ensure my surroundings remained in order.

I flipped through the folder once more, taking my time with Serene's pictures. As beautiful as she looked in these pictures, she was even more stunning up close. Not only that, but she had an aura of purity to her. To think someone wanted her dead made my stomach turn with disgust. Of course, now that I knew Serene was my mate, it didn't matter that people wanted her dead—neither I nor my wolf would ever allow for anyone to touch a single hair on her head.

And to think I was supposed to be her killer, I thought grimly, my stomach churning at the mere idea.

My first thought was to call Ben and tell him the deal was off, but I quickly decided against it. He might think I was just hesitating, pat my head and tell me it's okay, and then send someone else to finish the job. Hal would take no pleasure in murdering a schoolteacher, but he'd get it done if Ben ordered it. That's how it was in the pack. The Alpha commanded, the wolves obeyed.

But not this time, I thought.

I flipped through the folder until I found what I was looking for. Ben had jotted down a phone number on the last page, which I assumed belonged to the woman who'd ordered the hit, Serene's stepmother. And so, instead of going through a middleman, I decided to solve this problem by going straight to its source.

I dialed the woman's number and held up the phone. I heard the dial tone, once, twice, and then a buttered voice with a hint of a Valley accent came through.

"Is it done?" The woman asked, which let me know this was a burner phone she was using. She'd probably bought it specifically to handle Serene's contract-killing.

"Who am I talking to?" I asked. There was a pregnant silence as the woman weighed my words. She didn't recognize my voice, which threw her off, and she probably didn't like that one bit.

"Who is this?" She dropped that buttery note, and a nicotine-fueled raspiness took over her voice. "How did you get this number, and why are you—?"

"Calm down," I told her. "I work for Ben. Now, who am I talking to?"

"This is Margaret," she finally admitted.

"And you're Serene Duran's stepmother, correct?"

“I’m nothing to that girl,” she spat out, which translated as a ‘yes.’ “Now, why the hell are you calling me and asking me all these stupid questions? Mr. Sage assured me I wouldn’t have to deal with anyone else but him.” When I didn’t reply to that, she cleared her throat and charged back in. “Is the job done?”

“No, it isn’t,” I said. “In fact, I’m calling to inform you that Serene is off-limits. I’m canceling the contract.”

“You are...*what?*” She screeched, doing it so loudly I had to pull the phone away from my ear. “How fucking dare you? On whose authority are you doing that? Mr. Sage gave me his assurances that—”

“I don’t give a shit about any of that,” I growled, my fingers tightening around the phone. “The contract is canceled, and Serene is off-limits. Whatever your goals are, I suggest you find a game plan that doesn’t involve murder.”

Margaret’s teeth clicked, and she drew in a deep breath. She obviously wasn’t happy about having the word ‘murder’ thrown around on an open line, even if she was using a burner-phone.

“What is your name?” she asked me, surprisingly calm for someone who’d just lost her shit. Despite her faux patience, there was still an undercurrent of anger in her voice. This woman wasn’t accustomed to hearing ‘no.’ I could empathize with that—I’d never said ‘no’ to a direct order, nor had I ever canceled a contract before, so this was also a first for me, too.

“The name’s Tevin Novak,” I replied.

Ben would hear about this one way or the other, and there was little this woman could do with my name. She sure as hell couldn’t go to the cops without landing herself in hot water, so that wasn’t a concern. Maybe she was crazy enough to hire someone to murder *me*, but I didn’t care—in fact, I’d welcome the challenge. There was nothing better than to see the look of surprise on someone’s face as you shift and bare your fangs at them.

“Tevin Novak,” Margaret hissed, “this is the worst mistake of your pathetic little life, and you’ll live to regret it.”

With that, she turned her phone off, her irritating voice replaced by the humming tone of a dead line.

I threw the phone onto the table and rolled my shoulders as tension set in. Margaret’s threats were of little concern, but I knew she wouldn’t give up on Serene so easily. According to what I’d gathered from Ben, there was a large

fortune on the line here, and money always turned people into vicious assholes. This woman would be no different. If Ben didn't get the job done, she'd find someone else to handle it. Serene was still in danger.

Kill the bitch, my wolf growled right away, his simmering anger poisoning my thoughts. That damn woman had riled him up, and he was howling for blood. If I was sure Margaret's death would be the end of things, I wouldn't mind doing it, even if I still had to hunt her down; the problem was that I didn't know the whole picture. It was possible that removing Margaret from the board wouldn't put a stop to this game. For now, I'd have to wait and see.

One thing was clear, though, which put a kink in my plans to stay away from Serene: As long as Margaret was a threat, I needed to keep an eye on my mate.

Needing to let off some steam, I rummaged through my duffel bag and changed into a pair of shorts and an old t-shirt. Last night the receptionist had told me the motel had a gym, and lifting some iron was exactly what I needed. I wasn't one for long workouts that required complicated lists and spreadsheets, but sometimes it felt good to go feral on the iron.

True to form, the motel's gym was a damp little room at the back, near the laundry room. It doubled as a storage room, with cardboard boxes littering the space between the only two treadmills, but it was enough for my needs. There was a squat rack and enough weight plates for me to go crazy on the deadlifts, and that's all that mattered.

Or so I thought.

After twenty minutes of grueling punishment, I realized my wolf was simply too riled up. The iron wasn't helping, no matter how hard I pushed myself, and my wolf was slowly becoming more agitated. It wouldn't be long before the weights weren't enough, and I started tearing the walls down. That'd be an improvement on this place, but the last thing I needed was to attract any unwanted attention.

The one thing I knew would help for sure was to go for a run. Of course, that wasn't as simple as donning a pair of sneakers and going for a leisurely stroll on the beach. No, my wolf had been caged for too long now, and it needed to be set loose.

Dripping sweat, I left the gym and returned to my room. On the way there, I made a quick assessment of the cars in the parking lots, just to make sure there'd be no surprises. One of the first things I'd learned as a member

of the Demon Hollower MC is that it pays to be vigilant. If you can't see it coming, you can't defend yourself from it.

The sun was already starting its descent toward the horizon, but there were still a few hours before nightfall. I'd have to be patient and wait. Only then would I be able to let my wolf roam free. Inside the room, I disassembled the Glock and cleaned it up, my movements practiced and automatic. Once that was done, I hit the shower, hoping some cold water would help my wolf relax. And when that didn't help, I simply accepted the wait ahead of me.

Sitting by the table, I watched as the sun sank behind the freeway and into the mountains, its orange glow spilling over the motel walls. When the orange skies finally started turning indigo-blue, I tucked Serene's folder and the Glock under the mattress, and left.

The motel was trapped between the freeway and a wooded area, and I headed toward the latter. There, I found a secluded spot, hidden from sight by a thicket of bushes where I undressed, folded my clothes up, and stashed them underneath a bush.

"Finally," I whispered, closing my eyes and turning my face up to the sky. I breathed in deeply, allowing the evening air into my lungs, and relaxed my body. I could shift in the blink of an eye if I needed to, but it was less painful if I took my time with it. Gritting my teeth, I exhaled sharply and let my blood start to boil; a scorching heat took over my veins, filtering into my muscles and tendons, and I doubled over as the transformation began.

My bones and joints popped and cracked, a blinding pain exploded outward from my jaw, and a fiery rage blanketed my thoughts. It was always like this. In human form, this rage was always there, like background chatter, but it truly bloomed when I shifted. Sometimes, it was a challenge not to lose myself and *truly* become feral.

It was rare for a shifter to lose control in such a way, as most wolves accepted the shifter's dominion, but mine was an untamable beast. His interests were often aligned with mine, but sometimes his instincts were too overpowering, turning us both into a loose cannon. Ben had taught me the ropes, showing me all the techniques a shifter needed to be in control, but they'd only helped marginally. The relationship I had with my wolf had no dominant part—for better or worse, we were equals.

Fully shifted, I padded away from the thicket and up a steep hill. Brightenville's night lights were like beacons in the distance, and I quickly

found myself running through the woods at full speed. Breathing hard, I cut through the freeway using an underpass and did my best to keep to the shadows.

It was a risk to approach Brightenville when fully shifted, as my wolf was far too large to be mistaken for a regular beast, but it had to be done. I didn't know what Margaret was cooking up, and I had to assume Serene was still at risk. I had to keep a watch and guard her. More important than that, my wolf desperately wanted to see Serene again...

And he wouldn't be denied.

FIVE

SERENE

“**H**ow’s that novel coming along?” Paul threw me a curious glance as he worked the register. He was one of the few people who knew I was trying my hand at being a writer, and he always asked the same question whenever I packed my laptop and settled the bill. When it came to my writing career, he was my number one fan.

“I managed to write fifty words today,” I admitted, even though I wasn’t sure if I’d cracked that barrier. “Still, I’m going to count that as a victory. Fifty words are better than none.”

“Words are words,” Paul said, smiling as he handed me the change. “Just as long as you’re making progress.”

He pushed his glasses up into position, as he always did, then gave me a parting wink. I returned his smile, threw the loose change into my bag, and walked out of Beans and Leaves. Outside, the sun was already dipping toward the horizon line, a sunset magenta lighting up Brightenville’s skies.

It was rare for me to spend an entire day in the coffee shop, but it’d been good for me. I hadn’t been productive—the pathetic fifty words I still had to revise were a testament to that—but at least I managed to clear my head. Copious amounts of coffee, social-media-fueled procrastination, an amazing tuna sandwich for lunch, and hours spent people-watching had been the perfect ingredients for that.

And then there was that guy, I thought, a shiver shooting up my spine as images of him flashed before my eyes. Tall, dark, and brooding, he was the type of man God had designed to make women swoon. His tattooed arms didn’t hurt either, adding to that bad boy aura he had going on. What someone like him was doing in Brightenville, and in Beans and Leaves of all

places, I had no idea, but I couldn't help but hope he would give me a call. Then again, I didn't have to wait around on him...I had his number at well.

Thinking of Tevin and wondering whether I'd actually have the nerve to call a man as sexy as him, I grabbed my bike and pedaled back home, enjoying the cool evening breeze. By the time I got home, there was only a sliver of light left, and the sky was already sprinkled with the distant light of a million stars.

The house was blissfully cool and, after dropping my bag on the floor, I sprawled myself on the couch. Melanie would be home by now, and so I grabbed my phone and looked her up on my contact list. It wasn't long before her overly excited voice was filling my tiny living room.

"Girl, what the hell?" she demanded, leaving me no space for a run-of-the-mill greeting. "Louise told me you needed the day off, but she didn't even tell me why. Were you run over by a truck or something? You've never missed a day before. Do you have a fever? Nausea? I can grab some chicken soup and we'll have dinner together, just say the word and I will—"

"Melanie," I cut in, smiling at her fretfulness. "I'm fine. I'm not dying or anything. You don't need to worry."

"Then what's up? Did you blow off work just because? That's some rebel energy right there."

"No, there was a reason for it." I wet my lips, rearranged my thoughts, but ended up hesitating. Melanie was my best friend, but could I really tell her about *everything* that was going on? I still hadn't processed the fact that my parents had adopted me, or the fact that I was the heir to a massive fortune; maybe it was still too early to share that news with anyone else, especially when I wasn't sure yet what I was going to do about it. "It's a personal thing I'm dealing with, and I needed a break to unwind. And thank God I decided to do it, because I went to Beans and Leaves and the craziest thing happened..."

"Please, do share," Melanie said, and I could already imagine the boy-talk grin she must've had on her face.

"If you're thinking this is about a boy..."

"But *it is* about a boy, right?"

"You got me there," I admitted with a laugh. "He wasn't the kind of guy you'd expect in a place like Beans and Leaves, though."

"And thank God for that," Melanie said. "Don't get me wrong, I love Beans and Leaves as much as you do, but it's like I've told you a million

times before: that coffee shop isn't the place to be when you're on the prowl."

"I wasn't on the prowl!"

"Be that as it may—you're not gonna find a real man there."

"Except today was different," I said, then told her all about Tevin, giving her every detail I could remember, from his smoldering gaze to the dark ink on his forearms. My interest must've shown in my tone, because when I was finally done, Melanie was whistling excitedly.

"Damn, girl," she said. "You're blowing off work and exchanging phone numbers with tattooed strangers? Are you *sure* you're not sick or anything? Talk about an out-of-character day. Who are you and what did you do with my old friend Serene Duran?"

"Oh, c'mon, it's not like I've never flirted or dated anyone before!" I protested, but that just elicited one of Melanie's unstoppable bouts of laughter. I had to wait for a good twenty seconds before she finally shut up.

"Oh, sweetheart, who have you dated these past few years? I mean, Ryan was a nice guy and all, but he was an accountant! Nothing against accountants, mind you, but there's a reason things didn't work with him. And Joseph, ugh... don't get me started on that cheating bastard. I still wish you'd let me key his car."

"Melanie..."

"Then there's Paul, of course, who's always eyeing you whenever you step foot in the coffee shop, but he doesn't—"

"Paul? Shut up! He isn't eyeing me."

"C'mon, Serene, you're not *that* blind, are you?" She laughed some more, clearly amused with all the boy-talk. There was nothing Melanie loved more than talking about boys...or dating them. "Never mind him, anyway. It's painfully clear he doesn't do anything for you. This mysterious stranger, though...you sound really excited about him. You thinkin' of giving him a call?"

"Maybe," I muttered. "I mean, I don't know..."

"Are you afraid he might be some kind of creep?" She clicked her tongue. "Maybe not a creep, but a straight-up criminal? It does seem odd for someone like him to be hanging at Beans and Leaves, I'll give you that."

"He wasn't exactly hanging out in there," I protested. "He just went in, picked up his black coffee, and left."

"But not before he flirted with the hot schoolteacher," Melanie threw

back at me. “Okay, look...I get it. Someone like him doesn’t fit the scenery, but that’s not a red flag by itself.”

“How do you know? You’re the worst at spotting red flags. Even when there are dozens of them, all you see is a damn carnival.”

“And I love carnivals, as you well know,” she said. “Seriously, give that guy a call. What do you have to lose?”

“I’ll think about it, all right?”

“You better think about it hard, babe, ‘cause I’ll be on your case until you do,” she said. “I’ll see you tomorrow, right? Or are you thinking of blowing off work again?”

“Really funny.” I shook my head and pursed my lips, even though Melanie couldn’t see me. “I’ll be there tomorrow.”

After saying our goodbyes—and after suffering a few minutes more of Melanie insisting I should call Tevin—I put the phone aside and lay back on the couch. With my hands folded behind my head, I stared up at the ceiling, allowing my mind to drift. My chance encounter with Tevin had offered me some needed distraction, that much I had to admit, but it didn’t change the fact I had a lot of other things on my mind.

I still had no idea on what to do about my inheritance.

Part of me felt I had no right to it. Sure, I was Bryan Atwater’s biological daughter, but what did that really mean? Could I really roll up to this lawyer’s office and collect the result of a lifetime’s work just because I had lucked out on the genetic lottery? It all seemed so insane.

For a moment, I considered calling my parents and talking things through with them. My father would surely have the exact guidance I needed, but I wanted to be mindful of their feelings. I was going through a lot, but so were they. The last thing I wanted was to add to their emotional turmoil.

In the end, I decided to give it a few more days before I settled on a plan of action. The lawyers would certainly be anxious about my lack of communication, but I was pretty sure they couldn’t do anything with the money and assets until I responded.

Too tired to cook dinner and not feeling hungry at all, I dragged my feet to the bedroom and took my dress off. I put on a ratty old t-shirt, a pair of loose boxers, and slipped under the bedsheets. I knew I’d end up kicking the bedsheets off the bed by morning—the nights were still warm—but I always struggled to fall asleep without some type of cover.

Cover or no cover, sleep didn’t come easy. I spent the better part of an

hour tossing and turning, my mind littered with countless thoughts. Surprisingly enough, it wasn't Bryan Atwater or his fortune that was keeping me awake—it was Tevin. My mind had latched on to him and, no matter how hard I tried, I simply couldn't shake him off.

Even when I started drifting off, Tevin followed me into that limbo between sleep and wakefulness. His presence filled my mind, his electric aura charging up every single one of my sleep-addled thoughts. It was unlike anything I'd ever felt. Even if Melanie disagreed, I had a dating history, but this...

This was new.

I couldn't exactly tell what it was about Tevin that drew me in, but it felt as if I'd spent my entire life waiting for him. It sounded crazy, and I definitely couldn't explain it, but it felt like the truth.

Maybe it was the fact that he was my direct opposite, at least on the outside. People liked stamping the words 'kind' and 'nice' on me, but Tevin seemed like he was none of those things. He was rough around the edges, and he carried himself in a way that screamed 'I was born to do bad things.' Of course, my dreams weaved those bad things into *good* bad things.

In the theater of my mind, I was back at Beans and Leaves, except it was nighttime and it was just me and Tevin there. He was wearing the same tight t-shirt from before, and his boots made an aggressive sound every time they slapped the polished floorboards. Wordlessly, he crossed the room and made his way toward me.

I opened my mouth but realized I couldn't utter a sound. It didn't matter. Tevin closed the distance between us, his right hand darting to my waist while his left flew to the nape of my neck, then he leaned into me. He stopped with his lips no more than an inch away from mine, and time ground to a halt. I held my breath, my nerve endings blooming like spring flowers, and hooked my fingers on his shirt. I went up on tiptoes, drew him close, and

“What the...?” I sat up in bed, still processing the loud noise that had awoken me. It had sounded like something large falling over, or maybe the loud roar of a car's exhaust. Whatever it was, it'd scared the living daylights out of me. And maybe rightfully so—what if someone had broken in? That could've been the sound of someone smashing in the locks.

With my heart beating hard, I swung my legs off the bed and flung open the doors on my closet. Moving hurriedly, I pushed my dresses and shirts

aside and found what I was looking for at the back. I curled my fingers around the baseball bat and, holding it up like a sword, I backed up.

I took a deep breath before leaving the bedroom, summoned whatever courage I had in me, and stepped out. Both the kitchen and the living room were draped in shadows, and I immediately hit the lights to cast them away. I took one quick look around, just to see if something was out of place, but there was nothing. The house was perfectly still. For good measure, I checked the bathroom, but it was more of the same there.

I had freaked out over nothing, but that didn't stop me from double-checking the locks. After making sure nothing had been messed with, I went the extra mile and checked all the windows. Everything was as secure as it could be and, once I was sure of that, I let out an exhale of relief. I was too high-strung, and that showed. Maybe Melanie was right, and I really needed a man in my life. Sighing, I drew the curtains on the kitchen window...and that's when I saw it.

“What the...?”

It was just a shadow—a very large shadow—but I'd definitely seen it. There was something there, on the far side of my driveway, and it'd jumped away when I looked out the window; it moved fast, jumping between two garbage cans and disappearing out of sight. It'd seemed like a dog initially, with shaggy black fur and amber eyes, but that couldn't be—that creature was far too large for a dog. Could it have been a wolf? Maybe, but I'd never heard of wolves growing to be so large, and I was pretty sure no bears had ever been sighted in Brightenville.

I pulled the curtains back and pushed my forehead against the window, trying to get a closer look. It was useless. Whatever creature I'd seen, it was no longer there.

“You're losing it, Serene,” I whispered, “you really are.”

I drew the curtains in and raked a hand over my face.

My mind was nearing its breaking point, and this just confirmed it. My life was a whirlpool of strangeness—adoptive parents, fortunes that appeared out of nowhere, and mysterious bad boys—but I was pretty sure there were no giant wolves on my driveway. Surely, my life couldn't be *that* crazy.

SIX

TEVIN

Shit!

I jumped out of sight, crouching low so that Serene wouldn't see me. I shouldn't have come this close to her house, even at night, but there was a scent in the air that had me raising my hackles. I could smell Serene, the ocean, the rotten wood that was hidden out of sight, and a hundred other scents... but there was one in particular that had me on my back foot.

It was a stench of sweat and adrenaline, a pungent cocktail that told me there was someone else here; and whoever that someone else was, he clearly was up to no good.

Still cursing my recklessness, I ducked under a broken fence and went around Serene's backyard. There was a little path back there, separating her house from the others, and the stench of man was stronger in the vicinity. Keeping to the shadows, I sniffed at the air and followed the stench.

There you are.

Kneeling against the fence was a man with a shaved head and a goatee. He had an earring in his left ear, which caught the moonlight for a moment, and in his hands was an ancient Smith & Wesson revolver. He was spindly, so much that his thin limbs were almost disproportionate, and he wore faded jeans and a black hoodie. Still unaware of my presence, he grabbed a photo from his back pocket, looked at it for a long heartbeat, then gave himself a nod. He tied a bandana around his neck, drew his hood up, and cocked the hammer back on the revolver.

One deep breath and he steadied his trembling hands.

He stood up, looked over the fence to make sure the coast was clear, and readied himself to vault over it. Slowly, I crept toward him, cautious not to make a single noise until I pounced on him at the very last second. The man had started swinging one leg over the fence when I bit into his ankle, savagely yanking him back down.

I buried my fangs deep into his flesh, swung my neck around as viciously as I could, and slammed the man onto the cracked concrete. He didn't even scream. He let out a muffled groan as the impact drove all air out from his lungs and brought his revolver up with an awkward gesture.

Before he could squeeze the trigger, I let go of his ankle and jumped on his arm. The revolver clattered onto the concrete, jumping out of reach.

"What the fuck?" the man yelled, eyes wide as he finally saw the creature he was contending with. He dug his heels onto the ground, desperately trying to back away from me, and opened his mouth to scream. I wasn't about to let him wake up the entire neighborhood, though, so I jumped on top of him, slamming my forelegs into his chest. I put my muzzle to his face, baring my teeth as I snarled and frightened him into a pitiful silence.

I didn't want to kill him yet—I needed him to answer some questions first—but the choice was taken out of my hands. A low noise came from a hundred yards behind the house, where the woods crept up to the seaside neighborhood; it sounded like boots trampling on the underbrush, a sound only my wolf ears could've picked up. There was no reason for anyone to be there this late at night, which meant this asshole hadn't come alone.

I didn't have to think twice. I sank my teeth into the man's bare throat, ripping through his flesh, and squeezed until I heard the crack of his windpipe. Still with hot blood in my mouth, I sprang over the dead assassin's body and into the woods. This time I didn't bother with stealth—I moved fast and aggressively, like a poisoned-tip arrow.

I found my mark as he stepped out of the woods, a revolver in his right hand. Springing forward, I crashed against his chest and we both tumbled back into the woods, rolling over a bed of dry twigs and pine needles. This man was shorter than the other I'd just killed, but he made up for that in sheer aggression. He didn't seem to care if he was facing a man or a beast—he hooked his fingers into my dark fur and yanked on it, trying to keep my jaws away from his throat.

Despite his quick thinking, there was little he could do to stop me. I pushed his revolver out of reach, ripping two fingers off his hand in the

process, then put my jaws around his throat. The man panicked at first, hammering his fists against my side, but he went limp when he realized I was merely holding him.

“What the fuck?” he wheezed, struggling to process the vicious wolf that had toppled him. Much like his buddy, this low-level thug seemed to have a limited vocabulary. Before I was done, though, I was going to force a few more words out from his mouth.

I pulled back from the would-be assassin as slowly as I could, and he got the message: if he did no sudden moves, I wouldn’t rip his head off his shoulders. With my eyes on him, I inhaled deeply and let the fire of shifting engulf me. My wolf never liked reverting into human form, but this time he knew we had no other option. After all, I couldn’t ask any questions if all I could do was snarl and growl.

“Holy shit,” the man muttered, his face turning ghostly white as I stood over him. I probably cut an imposing figure, fully naked and with the moon at my back, but I was pretty sure it wasn’t my height or broad shoulders that had him scared. No, this man was scared shitless because he’d just witnessed something that shouldn’t be possible.

I was confident that Ben wouldn’t send two amateurs to finish a job, and this confirmed it—these two assassins had nothing to do with our pack. That, of course, meant Margaret had taken matters into her own hands. Still, I needed confirmation.

“Who sent you?” I growled, kneeling beside the man. I put my hand around his throat, right where my fangs had left a mark, and pushed him against the ground. He didn’t even try to fight me. He just returned my gaze, his eyes blank. “I’m not going to ask you twice. Who sent you?”

“Atwater,” he finally coughed out. “Margaret Atwater.”

“What was the job?”

“We were sent to kill this schoolteacher,” he replied. “She’s her step-daughter or something like that. I... I’m not sure.”

“Are there any more of you out here?”

“No, no,” he said. “It’s just me and Mike. We drove all the way from San Francisco together. This Margaret lady called our boss up and—”

“Who’s your boss?”

“He’s a fixer in San Francisco,” he replied. “He told Mike to take the job, but I came with him so that we could split the reward.”

“You can still have your reward.”

The man opened and closed his mouth like a fish out of water. “I don’t...I don’t understand.”

“Your reward is *death*.”

I moved fast.

Holding his head with both hands, I twisted viciously, forcing the bones on his neck to snap. The man’s legs thrashed wildly, his eyes rolled into his orbits, and he pissed himself. A fitting end for anyone who dared try and hurt Serene.

My wolf said nothing, but his satisfaction filled me to the brim. I let the joy of a successful hunt scratch that spot deep in my mind, then turned my mind to more practical matters: I had two bodies that needed to be disposed of.

With a sigh, I shifted back into the hulking figure of a dark wolf, and bit on the scruff of the man’s shirt. I dragged him deep into the woods, tossed his body down a ravine, and then came back for his buddy. It took me almost three hours to drag the two dead bodies away from Serene’s place but, once it was done, I was glad for the physical exertion. It calmed my wolf down.

With a clear mind, I returned to Serene’s house and stood guard all night. I doubted there’d be more assassins lurking in the shadows, but I didn’t want to run any risks. A fixer from San Francisco wouldn’t be that invested in tonight’s result—especially since he’d only wanted to send a pathetic thug here—so I wasn’t particularly concerned on that front. Still, I wanted to be careful.

I only moved away when the sun started appearing on the horizon, its tendrils of warm light cutting through the dark canvas of night. Hoping to outrun the night, I rushed back into the woods, charging back to the motel as fast as I could. I stopped near the thicket where I’d left my clothes, shifted back, then walked the rest of the way.

I would’ve preferred to keep a close eye on Serene the rest of the day, but that was too dangerous. There was no way I could prowl through Brightenville while fully shifted, and I drew too much attention while in human form to stay under the radar the way I needed to. Thankfully, I didn’t believe anyone would be stupid enough to send someone after Serene in broad daylight. Even so, I wasn’t going to leave Brightenville until I was absolutely sure Serene would be safe.

I patted my Harley-Davidson as I walked past it, already missing the roar of its engine, and grabbed a coffee from the vending machine as I made my

way into the room. There, I made a beeline for my phone and turned it on. If I was to keep Serene safe, then I had to keep close to her...which meant I had to see her in person. And there was only one way for me to do that.

Still, I hesitated before calling. If I truly wanted to keep her safe, I'd keep my distance, guard her from afar, and never get close enough to allow my unstable wolf to take control. At that thought, he growled in my mind, and I could feel his anger pulsing through my human form. He refused to be denied our mate, that much was clear.

As I debated with myself on the best course of action, the memory of Serene's beautiful smile and soft skin rose to the forefront of my troubled thoughts. The mere idea of anyone harming her quickly overrode my own personal fears. I could keep my wolf in check. I *had* to.

I glanced at the old clock on the bedside table—it was already past seven in the morning, so Serene would be up—and hit the green icon on my screen before I could overthink it any more. Serene picked up almost instantly.

“Yes?”

“Hey, Serene,” I said, struggling to keep my voice steady. I didn't know what the fuck was wrong with me, but my palms had suddenly grown sweaty, and my heart was beating so hard you'd think someone was trying to kill me. “This is Tevin Novak, from the other day. I hope I didn't wake you.”

“Oh, no, not at all,” she hurried to say, and I noticed a hint of nervousness in her voice. I wasn't sure if that was good or bad, but I chose to assume it was a good thing. “I wake up early most days.”

“Great, that makes for two of us,” I said. “Listen, I was wondering if you'd like to have dinner with me. I hope I'm not being too forward, but you've been on my mind ever since we met.”

“I really...I, huh...that's good.” She said something else unintelligible, stumbling through the rest of her sentence. “I mean, great. Dinner would be great. When's a good time for you?”

“What about tonight?” The words came out of my mouth automatically. The sooner I got to see her, the better.

“Tonight's great,” she replied without a moment's hesitation. Inwardly, my wolf wagged its tail in sheer ecstasy. “Where do you want to meet?”

“To be honest, I'm not from around here, so...”

“Oh, right, of course.” She let out a small laugh, and my heart skipped a beat. I loved the sound of her voice. “There's this little place near the beach. Manny's. It's small, but it has a cozy feel to it.”

“Manny’s then,” I replied. “I’ll look up the address and meet you there at...seven. Does that work for you?”

“Seven’s perfect.”

There was a little pause there, but it wasn’t awkward. Serene laughed again, maybe a little nervously, and we finally said our goodbyes. When I put my phone back down, I could barely control myself.

“Shit,” I groaned, a burning sensation spreading outward from my chest. That only happened right before I shifted, and I hadn’t had an uncontrolled shift since I’d been a pup. My wolf was overwhelmed with emotion, crazed with desire, and he was losing control. Ever since I’d seen Serene for that first time, my wolf only cared about keeping her safe, stalking and claiming her.

It took all that I had to keep him in check. My past had been built with blood and violence, and Serene didn’t need that in her life. She was simply too pure. How could I corrupt someone like her? The only solution I could come up with was getting close enough to protect her from harm but not so close that my wolf had me losing control. It would be a fine line to walk—and this date was definitely pushing it—but if I wanted to protect my mate, I’d do whatever it took.

I took my shirt off, threw it onto the bed, and padded into the bathroom. I turned the shower on cold, needing a shock to my system. Just hearing Serene’s voice had me aching with desire, and my wolf was way too close to the surface. Chucking the rest of my clothes off, I stepped under the water, its icy coldness hitting me like a dagger. I let the minutes pass me by, hoping it would help the need raging in my body, but no luck. My cock throbbed, demanding my attention, and I let my hand drift down and wrap around my hard, pulsing shaft.

I groaned as I thought of Serene’s delicate little hands—what they would look like wrapped around my cock. And the noises she would make as I touched her as well, bringing her to the edge of ecstasy over and over.

White-hot fire coalesced at the base of my spine, and I stroked myself harder and faster, my pent-up need and all-consuming desire for my mate bringing me close to orgasm in seconds flat.

I braced my hand on the cool tile of the shower as I jerked off to images of innocent little Serene surrendering her body to me. Despite the ice-cold water raining down on me, I was blazing hot, burning up from the inside out as pure need coursed through me.

In my mind, I conjured a picture of Serene's full pink lips, swollen and bruised by my plundering kisses. What they would look like wrapped around my cock...

I exploded. Jets of cum shot from the tip of my throbbing cock as I growled Serene's name. *Fuck*. I'd never come so hard in my life.

Deep down, I could still feel my wolf's maddening anxiety, but at least I wasn't on the verge of losing control anymore.

Having taken the edge off my raw desire, and now feeling the effects of sleep deprivation, I shut off the water, stifled a yawn and toweled myself off. I was already getting back into my clothes when someone knocked at the door. Still bare-chested, I ran into the room and grabbed my Glock from under the mattress; I pulled the safety off and flattened myself against the wall, right beside the door.

"Who is it?" I asked.

"It's Ben." Just from his tone, I could tell he wasn't happy. "Get off your damn ass and open the door, Tevin. It's far too early in the day for me to be kicking doors down."

Sighing, I tucked the Glock into my belt and opened the door. Ben stood on the other side of it, a mean scowl on his face and a paper bag in his hands. His sun-licked leather jacket squeaked as he shoved the paper bag into my hands. "I brought lunch. We need to talk."

I stepped aside to let him in, my whole body tensing up. Ben wouldn't have ridden into Brightenville for a social visit, which meant he knew about Serene. That didn't surprise me—after Margaret's meltdown, it was a given she'd want to chew Ben's ears off. Thing was, if Ben thought he'd be able to force me into finishing the job, he was in for a rude awakening.

"This place looks like a pigsty," Ben said, arms folded over his chest as he looked around the room. "What the hell's wrong with you, Tevin?"

I followed his gaze and frowned. He was right. I took pride in keeping my surroundings as orderly and neat as possible, but the room was in disarray. My clothes littered the floor, the bedsheets were rumpled, and there were two paper coffee cups on the bedside table. Back in the pack lands, I was always after my brothers, making sure the main cabin and the MC remained neat; this room wasn't exactly a *pigsty*, as Ben had so eloquently put it, but it was definitely out of character for me.

I dropped the paper bag on the small table and turned to face Ben.

"Why are you here?" I asked him.

“Do you really have to ask?” Ben’s tone dropped into a whisper, but his scowl softened. He wasn’t angry—he was confused. “This business with the schoolteacher...it’s not like you, Tevin. Whenever I give you an assignment, you always see it through, no ifs or buts. What’s different this time?”

I swallowed down my hesitation.

My wolf was eerily quiet, but he was alert—he respected Ben as the Alpha, but he also valued his mate more than he did anything else. I thought of coming up with some bullshit excuse, but then decided to be honest. Ben had accepted me as part of the pack, helped me learn how to control my wolf, and had been instrumental in making me feel like the pack was truly my family. More than anyone else, he deserved my honesty and respect.

“It’s this woman,” I admitted, shaking my head in frustration. “I was ready to do the job, but when I saw her for the first time...” I clenched my fists, my fingernails biting into my palms hard enough to draw blood. “I can’t stop thinking about her. She’s literally *everything* I ever think about now, and I don’t know how to stop it.”

“I do,” Ben said. “A bullet should do it.”

I clenched my jaw.

“I don’t think you’re getting it, Ben.” I didn’t intend to, but my words came out as a growl. “This girl is my mate. I can’t harm her, nor can I let *anyone* harm her. That bitch Margaret sent two other guys after her last night, and I got rid of them. I’ll cut my way through a fucking army if that’s what’s needed. No one’s touching a hair on her head.”

“She’s your mate?” Ben’s eyes narrowed into slits. “This can’t be.”

“But it is,” I said.

He took a step toward me, his eyes locked on mine. “This girl is fucking with your head, Tevin. You’ve made it clear that you’re backing out of the contract—and made me look like an asshole in the process—but now what? Are you going to babysit this girl? Is that it?”

“I’m going to do whatever I need to do.” I did it without thinking, but I took a step toward Ben, matching his aggressive posture. When it came to Serene, I wasn’t going to let anyone boss me around...even if that person was my boss.

“Have you lost your goddamn mind?” Ben snarled. “We’re an MC, not a fucking security agency. You’re coming back with me. *Now*. I won’t make you kill this girl, but you’ll leave this shit to itself.”

I grit my teeth.

“Ben...I respect you, I really do, but I’m not going anywhere. I’ll return once I know Serene’s safe, and not a day before that.”

I returned the intensity of his gaze, letting him know that this wasn’t up for negotiation. I didn’t give a fuck about anyone or anything else—right now, Serene was the only thing that mattered.

“Don’t make me drag you back into the MC like a pup, Tevin,” Ben whispered, and now he sounded more disappointed than angry. He clicked his tongue, as if to process his own thoughts, and looked away from me. “This is an order. I want you back at the MC before sundown.”

“I’ve told you,” I insisted. “I’m not going—”

Ben moved faster than I could’ve anticipated. He cocked his arm back and sent his fist into my stomach. I staggered back, reeling from the impact, and looked back at him. That’s when my wolf’s rage took over. Angry, I charged at Ben with the single-minded focus of a linebacker. My shoulder connected with his midsection, and I pushed him against the wall as hard as I could.

“Stop behaving like a fucking child,” Ben growled, then dropped his elbow between my shoulder blades. It hurt, but I didn’t let that stop me. Grabbing Ben by the collar of his jacket, I spun him around and sent him flying across the room. He flew headfirst into the table, knocking it to the floor, but he righted himself up almost instantly. With a threatening look on his face, he rolled his shoulders back and cracked his knuckles. “If that’s how it’s gonna be...”

He walked toward me, patient and confident, and punched me straight in the jaw. I tried to block his strike, but Ben wasn’t the Alpha for nothing. No wonder nobody had challenged him for Alpha status in years. He remained as dangerous as he’d ever been.

Kill him, my wolf snarled, snapping its jaws inside my mind. *He’s trying to take us away from our mate. Kill him!* My wolf tried freeing himself from his chains, but I didn’t let him. Somehow, I managed to exert just enough control to stop myself from shifting. Because if I did, it’d be carnage. Ben would shift too, and if that happened...it’d be a bloodbath, the victor uncertain.

“Get a hold of yourself,” Ben snapped at me, fingers hooked on my shirt. He slapped me across the face so hard that stars exploded behind my eyes. My wolf chomped at his leash again, eager to be let loose, but I pulled him back. “Your wolf wants to come out, huh? Let him then. We’ll see how that

turns out for you, Tevin.”

“Don’t push me,” I growled.

Ben set his jaw, and with a sharp exhale, let go of me.

“I won’t,” he said, raking a hand over his face. “The last thing I want to do is fight you...you might be acting like a fucking idiot, but you’re still family. And that’s exactly why I’m here, Tevin. I’m trying to make you see the light. What you’re doing here...it’s pure madness.”

“I don’t care what it is,” I countered, spitting out the blood that had pooled in my mouth. “I need to protect Serene.”

“Tevin—”

“Don’t,” I said. “I’m not changing my mind, and if you keep pushing me on this...I’ll just leave the pack.”

The words hung heavy between us, but Ben said nothing. He just held my gaze for a long time. Did I really mean that? Would I really leave the pack for Serene? I barely had to ask myself the question before I knew the answer. Every instinct in me screamed out that Serene was my mate and that I’d do anything for her, no matter how hard.

Ben must have seen something in my face because with a flicker of anger in his eyes, he turned around and left.

“Shit,” I muttered.

The last time I’d confronted Ben, I’d been much younger, and that time he’d managed to beat some sense into me. This time was different. Whether I was in the right or not, I wasn’t going to budge. The last thing I wanted was to fall out with the pack, but...

For Serene, I’d do everything.

SEVEN

SERENE

I stood on the doorway, keys still in my hand, and looked down at the envelope someone had pushed through the mailbox. A full day of work had done wonders for my mental health—nothing better than twenty-four kids to get your mind off things in your personal life—but this unsuspecting letter was enough to send my anxiety through the roof.

With a knot in my throat, I closed the door behind me and picked up the envelope. It was smaller than the folder I had received with the will, but it had the same Philadelphia return address, which meant this was probably just as important. I ripped it open, not sure of what I'd find inside, and pulled out a handwritten letter. The script was smooth and flowing, and even though there were no lines on the page, every word, sentence, and paragraph was perfectly spaced.

The first line—*To my daughter*—had me sitting down on the couch.

Silently, I scanned the words Bryan Atwater had written shortly before he died. I wasn't sure if I could call it a confession, but the emotions were just as raw as they were strong. Even if I didn't know the man, I could see the places where he'd lifted up his pen and hesitated, probably to ponder on the weight of what he was telling me. When I finally dove into it and started reading, my heart tightened painfully.

To my daughter,

If you're reading this, then that means I'm no longer among the living. It fills me with shame that I never had the courage to reach out before, but I didn't want to intrude on the life you've built for yourself over the years. I know you were raised by a wonderful couple, who loved and supported you, and I didn't feel it was my place to come back into your life.

I hope you'll forgive me, but now that my days are coming to an end, I realize I can't go without at least writing you a letter. My name's Bryan Atwater and, even though you might've never heard of me, I'm your biological father.

I dabbed my eyes with the edge of my shirt. I hadn't expected to get this emotional over a letter written by someone I didn't know, but now that the tears had started, there was no stopping them.

Bryan continued for two more pages, detailing how I'd been the result of an extramarital affair, and how afraid he had been of his parents if they ever found out about it. Groomed as the natural successor to his father in the family business, Bryan had been given a mission—to make sure the Atwater empire kept on growing, and to never bring shame to the family name.

Bryan had studied and worked hard, and even married someone from a 'good' family. A night of foolish love, though, was enough to put it all on the line. My biological mother died during childbirth and, when Bryan found himself with a newborn in his arms, he panicked; afraid of what his father would do—to himself *and* the baby—he decided to give me up for adoption.

He tried looking after me, from a distance, but it got harder as time went on. When I finally grew into adulthood, Bryan convinced himself he had no right to come barging in. He'd loved me from afar and suffered for it.

When I read his closing sentence, my heart broke into a million pieces. *I have but one dying wish: if you can find it in yourself, please forgive me.*

I turned over the pages and read them again. Bryan's turmoil was almost palpable, and it matched my own. Thing was, I didn't know if I was mad or sad. Maybe a little bit of both. Whatever my feelings were, at least I knew my biological father had a kind soul. If only I could've met him.

I put the letter aside and grabbed the envelope; inside it was another letter, this one typewritten and with Horace Samuels' letterhead. It restated Bryan Atwater's final wishes, detailing how he wanted to leave all his fortune to me in case he had no other children.

I sighed, feeling uneasy at the thought of so much money. What was I even supposed to do with it? Never mind the money—what I was supposed to do with all the real estate, stock options, and what have you? I was a schoolteacher, for God's sake! What business training did I have to handle such things?

Again, I thought of calling the lawyer's number to tell him I didn't want anything to do with Bryan Atwater's fortune. I didn't, though. Even if I

didn't want the money for myself, I knew I could make good use of it—just a little bit of money and I could make something out of Brightenville Elementary. Upgrade the library, replace the furnishings, add a computer lab; the possibilities were endless.

“I can't deal with this right now,” I whispered, throwing my back against the couch. I ran my fingers through my hair, looked up at the ceiling, and let out a sharp exhale of frustration. I knew I'd have to deal with this sooner or later, but I sure as hell wasn't ready to tackle it now. After all, how long had I been given to process all this? A day or two? I was going to need more than that.

I looked at my phone, saw that it was already a quarter past six, and jumped to my feet, nerves fluttering in my stomach. “Oh, shit.” I was supposed to meet Tevin at seven, and I didn't want to be late for our date.

I rushed into the bathroom for a quick shower, then rummaged through my closet until I settled on a combination I liked: tight jeans, a low-cut blouse that was the perfect blend of sexy and modest, and heeled sandals. One little twirl in front of the mirror and I was ready to go.

It had taken me half an hour to get ready, which meant I still had fifteen minutes left—enough time for me to ditch the Wrangler and walk to Manny's. I grabbed my bag and faded denim jacket on the way out, in case the evening got chilly, and took a deep breath before leaving the porch. This was going to be my first date in a long time, and I wanted to present my best, confident self.

I spent the fifteen-minute walk thinking of Tevin, replaying our conversation at Beans and Leaves. I'd never reacted to someone like I had to him. Just thinking of the way my body had warmed at his electric touch had a kaleidoscope of butterflies taking flight in my stomach. I shouldn't be that excited over someone like him—bad boys had never been my thing—but I simply couldn't help myself. Everything about Tevin drew me in, from his rugged looks to the assertive way he carried himself. And those eyes...there had been something there that made me want to know more about him.

I couldn't pinpoint exactly why he affected me so completely. He simply did.

“Here we go,” I whispered, taking a deep breath as I turned the corner that led into Manny's. The small bistro was tucked between two red brick office buildings, and the entrance was decorated with hanging flowerpots. The paneled doors were made of dark wood, and above it hung a wooden

sign spelling out *Manny's* over a carved illustration of a chef's hat and a wooden spoon.

Tevin was already there, leaning against the wall of the adjoining building. He stood behind a Harley-Davidson with a jet-black frame, open-face helmet in hand. His arms were folded over his chest, which made him look even more muscular, and his dark eyes seemed even darker in the shade. Despite that, his sharp features smoothed out when he saw me. He shifted his helmet from his right hand to his left and stepped forward.

"Serene," he said, politely kissing my cheek. He laid a hand on my waist as he did it, and an electric shiver shot up my spine as his fingers brushed against the naked skin between my jeans and blouse.

"Tevin," I breathed out, the butterflies in my stomach going from a flutter to a crazed dance. Even my heart was skipping happily.

"You look amazing," he murmured, his eyes wandering down my body without the slightest hint of shame. Had any other man looked at me like that and I would've felt uncomfortable; with Tevin, it was the opposite. Warm blood rushed to my cheeks, and I unconsciously started wondering about what he thought looked so amazing—my clothes or my body.

"Thank you." I bit on the corner of my lip, then looked past him and into Manny's. It was completely packed. I should've known this would happen, but when was the last time I'd come here? More than a year ago, probably. I almost smacked my forehead.

"It's full," Tevin said, but he didn't sound particularly annoyed. If anything, it was the opposite. He was looking at the jam-packed dining room with...relief? Somehow, I had the sense he wasn't comfortable around crowds.

"I'm really sorry," I said, feeling like a complete idiot. "I should've made a reservation but I—"

"It's not a problem." He smiled, then looked down for a split second, as if weighing our options. "Give me a minute."

Without waiting for a reply, he turned on his heel and stepped inside Manny's. Surprised, I kept my feet rooted to the ground, having no idea what he was going to do. Part of me wondered if he was going to shake a server or two and demand we were given a table. He certainly looked imposing enough to manage that.

He stepped back out two minutes later, carrying two paper bags in his hands.

“I got us dinner,” he said, holding the bags up. “There wasn’t a single seat available, so I think this works out better.”

“Right,” I laughed, wondering where he wanted us to eat. I was about to suggest the town square or the promenade, where we could find a bench to sit, but he was faster. He pushed the paper bags into my hands, then tilted his chin toward the Harley-Davidson.

“We’re going for a ride.” It wasn’t a question, nor was it a suggestion. It was a statement, one that left no margin for hesitation. I looked at his motorcycle and my stomach did a little flip. Going out on a date with someone like Tevin had already pushed me out of my comfort zone, but to go on a ride with him...maybe that was a little too much. I wanted to go, but at the same time...

“I don’t have a helmet,” I said.

Smiling, he stepped forward and lowered his own helmet over my head. He did it gently, tucking my hair under its frame. “Now you do.”

Feeling like a girl in one of those ‘80s movies, where the male lead is a blend of gentleman and bad boy and *always* rides a motorcycle, I let Tevin help me onto the Harley-Davidson. He climbed on after me, leaning forward to grip the throttle, and I put our dinner in my bag and wrapped my arms tightly around his torso. It wasn’t my intention to feel him up, but my fingers brushed lightly against his stomach, where his shirt hugged his hard abs. More than just *looking* in shape, Tevin was in mouth-watering shape.

Get your mind out of the gutter, Serene, I thought, reminding myself that this was just a first date. I was just trying to be cautious, but all that caution went out the window when Tevin turned the ignition on. The motorcycle came alive with a sputtering roar, the engine’s vibrations traveling up my spine, and I wrapped my arms around him even more tightly.

To hell with caution—I deserved this.

“Where are we going?” I asked, but Tevin couldn’t hear me over the sound of the engine. In rebel fashion—no helmet, tattooed arms in full display—he sped away from Manny’s, zooming down Brightenville’s narrow streets in a blaze of excitement.

I didn’t even care about our destination. All I cared about was the wind on my face, the clenching of Tevin’s abs under my fingers, and the warmth that spilled from his body and onto mine. Before I even knew what I was doing, I leaned in further and laid my head against his back. For the first time since I’d received that damn will, I let go of all my worries and surrendered

to the moment.

Tevin drove us across Brightenville and into a maze of backroads, all of them leading into the woodlands that surrounded both sides of the freeway. It wasn't long before I had no idea where I was. Even though I'd been raised in Brightenville, I still wasn't privy to all the secrets our little town held, and that only increased my excitement and intrigue. More than just discovering someone new, it felt like I was rediscovering Brightenville all over again.

We rode far into the woody hills, leaving a plume of dust in our wake, and Tevin stopped at the crest of a hill. He swung his legs over the seat, helped me down, and removed my helmet. With his hand on my lower back, he turned me around so that I could take in the view. There was a natural water reservoir directly underneath us, where the hill sank into a valley, and Brightenville stretched lazily a few miles beyond that. From above, it seemed like a spider's web of bright lights. The sun had already set, bringing with it a cozy summer darkness, and Brightenville had turned into a beacon of light.

"This is silly," I said, still taking in the scenery, "but I've never been here before. It's so beautiful. To see the town from up here..."

"I've only come up here once or twice," Tevin said, pushing the kickstand into position with the sole of his boot, "but I thought you'd like it. It's different seeing things from a distance. Helps you gain perspective."

I stood aside and let him grab a small rolled-up blanket from his Harley. He stretched it over a flat outcropping of rocks and, when I gave him the paper bags, he laid out our dinner; I hadn't noticed it, but there was even a bottle of red in one of the bags.

"There's garlic bread, cheese, olives, salad, spaghetti, and..." He trailed off, then waved a hand at all the little containers littering his blanket. "I wasn't sure what you liked, so I ordered a little bit of everything."

"I'm not picky," I replied, sitting on the edge of the blanket with my legs folded under me. "And you gotta tell me how much all this was. We can split the—"

"Don't worry about it," he said, and he wasn't just being polite; the money was clearly just an afterthought for him. Smiling, he popped the cork out of the bottle and poured some wine into two paper cups. There was nothing fancy about our impromptu dinner date but, at the same time, this felt like the stuff fairy tales were made of.

A moonlight dinner with a devilishly handsome man, and with Brightenville as a background?

Sign me right up.

Tevin gently tapped his paper cup against mine before bringing it to his mouth, his eyes on mine the whole time. His gaze was intense, as if he were trying to memorize my face. It made my cheeks feel warm, and I looked away as I took a sip of my own wine.

“Where are you from?” I asked, suddenly aware I knew nothing about him. In the back of my head, my mother’s voice surged, freaking out over the fact that I had come into the woods with a stranger. I promptly ignored it. Tevin looked dangerous, that much I could admit, but I felt...safe around him. Maybe I was just being silly—that was always a possibility—but there was something about him that put me at ease. And I tried to listen to my instincts when possible. They’d rarely steered me wrong in the past.

“Not from Brightenville,” he replied, “but close. I was born in Fresno but moved here when I was just a pup.”

“A *pup*?” I repeated, laughing. “I can’t imagine you as a pup.”

“Are you telling me I wouldn’t pass as a cute pup?” He took a quick sip of his wine, then busied himself with serving me dinner from all the little containers he’d bought. He glanced up briefly and gave me a sexy half-smile that had my heart beating faster. “I might not look like it, but I was a damn cute pup.”

“You’d probably look cute with some fur on you, I’ll give you that.” I laughed again, letting the wine work its way into my bloodstream. I could tell Tevin had splurged on it—the wine had an oaky aftertaste, but it was smooth and delicate on the tongue. Distracted as I was with our conversation, I made a conscious effort to nibble at the food; the last thing I wanted was to get drunk on paper cups of wine and make a complete fool of myself.

Tevin seemed blissfully unaware of how self-conscious I felt. He replied to my stupid quip with a grin, looking at me over the rim of his paper cup. My heart skipped a beat as I held his gaze, and the warmth I’d experienced before spreading from my cheeks to the rest of my body.

Come on, get a hold of yourself, Serene. I drained my cup, then devoured the rest of the garlic bread with ravenous intensity. As long as I had my mouth stuffed, I didn’t run the risk of saying something foolish.

“I’ve never done this before, you know?” Tevin said suddenly, his eyes never leaving mine.

“You’ve never done what?” I asked. “Gone on a date?”

“I’ve been on what you’d call dates before,” he replied, shrugging his

shoulders. His voice was flat as he talked about those other dates, but it changed once his eyes met mine. There was a rise in pitch there, one that made my heart beat even faster than before. “But this...” He pursed his lips, shook his head, then closed his eyes. “This is different. *You* are different. One look at you and I realized...”

He trailed off, and only then did I notice I was leaning forward, as if afraid I was going to miss the last words of his sentence.

“What did you realize?” I asked him, my words coming out as a faint little whisper.

He held my gaze for a long heartbeat, parted his lips to say something, then pressed them into a tight line. He looked down, as if struggling with his own thoughts, then shifted his weight so that he was sitting closer to me. Gingerly, he pushed the hair away from my face, his knuckles brushing against my cheek as he studied my face again, and leaned in. His forehead touched mine, our lips no more than an inch away from each other as we stared into each other’s eyes.

My heart hammered, my breath caught, and I could barely form thoughts, much less words.

“Tevin,” I managed to ask again. “What did you realize?”

“A thousand things,” he whispered, and that’s when our lips met.

It was as if a million tiny fireworks exploded in my chest, an unfamiliar heat and deep desire spreading outward through my body. I was aware of every beat of my heart, every millimeter of space between Tevin and me, and I longed to press myself against him and close that space.

The kiss was soft, almost chaste, but it ignited a flame that burned hot and bright, and I found myself edging closer and closer. I reached up, gently draping my hands around Tevin’s neck, and he jerked back like he’d been burned.

I blinked, startled, catching a glimpse of what looked like panic in his dark eyes, but it was gone in an instant and I wondered if I’d imagined it.

“Sorry,” he mumbled.

“For what?” I breathed, trying get my bearings. It had barely been a brush of lips, but I felt as if something in my very soul had shifted. I couldn’t explain it—but I did know that one kiss would never be enough.

“I just don’t want to rush things,” he said, not quite meeting my gaze. “I like you a lot and I want to do this right.”

I smiled at that. Tevin was a huge, hulking beast of a man, yet there was

something about him that put me at ease—well, other than the war drum pounding of my heart and the desire coursing through my veins. I didn't know him, but I wasn't afraid of him, despite his rough edges. He was gentle when it came to me. He could have had his way with me right here and now, and I would have offered no resistance. I should have been embarrassed by that fact, but I wasn't. There was just something about this man that drew me in.

"I appreciate that," I replied. "But I was enjoying where things were going."

Tevin chuckled, but he shifted away from me on the blanket. "Tell me more about yourself, Serene."

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything."

It wasn't just a quip. I could tell by the look in his eyes that he truly wanted to get to know me, and I smiled, biting on the corner of my lip.

"Okay, where to start...I was born and raised in Brightenville. I teach kindergarten at the local elementary school. I like walks on the beach and cozy nights on my couch reading a good book." I gave a self-deprecating little laugh. "Not exactly a wild life."

Tevin smiled. "There's something to be said for a calm, quiet life."

"Mine is simple, but I like it."

Though it wasn't so simple these days. Thoughts of the inheritance and learning about my adoption floated to the surface again, but I pushed them away. I didn't want to spend a second of my date with Tevin worrying about those things. There was time for that. Right now, this time was for us.

Tevin refilled our paper wine cups. "So you like to read? What else do you do when you aren't reading, teaching, or walking on the beach?"

The way he said it wasn't condescending. He didn't think I was boring for the simple life I led. He seemed genuinely interested.

"Well," I began, hardly believing I was about to admit this to a man I barely knew, "there's this project I've been working on. A novel."

"Yeah?" He grinned. "What kind?"

Now *that* was something I wasn't ready to share. I gave him a teasing look. "I can't tell you everything about myself on the first date. Then what will we talk about on the second?" I cleared my throat. "I mean, assuming there is a second."

I wanted to kick myself, but Tevin watched me with that intense stare

over the rim of his cup as he took a long sip of wine.

“There will definitely be a second,” he finally said, and my heart did a little flip. “If you want, that is.”

Oh, I want. There was a whole lot more I wanted when it came to Tevin.

Instead of replying, though, I edged closer to him, and this time, I was the one to initiate the kiss. Not as gentle and testing this time.

I pressed my mouth to his, and a low groan sounded in his chest. I parted my lips, and this time he didn't hesitate. He swept his tongue across mine; shivers of delight raced up and down my spine.

Yes, this. This was what I'd been missing in my life. Desire, passion, longing, excitement. Tevin sparked all of that inside me, and more. I couldn't get enough of him, but when I reached up and tangled my fingers in his hair, he seemed to come back to himself once again, pulling back.

When I met his gaze, his dark brown eyes were a fiery inferno. I could see that he wanted me, but he was holding back.

I appreciated his restraint, because with the way I was feeling, I was half tempted to throw caution to the wind and tear his clothes right off his body.

Tevin cleared his throat again, tearing his gaze from me as he reached for the bag. “How about dessert? You like tiramisu?”

I did, but I liked Tevin even more. He seemed determined to take things slow, though. I took a deep breath, trying to steady my raging hormones.

“I love it.”

“Perfect,” he replied, and I couldn't agree more.

This had been one of the most perfect nights I could ever remember.

EIGHT

TEVIN

I pushed the Harley to its limits.

I had just dropped Serene back at her place, and my body was still brimming with lust and excitement. Before this date, her presence was like holding a flame next to a trail of gasoline, but now that we'd finally kissed...my mind was on fire.

More, my wolf snarled, trapped between exhilaration and discontent, *we need more of her*. Clearly, a couple of kisses hadn't been enough for him. I didn't blame him for it—much like my inner beast, I was desperate to have more of Serene. So much more. The kisses we'd shared weren't nearly enough to sate my thirst.

Gritting my teeth, I turned the throttle even harder, and the Harley responded with a mischievous growl. I pulled onto the freeway, driving in and out of traffic as fast as I could, and the bike responded smoothly to each and every one of my commands. I'd customized it myself to make sure it'd act like an extension of my own body, and it showed.

The faster I drove, the more my mind insisted on returning to Serene. I replayed that kiss and the rest of our date a dozen times, driving myself into a frenzy, and I had to convince myself it was madness to turn back and finish what I'd started.

More than anything, I wanted to drive to Serene's again, pull her back into my arms and kiss her one more time, but I wasn't blind to the consequences—there was a chance I could lose control, and I couldn't put Serene in danger. After all, wasn't I staying close to Brightenville so that I could protect her? That included protecting her from myself.

That was the reason I'd been the one pulling back from our kiss. I'd felt

her eagerness in the way she parted my lips with her tongue, and in the way her fingers trailed down my chest...and I was forced to put a stop to it. It had been painful, probably more than anything I'd ever experienced, but I'd managed to extricate myself from her embrace.

That was wrong, my wolf snapped at me, his anger going from a simmer to a roil. *Wrong!*

"Shut the fuck up," I muttered, my words drowned out by the engine and the wind. Had I listened to my wolf back then, I would've *ravaged* Serene. The lust I felt for her verged on madness, and I knew I could've killed her if I tried to claim her.

This was why I should have stayed away from her in the first place. I was far too dangerous for someone as good as Serene. Only now that I'd had a taste, I craved more just as much as my wolf did. The only thing keeping me in check was that I was slightly more in control than him. Barely.

I closed my mind off, a futile attempt at shutting down my inner beast, but it was useless. The furious snarling and angry snapping accompanied me all the way to the Bentley Motel. There, I grabbed a coffee from the vending machine and locked myself inside the room.

"Ben was right," I said, "this place looks like a pigsty."

I threw my head back and downed the coffee in two long gulps. With a sigh, I massaged the nape of my neck and started cleaning up the room. There wasn't that much that needed to be done—just taking out the trash and folding my clothes—but it still brought me some much-needed comfort. The more orderly my surroundings were, the less my inner chaos affected me.

What you need to do is pack up and go home, I told myself. The further away I was from Serene, the less chance of me losing my tenuous grip on my wolf's insistence that I claim her. But we both revolted at that idea. I had to protect her from the outside threats.

I was almost done straightening up when my phone buzzed.

I picked it up instinctively, half-expecting to see a text from Ben, but that's not what I found. Instead, it was Serene's name on the screen. My heart immediately picked up the pace, and I unlocked the screen with a quick swipe of my thumb.

Thank you for tonight, her text read, *I had a wonderful time*.

My fingers hovered over the keyboard as I thought of a response. Some of my pack brothers enjoyed texting back and forth with the bunnies that frequented the club, but I wasn't particularly fond of that. Whenever I replied

to a text, I mostly used the simple but efficient ‘OK.’ That clearly wasn’t going to work here.

Same here, I finally replied. *And that kiss...*

I hit Send and my fingers instantly tightened around the phone. Why the fuck was I bringing up the kiss? Why in God’s name was I flirting with Serene? Over and over again, I’d convinced myself that I had to keep some sort of distance from her, but here I was...acting like a goddamn teenager.

That kiss, yes... She added a little digital heart to punctuate her sentence. Three little dots appeared directly under her message, indicating she was still writing, and I sat on the edge of the bed as I waited. The dots disappeared and reappeared a couple of times before I finally got her message. *I have to repay you for tonight. What do you say I make you my world-famous meatloaf?*

I didn’t even have to think about it.

If it’s as good as that kiss was, I texted, *I’m game*.

Yeah, I was a lost cause. My wolf seemed pleased with lame flirting, though, as I could almost feel it wagging its tail inside my mind.

Is Friday okay? Seven o’clock, my place?

I raked a hand over my face. My pack brothers would laugh their asses off if they could see me now. Tevin Novak, excited about eating meatloaf by candlelight at a schoolteacher’s house—yeah, that wasn’t like me at all. And yet, even if everything about this was surreal—not to mention dangerous as hell—I couldn’t bring myself to say no. In fact, I did just the opposite.

Yes, I typed, *but I’d like to see you before that. Are you free tomorrow? I want to take you to the beach.*

The three dots reappeared, and I stared at them as if they held all the secrets of life.

I’m free, she replied, *and the beach sounds perfect*. There was a little emoji sun, followed by a pair of sunglasses and a little heart. I wasn’t as literate as my brothers were in emoji language, but I took it as a good sign.

Conflicted, but definitely satisfied that I was going to see Serene again, I threw myself onto the bed. What the fuck was I doing? Was my inability to resist my wolf’s impulses a sign that he was gaining dominance?

No, I refused to accept that. If I were being honest, I was simply powerless to resist the draw of my mate. I was defying Ben, defying orders, even going against what I knew was best. Which meant I was playing a dangerous game here.

Sleep didn’t come easy.



THE FIRST RAYS of sunshine hit Serene's porch at half past six.

It was still early as hell, but I was so damn eager to see Serene that I simply couldn't wait. I'd gotten out of bed before five, killed time with a long shower, and then hit the road. I made a stop so that I could pick up some food and flowers, and now I was holding the bouquet up in front of me like a shield.

Flowers, I thought, what the hell is wrong with me?

For half a heartbeat, I considered turning around and killing some more time. I didn't want her to think I was some kind of early rising lunatic. Thankfully, though, my heightened senses put my concerns to rest: from inside the house came the low creak of floorboards, which told me Serene was already up. Maybe she was as anxious about our second date as I was.

I took a deep breath and rang the bell.

I heard Serene padding across the house, her bare feet producing a sound regular humans would never pick up, and I shifted my weight from one foot to the other. Even my wolf was restless, its energy fluctuating inside me as if he were an overly enthusiastic pup.

It took a few seconds, but the door finally swung open to reveal Serene. Her hair was still bedraggled, which somehow made her sexier, and the oversized t-shirt she was wearing clung to her hips, revealing the mouthwatering shape of her body.

"You're here early." She cleared her throat and offered me a nervous smile. "I was still getting ready, so if you don't mind waiting a couple of minutes...oh, flowers. Are these for me?"

Now she was the one shifting her weight around, the movements of her breasts enough for a lump to form in my throat. Why did she have to be so fucking attractive?

"Those are for you," I said, gently handing her the bouquet of tulips. I'd thought of getting some roses, but I hadn't wanted to fall into cliché-land. Tulips seemed like a fair choice instead, and Serene seemed pleased with them. She held the flowers close against her chest, inhaled their scent, and the most precious smile spread across her lips.

Claim her, my wolf pleaded. You need to.

His desperation had grown so strong that he was no longer snarling his commands—instead, he was *begging* for me to claim Serene. It was a weird

feeling, as if my wolf's life was being threatened by the distance between Serene and me, and I had to close my eyes to control myself. I was *this* close to losing it.

"Thank you so much," Serene said, the smoothness of her voice cutting through the noise. When I didn't reply right away, she just continued. "Tevin...is everything okay?"

One deep breath and I opened my eyes, suddenly aware that I was acting like a nutcase. "Everything's perfect," I said. "I was just caught off guard by how beautiful you are."

"Are you serious?" She laughed, eyebrow cocked as she waved at her body. "I've just gotten out of bed, I'm wearing a ratty shirt, and you think I'm beautiful?"

"No, you're right," I said. "You look more than just beautiful. You look perfect."

It was the truth—the more I looked at her, the more I realized this was how I wanted her to look. She had that innocent aura about her, unblemished by tight clothes or make-up, and I absolutely loved it. I wouldn't mind waking up to this every single morning for the rest of my life, that was for sure. Even though I knew I could never have that. I ignored the tightness in my chest at the thought.

"I'll pretend that I believe you," she threw back, that bright laugh of hers making my heart tighten. "Just gimme a minute, all right? I'll be out in a sec."

True to her words, Serene was out the door five minutes later, wearing a navy blue shirt and a colorful sarong. She had a dark baseball cap on, with her hair tied into a ponytail that fell through the opening in the back, and aviator sunglasses. It was the kind of look a girl would get after raiding her dad's wardrobe for a couple of accessories, but it worked. Then again, I wasn't surprised. Serene was the kind of woman who made clothes look good, not the other way around.

"Ready," she announced, and I promptly laced my arm in hers. When she noticed the helmet in my hands, she threw me a curious glance. "Are we going somewhere? The beach is just there."

She pointed across the road, where the white sands unfurled toward the ocean.

"I know a better place," I replied. "A few miles north, there's—"

"Brightenville Cove," Serene cut in, smiling. "I thought you said you

weren't from around here. First you showed me that view up on the hills, now the cove...I'm starting to think you know more about Brightenville than I do."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Most of the places I know around here are in the vicinity, not in Brightenville itself." Slowly, I led her down the porch and toward the bike. "I've always liked that cove. Not many people there."

"Agreed," Serene said. "I don't like fighting for a place to put down my towel."

"Perfect." I helped her onto the bike, revved up the engine, and off we went.

Brightenville Cove was a coastal inlet north of the town, no more than a small bay sheltered by tall cliffs. We had to leave the bike, as the cove was only accessible by a winding trail, but it was worth it—the sand was warm, the ocean was calm, and there wasn't a single person there to bother us.

We picked a spot near the water and stretched out our towels. From the corner of my eye, I watched as Serene pulled her shirt over her head and peeled off her sarong. Underneath, she wore a crimson bikini that offered the perfect contrast to her golden locks. I snuck a quick glance at her, drank in the swell of her breasts and the taper of her waist, and warm blood rushed down between my legs. Again, I had to take a deep breath so that I wouldn't lose my mind.

I took off my shirt and sat down beside Serene. Much like I'd done with her, she snuck a glance at me, her eyes roaming down from my shoulders to the V-shape of my lower abs. She did it quickly, probably hoping I wouldn't notice, but I did. I met her eyes and offered her a smile and a wink, which promptly turned her cheeks into a bright shade of red.

We spent the early morning basking in the sun and enjoying each other's company. After our date the previous night, most of the awkwardness between us was already gone, and the conversation flowed more easily. Serene tried asking about my life, but most of the time I just deflected her questions and answered with some of my own. She seemed particularly happy to talk about the children at Brightenville Elementary, and all the work she did there.

She didn't say a word about the fortune that awaited her, and her only thoughts seemed to be of the children. Had anyone told me someone like Serene existed, I would've doubted it. She was just too pure.

"So, what do you do in your free time?" Serene asked, turning onto her

side and propping her head on her hand. I couldn't help but stare at the perfect curves of her body—the swell of her breasts, the dip of her waist—and I had to avert my gaze and focus on her face, even though the beauty there was already enough to drive me to distraction.

“Um...” I shook my head, trying to remember what she'd asked. Free time, right. I said the first thing that came to mine. “I like to hunt.”

Serene sat up. “Seriously?”

“What, do I not strike you as the woodsy, outdoorsman type?” I laughed. If she only knew the half of it.

“Not exactly,” she said slowly, her lips twitching.

“I'll have you know I'm one of the best hunters around.” I said it lightly, teasingly, and fortunately she let it drop when I decided changing the subject was the best course of action. “Care to go for a swim?”

Before she could answer, I was on my feet, scooping her up into my arms and tossing her over my shoulder as I jogged toward the water's edge.

“Tevin!” she shrieked through her laughter, and I grinned like a fool. This woman was making me act like a love-struck teenager, and I couldn't care less. Oddly enough, my wolf was lying low today, there in the back of my mind, but something about being around Serene had him acting more settled, somehow. For once, I wasn't afraid that I might lose control.

Serene clung to my body as I put her down in the surf, the gentle waves of the protected cove lapping at our feet, and I took a minute to just enjoy the feel of her. Then she was darting off into the water with a teasing grin, and I gave chase. We played in the water for a while, and I couldn't remember a time when I'd felt so carefree, so at ease.

The rest of the day was spent in a blissful daze, and my wolf seemed content with just hanging around Serene. That lustful pull was always there, with the urgent need to claim her underpinning it, but it all remained under control. It wasn't until later in the day, after we'd eaten the lunch I bought for us, that our perfect date was disturbed.

From the cove, we could spot a couple of stray surfers, who'd paddled deep into the ocean in search of better spots, and the occasional jet ski. There were even a few powerboats here and there, but they mostly stayed out of the little bay. It seemed as if the cove would remain ours for the rest of the day, but I was dispelled of that notion when a long powerboat cut through the waves and turned sharply toward the bay.

I didn't mind having some company—this was a public spot, after all—

but Serene tensed up the moment the powerboat came within view. The man driving the powerboat stopped it a hundred yards away from shore, and then he dove into the water. There were two other males and a woman, and the rest of the group followed after him, dragging a large beer cooler after them. As they set themselves up in the vicinity, Serene tensed even more, rounding her shoulders and straightening her back.

“Is something wrong?” I asked her, turning on my towel so that I could face her.

“It’s...it’s nothing, really,” she muttered, but I noticed the way her eyes darted toward the newcomers. She knew them.

“Do you know these guys?” I asked her.

“Well, yes,” she admitted. “See that tall one? With the dark hair and gold-rimmed sunglasses? That’s Joseph. He...he used to be my boyfriend.”

I looked at the man Serene had indicated and frowned. He wasn’t as tall as I was, but he still had an imposing frame. He was olive-skinned, although his tan could be blamed on a sunbed, and he sported a slicked-back undercut. He wore nothing but a pair of tiny red shorts and golden sunglasses, which made him look as if he belonged on a director’s cut of *Jersey Shore*.

“I didn’t know you had such bad taste,” I said, putting on a sly grin. “I mean, that guy looks like an asshole.”

I wasn’t exactly happy to learn about Serene’s dating history, but it didn’t bother me that much. On a deep, unconscious level, she was already mine. The rest were unimportant details.

“Looks like an asshole?” She scoffed. “He *is* an asshole.”

“Care to elaborate?” A possessive instinct at the idea of Serene being mistreated raised my hackles.

She rolled her eyes. “Let’s start off with the fact that he’s a lawyer. He works for his dad but thinks he’s the next best thing in existence after sliced bread. He also spends half his waking day in the gym. Oh, and see that girl over there?” She pointed at the woman, a petite brunette with long dark hair and a resting bitch face. “That’s Marion, his wife. He cheated on me with her.”

“Okay,” I said, “he’s even more of an asshole than I initially thought. What exactly did you see in him?”

“I don’t really know, to be honest,” Serene sighed. “I’m just glad he’s out of my life.”

Joseph wasn’t that close to us, and so it was impossible for him to

overhear us, but he still looked our way. He must've recognized Serene, because next thing I knew he was saying something to his wife and walking toward us. With each step he took, he puffed out his chest more and more, so much so that I wouldn't have been surprised if he started beating it like some hormone-addled gorilla.

"I thought it was you," he said with an amused drawl, stopping at the foot of Serene's towel. He peered at her over the rim of his glasses, and a lazy smile spread across his lips. "I haven't seen you in a while. How have you been doing?" Only then did he acknowledge me, the small upturn of his lips letting me know he wasn't exactly happy about seeing me here. "I see you have some company."

I sat up on the towel and looked straight into the asshole's eyes. "She does."

"Yeah, it's been a while," Serene said, the tension that had been showing on her shoulders slipping into her voice. Her bright confidence had now given way to anxiety. "Look, I'm just trying to relax here, so I—"

"You're still working at that school?" Joseph continued, clearly not giving a damn about what Serene was saying. He made an annoying *tsk-tsk* sound and shook his head. "You should've come to work for my dad when you had the chance, Serene. Maybe I can still get you in. You look *exactly* like the secretaries we like hiring, the pay isn't half-bad, and you wouldn't be running around covered in puke and snot half the day."

"I don't..." Serene trailed off and looked down at her feet, slowly balling her hands into fists. Her lips were pressed tight, and her face was turning red, something that I couldn't blame on the sun.

Slowly, I rose to my feet and looked down at the douchebag. As tall as he was, I still had a few inches on him. He probably wasn't expecting that, as he leaned his body away from me, as if afraid I was going to introduce him to my fists. He was right to do so, because that's exactly what I felt tempted to do.

"Do you really think Serene would like a job like that?" I asked him, feigning genuine curiosity, and then pointed at his wife. "I mean, your secretary over there doesn't look too happy with the position."

"That's not..." Joseph clenched his jaw. "That's my wife."

"Oh, sorry." I showed him the palm of my hands and grinned. "I just looked at her face and thought she wasn't too happy about being out here, so I assumed she was your secretary."

For a split second, I thought Joseph was going to insult me, but he bit on his tongue and looked away from me. “Who are you, anyway?” he asked me, a flicker of defiance in his eyes when he dared look back.

“Tevin,” I offered, taking his hand in mine. I gave it a firm squeeze, crushing his knuckles together. I knew I was hurting him, but the asshole tried to pretend he didn’t feel a thing. “I’m with Serene.”

“Right,” he muttered, pulling his hand away as if it were on fire. He cleared his throat, looked back at Serene, and gave her a nervous nod. “Anyway, it was good seeing you. I’m going to head back.”

“Yeah, you do that,” Serene said, a surge of confidence making her voice sound stronger.

She followed Joseph with her gaze for a couple of seconds, and then let out a long breath of relief.

“God, I can’t believe I got tongue-tied in front of that asshole.” She turned toward me and laid her hand on top of mine. “Thank you.”

“What for?”

“For sticking up for me,” she whispered, gently tightening her fingers around mine. “I can’t remember the last time anybody did that for me. I know I shouldn’t let him make me feel bad, but...”

“It’s okay,” I whispered, sitting beside her and draping my arm over her shoulders. She leaned against me, the warmth of her skin on mine like a soothing balm. “I’m here now.”

And no one will ever make her feel like that again, my wolf added with a snarl, and this time I was in agreement. More than just protecting Serene, I wanted her to feel safe, cared for, and...loved?

Oh, shit, I thought. *So much for keeping my distance.*

NINE

SERENE

“Tell us a story!”

Anika tugged on my sleeve, her expectant gaze meeting mine. I looked at her, blinked, and only then did I process what she was saying. Today was a particularly difficult day—not used to taking time off, it had taken me an hour or two to get into the full swing of things after having taken three personal days—but it wasn’t just that. No matter what I did, I simply couldn’t get Tevin off my mind.

Of course, I’d suspected that was going to happen. After our date at the beach, and the way he handled that asshole Joseph, there was no way I’d have anything else on my mind. If I was honest, part of me had been afraid Tevin would pick up Joseph and snap him in two like a twig...but it seemed like the man I was dating knew better than that. He looked strong and capable and rough around the edges, but he wasn’t a brute.

“A story!” Anika insisted, giving my sleeve another tug. That’s when I realized Tommy and the other children had gathered behind her in a show of force. I was so distracted that the kids had decided to make a political alliance just so they could draw my attention.

“Right, a story,” I repeated, offering them my best attentive smile. With Anika and the others in tow, I led the way toward the story nook and knelt beside the ground-level shelves. Some of the books had yellowed pages and torn covers, but a few others still had that hardcover gloss—these had arrived no more than a couple of weeks ago, ordered and paid for by me. It was one of those that I grabbed. Yet again, I thought of how many more books I could

buy my students with Bryan Atwater's fortune. A whole library full.

"What about Snow White?" I asked the children, turning the book's cover toward them. In it, a scared Snow White rushed through the dark woods, looking back over her shoulders at a shadow that pursued her; in the corner, a couple of dwarves peeked over an overhang, watching poor Snow White flee from her stepmother's evil shadow.

"Yes!" Nico said, vigorously nodding his head. He was slightly younger than the other kids—and he looked like it, with his shaggy brown hair and big round eyes—but he had a passion for stories. Even though he was younger, he was already ahead of the other kids when it came to the alphabet, and I figured it wouldn't be long before he started reading.

"Right, gather 'round then," I announced, prepping a mountain of pillows for me to sit on. Anika and Tommy took the initiative, and together they herded the rest of the children.

We spent the following hour going through the book, the only sound in the room being that of my own voice. I'd never considered myself a good reader—certainly not good enough for professional narration—but the kids enjoyed my poor attempts at coming up with the characters' voices. They particularly liked my rendition of the Huntsman, which had my voice dipping into a low rumble.

"Please, spare me," I cried out, doing my best Snow White voice. The Huntsman had just led her into the woods, and he was about to plunge the dagger into her heart on behalf of Snow's deranged stepmother.

"What happened?" Nico asked, propping his chin on the palm of his hand. "Did the Huntsman kill her?"

I shook my head, smiled, and continued reading. "The Huntsman saw the tears in Snow White's eyes, and he realized he couldn't follow his orders. The Evil Queen had given him his orders, but Snow White's beauty and innocence had dazzled him. He couldn't kill her, nor could he hurt her." I cleared my throat and dipped my voice to interpret the Huntsman, "I will protect you, Snow White. The Queen has demanded your heart as proof, but I will take her the heart of an animal instead. In this, I will protect you."

"I like the Huntsman better than I like the Prince," Anika said, stifling a yawn. This wasn't her first time listening to this story, and she never failed to mention her love of the Huntsman whenever I got to this part. I got where she was coming from—I liked the Huntsman better myself.

He had an edge to him, and he risked his own life to protect Snow's.

Sure, the fact that he was going to kill her before he changed his mind kinda complicated things, but that just added to the character's charm. At the end of the day, Prince Charming was boring, and the Huntsman was not.

After I was done with the story and Snow White had finally had her happy ending, I clapped my hands together and pointed to the far end of the room. The children formed an orderly line at the door leading into the small lunchroom, which connected with the other classrooms. Melanie's class of six-year-olds was already there, occupying the round table at the corner, and I joined her at the teacher's table. One of the other teachers, Louise, always used her lunchtime to do some administrative work—she just munched on a sandwich while pecking away at her laptop—and so it was just me and Melanie.

"Spit it out," Melanie said the moment I sat down, a mischievous grin lighting up her face. Petite but slender, she had short dark hair with bangs, and her eyes had a cat-like intensity to them; she was the kind of woman who found *everything* amusing, especially if that everything related to men.

"What?" I asked her, even though I knew exactly what she wanted to hear.

"Oh, c'mon." She rolled her eyes at me and sighed. "You've been on two dates now with that biker dude. You gotta give me some details, girl. I mean, it's not every day that Serene Duran goes out with a bad boy."

"Tevin isn't a bad boy," I protested. "Sure, he might look like one, but he's actually the opposite."

"Oh?"

"Okay, listen to this," I said, and then walked Melanie through everything that happened the previous day, from the flowers Tevin had brought me to the way he'd confronted Joseph. By the time I was done, Melanie's eyebrows were so arched they seemed to have gained a life of their own.

"Damn," she whistled. "Do you know if Tevin has a brother or something? 'Cause I wouldn't mind having a man like that around. A perfect gentleman with a bad boy attitude? Sounds yummy. Is he a good kisser?"

"Well..." I looked down at my hands, warm blood rushing to my cheeks.

"*That* good?" Melanie said with a laugh. "Then what the hell are you waiting for? Good kissers are usually good between the sheets. You gotta take that bad boy for a test drive, honey."

"It's not like that," I whispered, looking around to see if anyone was eavesdropping on us. Unlike Melanie, I'd never been comfortable talking like

this out in the open...especially if we were at school. Not that I needed to worry—it was just the two of us at the teachers' table, and the kids couldn't care any less about adult-talk. "I actually like him. I don't want to rush into things."

"Is that why you invited him over for dinner?" Melanie said, an amused glint in her eyes. She gave me a little wink and poked me with her elbow. "C'mon, you wouldn't have invited him over unless..." She waggled her eyebrows at me suggestively, her grin widening.

I sighed. What was the use in lying to Melanie? I hadn't exactly invited Tevin over just so we could have sex, but I sure as hell hadn't invited him *just* for the meatloaf. I wanted to spend more time around him, and I wanted more than just an innocent kiss. Not that the few kisses we'd shared had been innocent—short as they were, they'd been charged with raw desire and lust. Had Tevin pushed for it yesterday at the beach, I would've surrendered to him right there and then. Except, instead of doing that, he'd just pulled back from me. Maybe he just preferred privacy. I was more than willing to find out.

"Fine," I admitted. "I do like this guy, and I wouldn't mind...you know."

"Fucking his brains out?"

I choked on my soup, then started coughing so hard that Melanie had to slap my back a couple of times. When I was finally able to breathe again, I leaned back against the chair and took a couple of deep breaths.

"It's not like that," I protested with a wheeze. "I actually like him, Mel."

"So?" she asked. "That's even better."

"Yeah, I guess," I muttered.

I wasn't in the habit of thinking about things in the way Melanie did, but she did have a point. I was dying to get in bed with Tevin, to explore every inch of his naked body, and to surrender myself to him. More than anything, I wanted to have his lips on mine, to feel his hands going down my body and—

"You're blushing," Melanie pointed out. "Thinking of Mr. Sexy Biker, huh?"

"You're impossible."

"And that's why you love me," Melanie said with a wink. "Now, what are your plans like for Friday evening?"

"What do you mean? I'm going to make him my meatloaf and—"

"Oh, honey," Melanie said, "I think your meatloaf is irrelevant here. Don't get me wrong, your cooking is great, but I think Tevin will want

something other than a meatloaf.” Another elbow poke, another grin. “Seriously, what are you going to wear?”

“I mean...clothes?”

“Duh.” She shook her head and laughed. “You can’t exactly get the door fully naked—although I doubt Tevin would mind—but at the same time...you can’t just throw on some random outfit and call it a day.”

“Well, I was thinking of wearing that low-cut dress I bought when—”

“Yeah, yeah,” Melanie cut in, “that’s a good one. Thing is, we need to think about what goes *underneath* that dress. Because, trust me, going by everything you told me...it won’t be long before you’re out of that dress. Once that happens, you need to make sure his jaw hits the floor.”

“Right,” I said, already knowing what Melanie was getting at. “What do you suggest?”

“You gotta hit up The Crimson Corner,” she replied without a moment’s hesitation. The Crimson Corner was a little boutique shop in the town center, specializing in women’s nightwear and lingerie, and it was one of Melanie’s favorite shops. She probably owned more sets of lingerie than she did actual clothing. Some women loved heels, others loved underwear—Melanie was the latter. “They had some great stuff last time I was in there.”

“What if I’m not ready to take this next step with Tevin?” I asked her, but I knew that it was bullshit as soon as the words left my mouth. After that first kiss, I was ready for everything and anything.

“Oh, please,” Melanie said. “You’re dying for it to happen. Sure, it’s risky to fall in the arms of a man, any man, but doesn’t it feel good?”

“It does,” I whispered, although I doubted any other man would produce the cocktail of emotions Tevin had unleashed in me. It went beyond the physical and emotional aspects of the equation—the attraction I felt cut deeper, verging on the spiritual. I’d never say it like that to Melanie—Melanie didn’t really believe in ‘The One’—but that’s how I felt. There was something about Tevin that made me think the happily ever after I’d always dreamed of might not be out of my reach after all.

In the end, though, Melanie was right. It was daring and risky to fall into a man’s arms, but maybe that’s exactly what I needed. To close my eyes, make the jump, and live a little. My biological father had never done it, preferring caution over risk, and he’d died filled with hurt and regrets. I didn’t intend to follow in his footsteps—life was too short for regrets.

It was with that thought in mind that I found myself at The Crimson

Corner, half an hour before closing time. The store clerk was an old high school acquaintance, and so I gave her a little wave before heading toward the back.

The Crimson Corner wasn't as racy as its name would suggest—there were no sex toys or anything on the displays—but it was more of a high-end shop. With its hardwood floors, high ceilings, and industrial decoration, it offered the perfect blend of sexiness, fashion, and style. The price tags reinforced that idea, and I had to convince myself that it was a good idea to splurge. After all, if not now, when?

“Oh, that’s nice,” I whispered as I eyed one of the mannequins. The headless body sported a delicate blue lace bra and thong, which matched the blue in Tevin’s eyes. Lacy but not frilly, it was seductive without being too out there. I bit on the corner of my lip as I imagined myself standing in front of Tevin, wearing nothing but that set, and my heart immediately skipped a beat.

“I can’t believe it,” I heard a familiar voice say from behind me, and my heart went from skipping to tightening. “It’s really you, Serene. God, seems like we’re bumping into each other every day now.”

I turned around and there she was.

Marion.

She had heels on, which put her at a height with me, and she was wearing a low-cut blouse which seemed on the verge of exploding. Her breasts pushed against the fabric, revealing a healthy amount of cleavage, and the silver pendant she wore only drew more attention to her breasts.

“Marion,” I said, trying to keep my voice as flat as possible. “I didn’t see you coming in.”

No one would blame me for not liking Marion, but I didn’t exactly hate her. Joseph had cheated on me with her, there was no denying that, but I blamed him far more than I blamed her. The way I saw it, if she wanted Joseph that badly, she could have him.

“Crazy, isn’t it?” She shook her head, smiling, and blew a dark lock of hair away from her face. “I barely see you around town, and now I’m seeing you everywhere.” She let her smile widen, but I noticed the upturn of her lips didn’t reach her eyes—it was as plastic as the mannequin I’d been eyeing. “Joseph told me you have a boyfriend now. I was very happy to hear that, you know? We never really talked about it, but I was afraid you’d never be able to get over how things ended between you and Joseph. I’m glad to hear

you're finally moving on."

I dug my fingernails into the palm of my hands. What was Marion's game here? Joseph and I had broken up more than three years ago, and I'd moved on just as soon as I learned he'd cheated on me. Did Marion really think I still had feelings for her asshole husband? Or was she just delusional?

"I haven't thought of Joseph in a long time, to be honest," I told her, still trying to sound as neutral as possible. It was hard to do, as her stupid comments were making me angrier by the second.

"Oh, that's good," she replied, flicking away another lock of her hair. "I was afraid you might be using that guy I saw at the beach to get over Joseph."

"What?" I arched an eyebrow. "It's nothing like that."

"Good," she said with a smile. "Just be careful, though. Your boyfriend...I know his type."

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, you know the type." She narrowed her eyes slightly, her smile never wavering. "Tall, dark, handsome, and with that dangerous glint in his eyes...they're never satisfied. They want a woman that can make their heart race, and when that doesn't happen—*poof!*—they're gone. Just some friendly advice, dear."

I don't know what came over me, but I just lost it. Who the hell did Marion think she was to say all those things? What did she know about me or Tevin? For the first time in my life, I took the chains off my anger and stood tall.

"Marion, don't take this in the wrong way," I started, "but fuck you *and* your friendly advice." I walked past her, then stopped and looked back. "And don't ever call me dear."

I marched all the way to the counter, asked the clerk to bag me a set of that blue lace underwear, and left The Crimson Corner with a smile. It felt good to have someone like Tevin standing up for me, but to do it myself...it felt *amazing*.

Maybe Tevin was rubbing off on me, in more ways than one.

TEN

TEVIN

I paced the cramped motel room, trying to muster enough courage to pick up the phone and call Ben. I didn't like the way we had left things, and I needed to reach out to him. He was the Alpha, the leader of our pack and family, and I couldn't let things sour between us. Loyalty mattered in the MC (and the pack), and I'd defied orders. It didn't sit right with me. I wouldn't let him pull me away from Serene—not before I knew she'd be safe—but I still needed to bury the hatchet.

“Fuck it,” I muttered, picking the phone up from the table. I scrolled through my contacts list, jabbed Ben's name with my thumb, and put it on speaker. The tone rang once, twice, and only then did Ben's gruff voice come through.

“Took you long enough,” he said in that low growl of his. “One more day and I'd send someone looking for you. Have you finally come to your senses?”

“I don't want to fight,” I said, but my tone indicated I wasn't afraid to do it. “I just wanted to check in. I don't like the way we left things, Ben.”

“And do you think I like it?” He let out a heavy sigh, almost a groan. “You can be an idiot at times, Tevin, but it's just like I told you: you're family. Not only that, but you're essential to the pack. You're loyal, and you know how to put the pack's needs ahead of yours.”

He didn't say it outright, but I got the message all the same. Ben wanted me to drop my 'needs' and return home, just like I always did. What he failed to grasp was that this had nothing to do with 'needs'—Serene was my mate, and that meant she had a claim on my entire existence. This went way beyond 'needs.' Without Serene, nothing but suffering awaited me.

Not that I was afraid of suffering.

My wolf was feral, and I was dangerous; I added nothing to Serene's life. I had only remained in Brightenville to make sure she was safe, but after that I had every intention of leaving. Or at least...that's what I'd been telling myself.

I gritted my teeth, anxiety spreading its wings inside me. After only a few days, I couldn't stomach the thought of leaving Serene behind, even if I could put a stop to her stepmother's machinations. Would I really be able to step back? Or was I just stumbling in the dark, telling myself that I was following reason?

"I'm not going back until I fix this." I leaned over the phone and glared at it. "I can't let anything happen to this girl, Ben, you know that."

"This again?" I heard the creak of his chair, then the rapping of his knuckles on the hardwood desk. "Tevin, I've given you enough time for you to sort yourself out, but you still have your head up your ass. Things can't go on like this for much longer, and you know that just as well as I do."

"You have to understand, this woman—"

"I swear to God," he growled, "you say the word 'mate' and I'm going to reach through this fucking line and choke you out. Look, it's rare for someone like us to find his mate."

"But it happens," I said.

"It does," Ben admitted, "but it's not always a good thing. And I've never heard of a shifter having a human mate."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" I demanded, focusing in on his first point and dismissing the latter—human mates might not exist as far as Ben knew, but I knew without a doubt what this was between Serene and me.

"Just think about it for a second, will ya?" Even though I couldn't see him, I could sense his exasperation. "Do you really think our way of life allows for romance? What's your plan for the future? Turn a schoolteacher into a drug-running gangbanger?"

"I'll leave once I know that—"

"Stop fucking lying to yourself," he snapped. "You know damn well that you won't do that. If you don't leave this mess behind now, you're never going to do it. Tevin, I love you like a son, but know this...if you hurt this woman, then I will personally put you down."

It was hard not to laugh. Ben had sent me here to kill Serene, and now he was threatening me over her? "I've stayed here to protect her, not to hurt her."

Besides, you sent me here to kill her, remember?”

“How can you be this fucking thick?” Ben growled, his voice dropping in pitch. “Nothing good will come of a relationship between a human and a shifter, especially when the shifter is almost feral. A human can’t withstand us, and we can’t control ourselves—you’ll want to claim her, and when you do...”

He left the rest unsaid, but I knew what he meant. I’d been struggling with those thoughts ever since I’d laid eyes on Serene. The depth of my desire could be too much for her; claiming her was dangerous.

“It’s one thing to get rid of a schoolteacher through a contract,” Ben continued. “The news would be all over it, sure, but it’d just be another murder, soon forgotten. If you killed her with a claiming bite...fuck, who knows what might happen? You might lose your shit afterward. The last thing any of us need is for the shifter community to be put under the spotlight. So make no mistake—if it comes to it, I *will* put you down. You’re family, but I won’t allow you to put us all in danger.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but no words came out. What could I even say to that? Ben had a point, but what were my options? Abandon Serene to her fate? No, there was no way I was going to do that. Our relationship was dangerous, I wasn’t going to deny it, but to leave her was even more dangerous. I simply would have to risk it.

“I’ll take my chances,” I said, then hung up on Ben.

I’d thought calling Ben would be a good thing, but I was now regretting it. Instead of lending me his support, he’d just shined a light on the reality of my situation—whether I liked it or not, I was stuck between a rock and a hard place. Whatever I did, Serene would be in danger.

Funnily enough, Ben’s threats did nothing for me. So what if he wanted to put me down? If I ended up hurting Serene, I would be the one volunteering for it. I wouldn’t want to live in a world where I’d killed the most precious person I’d ever met. As screwed up as the whole thing was, I cared little about what could happen to me.

Fuck Ben, my wolf reminded me, Serene’s all that matters.

“And you think I don’t know that?” I said out loud, hands balled into fists. “But I can’t hurt her. I can’t.”

You won’t, my wolf insisted. She’s ours. We protect what’s ours.

I wanted to agree with him, but I knew his way of seeing the world was too simplistic. Our meshed instincts were all about protecting Serene, but I

couldn't ignore the frenzied lust that permeated those instincts. If I lost myself in that lust, if I forgot all about my humanity, even if just for a moment...

"Fuck," I groaned, "I need a drink."

Fifteen minutes later and I was riding through the narrow streets of Brightenville, trying to find a place I could hide in the shadows while nursing a tumbler of whiskey. Unfortunately for me, Brightenville's cozy atmosphere translated poorly when it came to its nightlife. There were almost no bars or pubs in town—it was mostly coffee shops and little bistros—but I eventually found what I was looking for in the town center.

The aptly named Corner Pub was located in one of the square's far corners, neatly tucked between a florist and a vintage book shop. Narrow instead of wide, it was a literal hole in the wall.

I left my bike out front and walked in. The bell above the door announced my presence, and a dozen heads turned toward me at once. Most of the patrons were sitting by the counter, perched on tall stools and working their way through half-full pints of lager. They had the look of regulars who gathered here after work, to mindlessly watch a football game on the flat-screen while bitching about their wives.

I wanted no part of that, and so I ordered a shot of Jack Daniels and a beer, then promptly slinked away to one of the corner booths. There, I listened to the domesticated rock music that came from the speakers and let the alcohol work its way into my system. Two beers and three shots later and I had a healthy buzz going on. It wasn't a miracle cure, but it helped blunt the edges of my anger.

Unlike some of my brothers, I wasn't a big drinker, nor did I seek refuge in alcohol whenever the going got tough. Despite that, a few shots of whiskey always helped me keep my emotions under control. Short of going for a hunt—something I couldn't exactly do in Brightenville—alcohol was the best thing when it came to dealing with my inner beast.

I was deep in my fourth beer when I found myself straightening up.

I did it without thinking, but my body sure knew what it was reacting to. My spine straightened out, my shoulders rolled back, and an electric tension settled deep in my bones. I pressed my lips together and looked at the door. I did it just in time: the moment I looked up, the door swung back to reveal the man who'd drawn my senses.

He had long dark hair, which he let fall down to his shoulders, and he

seemed to be roughly my age and height. His eyes were as dark as his hair, and they emanated the same amount of power his body did—broad-shouldered and powerfully built, with cords of muscle thickening his forearms, he looked like the kind of guy who could give me a run for my money.

His appearance had nothing to do with the unconscious pinging from my instincts. Any human would've been wise to consider this stranger a threat, but it wasn't my human consciousness that had been alerted—instead, my wolf had sensed a power that resembled its own. This was no ordinary man.

This was a shifter.

I reached behind me, hoping to find the cold grip of my Glock, but it wasn't there. Shit. My gun was back at the motel, under the mattress. I'd allowed my anger to cloud my judgment, and I'd been careless. Now I was paying for it. After all, there was a chance this shifter had been sent here by Margaret.

Our pack's influence stopped where Brightenville started, and it was possible some other pack had been given the assignment when I'd dropped the ball. I wasn't sure about how much Margaret knew of the shifter world, but if she was aware of its existence, then it was obvious she'd try to hire another shifter to kill Serene.

And here I am, with no gun.

Gun or no gun, I had to get to the bottom of this. If this shifter was here to wreak havoc, I was going to stop him.

Leaning back, I kept to the shadows and eyed him furtively. He ordered a beer, laughed heartily at a joke one of the other patrons told, then made a beeline toward the bathroom. On the way there, he threw me a sideways glance, his eyes narrowing when they met mine. Much like it'd been with me, he felt my presence here, and he didn't like it one bit. Most wolves were territorial, especially when it came to those outside their pack, and this one was no different.

I followed him with my gaze until he entered the bathroom, then rose to my feet. One cursory look at the room, just to make sure this guy hadn't brought anyone else with him, and I stepped in after him. I found him in front of the sink, washing his hands with his back to me.

“Oh, man, I knew I shouldn't have stopped for a drink here,” he said, almost too casually. Turning around, he wiped his hands on his jeans and grinned. “Did you come here for a fight? Because, let me tell you, I'd rather

be having a drink than throwing punches.” He cracked his knuckles. “But if it’s a fight you want...”

“Who sent you?” I asked, taking a step toward him. I was as uninterested in a fight as he was, but I wouldn’t shy away from it. If this bastard thought he could get out of this with smiles and stupid jokes, he was in for a rude awakening. “I’m not gonna ask you twice, buddy.”

“Who sent *me*?” He scoffed. “Santa Claus? The Easter Bunny? Look, I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, but no one sent me here. I’m just passing through Brightenville.”

I was on him before he could move a muscle.

I closed the distance between us, hooked my fingers on his shirt, and pushed him against the wall. He didn’t bat an eye, but his smile disappeared from his face instantly. In his eyes, a dangerous spark appeared, and my wolf reacted to it with an anticipatory growl.

“Tread carefully,” the man whispered, his eyes never leaving mine. “I’m not here to cause any trouble, but I sure as hell won’t allow for—”

“I don’t give a shit about what you won’t allow,” I cut in. “All I care about is the truth. Did Margaret send you?”

“Margaret? Who the hell is that?” He exhaled through his nose and pursed his lips. “I have no idea who Margaret is, and like I told you...I’m just passing through Brightenville.”

My wolf’s growl retreated into a careful snarl and all tension dissipated from my muscles. It was hard to detect lies in a shifter, especially if he had training, but there was nothing about this guy that seemed alarming. Aside from the fact that he was a shifter *and* that he was in Brightenville.

“Are you leaving then?” I asked him.

“Soon.” He shrugged his shoulders and looked at me in a coy manner. “There’s this chick, you see...”

“A girl?” I was almost ready to snap this guy’s neck, and here he was, talking about women as if it was nothing. “You’re seeing a girl here?”

“Yeah,” he replied. “I didn’t mean to, mind you, but I bumped into her the other day and...” Another shrug, and his lips curled up into a mischievous smile. “I kinda like her. I’m thinking of staying for a few days, see what happens, and then hit the road.”

“You’re not staying,” I growled, clenching my fists again. “You’re gonna finish your drink and you’re gonna hit the road. Nothing against you, but the situation here in Brightenville...” I trailed off and sighed. “The last thing I

need right now is another shifter in the vicinity.”

“I see.” He knitted his eyebrows together, gave me a curious glance, then shrugged again. “What a pity. This girl had potential, but—”

“But?”

“But I’ll hit the road,” he finished saying. “Like I said, it’s a pity, but it seems like this town already has enough trouble of its own. I’m a peaceful guy, see? I want nothing to do with trouble.”

He threw me one last glance, turned on his heel, and left. Only when the door swung shut did I realize I’d been holding my breath.

Good, my wolf proclaimed. This town doesn’t need another shifter.

I agreed, though deep down I couldn’t help but wonder: did Brightenville need a shifter at all?

ELEVEN

SERENE

“**A**nd that’s done,” I said, closing the oven door with one foot. With both hands on my hips, I looked at the meatloaf through the oven’s see-through door and nodded approvingly. It looked right, just the way my mother’s always did, and that was a pretty good indicator it’d also taste right. Or at least I hoped so. Tevin would be here in about forty minutes, and I needed things to be perfect.

Knowing I was racing against the clock, I padded into the bathroom and hopped into the shower. I scrubbed myself clean, then went to my battle station, the little dressing table in the corner of my room. I’d never been that good at applying make-up—I was only confident with some basic foundation and concealer—but a few YouTube tutorials and Melanie’s advice had given me all the coaching I needed.

I put on a neutral eyeshadow, used the eyeliner I’d borrowed from Melanie early in the day, then settled on a strawberry-red lipstick. I smacked my lips together to get the excess off, gave my reflection a little confident wink, then breathed in deeply.

Phase one completed; now on to phase two.

I took off my bathrobe, applied a cherry blossom scented lotion, and then turned and gathered my clothes. I laid them all out on the bed, as if they were a uniform, and pictured Tevin yanking them off my body with abandon.

I slipped on the blue lace lingerie I’d bought at The Crimson Corner, squeezed myself into a short black skirt, the flowy fabric thin and almost see-through, then put on a white blouse. My look wasn’t too aggressive, but it wasn’t coy either—I wasn’t wearing a slip, which meant my legs weren’t exactly hiding, and the edges of my bra showed from under the blouse.

Melanie would be proud.

I felt a bit exposed but, at the same time, I absolutely loved it. It'd been a long time since I'd felt this sexy and, like Melanie enjoyed saying, there was nothing better than feeling like a sexy goddess. I didn't know much about feeling like a goddess, but the sexy part I understood well enough.

One quick look at the clock on my bedside table—fifteen minutes left to go—and I grabbed my hair straightening iron. I worked fast, smoothing out the curls in my blonde hair, and only stopped once my hair was silky and shining. I did a little twirl in front of the mirror and, satisfied, decided I couldn't improve on my looks. I looked as good as it was humanly possible for me to look. That, of course, didn't stop me from calling Melanie for a second opinion.

“What do you think?” I asked her, holding my phone up in front of me. Melanie's devilish grin took up the entirety of my screen, and she offered me a little appreciative whistle. Her cat-calling skills never failed to impress me, and this time was no different.

“I think you look great,” she replied, propping her cell phone up on her knees. Knowing her as I did and judging by the old college sweats she was wearing, I'd probably interrupted one of her TV binges. If she wasn't going out on a Friday, she'd be in front of the TV. But that didn't stop her from putting on a show of support. “You look like someone who's about to get laid.”

“You really think so?” I asked, biting on the corner of my mouth. I looked at my picture, hidden on the corner of the phone's screen, and knitted my eyebrows together. In the mirror I had looked beautiful, but there was something about a phone screen that diminished my initial appraisal. “I don't want to look like—”

“A slut?” Melanie laughed out loud, a twinkle in her eyes. “Trust me, honey, you look nothing like it. You look sexy, but you still have that girl-next-door vibe. You're the kind of walking contradiction any man just wants to...” She made a pause, knowing I'd already completed her sentence in my mind, and only then did she finish. “...make love to.”

“Really funny.”

“I know, I'm hilarious. But enough about me—how are you feeling? Giddy? Excited? Nervous?”

“Nervous?” I repeated, only now looking inward to see how I was feeling. I'd rushed home from school, worked through my mom's meatloaf

recipe in a hurried frenzy, and had only started getting ready moments ago— with all that going on, I'd barely had the time to take a breather and see how I was feeling. "Yeah, I guess...but excited too."

"I can imagine," Melanie said. "A home date with Mr. Sexy Biker? I'd be excited too. There's nothing quite like the challenge of taming a bad boy to make a woman feel alive and—" She clamped her mouth shut when my doorbell rang. "Is that him?" She leaned into the camera so much that her eyes were the only thing I could see.

"Yeah, I think so," I replied, and that's when my nerves decided to go for a frontal assault. My stomach did a little flip, my knees buckled, and a tingling sensation appeared on my fingertips. "Listen, I want to know all about this new guy, but I gotta—"

"Yeah, yeah," Melanie said with a laugh. "No need to worry, girl. Good luck, all right? And try to have some fun."

"I will," I said. "Thank you, Mel."

"Don't thank me." She waggled her eyebrows at me. "You'll pay for my support by telling me all of the sordid details, so we're good."

"You're nuts." I shook my head and laughed. "But that's why I love you."

"Put the damn phone down and go get him."

I threw the phone onto the bed, did another twirl in front of the mirror for good measure, then left the safety of my bedroom. I crossed the living room with a knot in my stomach, the hairs on the nape of my neck standing up on end and stopped right in front of the door. I laid my hand on the handle, gripped it tightly, and breathed in deeply.

Here goes nothing. I opened the door.

"Tevin," I breathed out, feeling as if someone had punched me in the stomach. My knees trembled, and I had to grip the handle so that I wouldn't fall over. He was still wearing the same brand of dark jeans and scuffed boots he always did, but he'd replaced the t-shirt with a black button-down shirt, the sleeves rolled up to reveal the intricate patterns that crisscrossed his skin. He'd brought no flowers this time, but there was a vintage-looking bottle of red in his hands.

"Serene," he said, and thunder and lightning shot up my spine at the sound of his voice.

I couldn't exactly tell what was different this time, but there was a kind of fiery heat coming off of him, and it was contagious. Maybe it was his smoldering gaze, or the way his full lips were slightly parted. Or maybe I had

spent the whole day building this moment up in my mind, and now that Tevin was finally here...

“You look...” Tevin’s eyes roamed down my body, lingering on my chest for half a heartbeat, then continued down to the hem of my skirt. Under his gaze, a pleasant warmth radiated from my chest and spread outward, all that heat pooling right between my legs. “You look stunning.”

It was silly, but only in that moment did I understand why Melanie was always preaching about seductive clothes and killer make-up. Rationally, I had always known that looking good could make me feel good, but I’d never had such a deep reaction to someone’s praise. All my nerves were tingling, and it was as if all the air had been sucked up from my lungs. The lingerie, the dress, the make-up and body lotion...it’d all been worth it.

I wanted to invite him in, to be a gracious and polite host, but I couldn’t. When I opened my mouth to say something, I quickly realized I was incapable of speech. All my brain’s processing power was occupied with the man in front of me, and irrelevant details—such as manners and coherent speech—had been thrown out the window.

Tevin didn’t seem to mind.

He took a step forward, his eyes never leaving mine, and put the bottle down on the console table, next to my hollowed conch and keys. Next thing I knew, he was no more than an inch away from me, invisible sparks jumping from his body to mine. Reaching over my shoulder, he gave the front door a push and closed it; when the latch fell in place, Tevin’s hands shot down to my hips and he backed me up against the wall.

I offered no resistance.

I melted into his embrace, relishing the way my breasts pushed against his chest, and went up on tiptoes. His hand went to the nape of my neck, he threaded his long fingers into my hair, then leaned in. His lips hovered over mine for a moment, straddling that elusive line that separates anticipation and pleasure, but he quickly closed the gap. When our lips finally touched, it was as if hellfire had been unleashed inside my body.

I returned his kiss eagerly, allowing my tongue to dance around his, and ran my hands down the smooth fabric of his shirt. I hooked my fingers on his belt and reeled him in, desperate to feel the pressure of his body.

Tevin didn’t need my guidance.

He kissed me so fiercely you’d think his own survival depended on it, and his hands wandered all over my body, exploring the smooth curves and gentle

dips of my lower back, backside, and hips. With his forehead against mine, he bit on my bottom lip, gently tugging it back.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered against my lips, his voice weighed down by furious lust. His words were thick and honeyed, his emotions somehow acquiring a physical quality. “I couldn’t help myself.”

I’d felt men’s desire before, but this was unlike anything I’d ever experienced. His desire surrounded him like a bright aura, as if his own soul was aflame. I knew it, because my own soul was already catching on fire.

“I’m glad you couldn’t,” I said, allowing my unconscious mind to do all the talking. If I tried to think of something smart and witty to say, I knew I’d fail miserably, so it was better to let my instincts take the reins. “I don’t think I ever had a kiss like this before.”

“That goes both ways,” he said in a low rumble, the deep vibration of his voice reverberating inside my chest.

My heart fluttered, as did my eyelids, and the heat that had pooled between my legs became too much for me. I forgot all about conversation, politeness, and dinner. All that mattered in the world was this man’s body.

I wanted him, and I wanted him *now*.

“You have no idea what you do to me.” With his eyes locked on mine, he reached low and brushed his fingers against my knee. His fingers ran up the hem of my skirt, over the ironed fabric of my skirt, and made a turn toward my inner thighs. Breathless, I closed my eyes as I felt his touch draw close, my whole body on the verge of imploding, and that’s when—

Ding!

The oven timer beeped happily, oblivious to the picture-perfect scene it had interrupted. I never hated that stupid timer as I did in that moment. Still, it was for the best—crazed as I was, there would’ve been no stopping me, and that just wouldn’t do. As much as I liked Tevin, and as much as I felt ready for this, I didn’t want to rush things *too* much.

“Dinner’s ready,” Tevin whispered into my ear, but his fingers remained firmly planted on my inner thigh. He took his sweet time pulling back from me, fully aware he was only extending the fishing line, not removing the hooks. He had already ensnared me, and there’d be no escape from the allure of his body.

Yet, when he pulled back from me, I sensed more than the light teasing a woman could expect. His eyes lingered on mine, and he stood straighter, responding to a tension in his spine that hadn’t been there before. There was

even a barely noticeable twitch to his fingers, as if his body was demanding for him to seal the deal now. For the first time since I'd met him, I sensed conflict.

He wanted me, but he was also afraid.

Afraid of *what*?

TWELVE

TEVIN

I should've known better.

Any attempts at lying to myself about where I wanted this night to lead were shot to hell after that kiss. Not only did I want Serene, I *needed* her as if she were the very air I breathed. My wolf was dangerously close to the surface, eager for our mate, but I shoved him down ruthlessly into submission. I needed to prove to myself that I had at least some shred of control.

“Let me,” I said, stepping in front of Serene to get the oven. More than wanting to help, I needed something to distract me. Pulling back from her had been painful beyond measure, and it was taking all of me to act more human than wolf.

I grabbed one of the oven mitts forgotten on her kitchen counter, scrunched it up in my hand instead of putting it on, and grabbed the baking dish from inside the oven. I carried it to the table, much like I carried the smile I hoped would mask my inner battle—and that’s when I realized the lengths Serene had gone to for this evening.

Her kitchen table was small—as was the rest of her house—but she had decorated it lavishly. She’d draped a crimson tablecloth over it, her best silverware was out, free of the blemish of repeated use, neatly folded napkins had been tucked under the wine glasses, and fresh flowers occupied the center. On both sides, tall candles burned lazily, releasing a scent that reminded me of a time when my life wasn’t a pit of bottomless violence.

“Thank you.” I didn’t know what else to say. Dates had never been something I did, especially those involving home-cooked meals, and I was at an absolute loss here. Somehow, Serene had made me feel at home, and that

was a feeling that I'd only ever experienced with my pack. "This looks amazing. And the food, it smells great."

"My mother's recipe," she announced proudly. "Meatloaf and mashed potatoes. Simple, I know, but it's kind of a go-to dish at my parents'."

"I'm pretty sure the teacher has surpassed the master." I pulled her chair back so that she could sit, and only then did I take my place. It wasn't a contrived or conscious gesture—it just felt right. "You didn't need to go to all this trouble. This is far more than I deserve."

"Is it?" She threw me a coy smile, and her eyebrows arched slightly. "What exactly does Tevin Novak deserve? You seem to know everything about me, but you...you're a mystery. You fall into Brightenville out of the sky, ask for my phone number, and sweep me off my feet. Are you just a figment of my imagination or what? Because sometimes I wonder if this is just a dream."

She smiled, the warmth of it so intense that it floored me.

"I'm as real as I could be." Before Serene could do it, I cut the meatloaf and grabbed the serving spoon. "Rest assured, though, I didn't fall out of the sky. Last time I checked, only angels take that road, and I'm anything but an angel."

"What are you then?"

It was so easy to lose myself in a conversation with Serene that I almost forgot about who I really was: a shadow, someone whose true existence needed to remain a secret. Humans couldn't know about the existence of shifters, especially when those shifters made a living as part of the criminal underworld.

"I'm just a guy," I finally replied, now popping the cork off the bottle. Curiously enough, even though I knew it'd be safer if Serene dropped the subject, part of me wanted her to keep probing.

I couldn't give her the truth, at least not the unadulterated version, but I still wanted to share a piece of me with her. Intimacy had never been part of my vocabulary, but with Serene, I ached for a deeper connection. And how could I have that if I remained a shadow?

"Oh, c'mon." She leaned forward and brushed her fingers against the inside of my wrist. "You've gotta give me a little more than that. You told me you were born in Fresno, right? Do you still have family there?"

I shifted in my seat. That was an uncomfortable story, but at least it was a story I could share.

“I never really had any family there,” I replied. “My mother dropped me off at a Catholic orphanage when I was just two months old, and that’s where I spent most of my childhood.”

“I...I had no idea.”

“It’s okay, really.” I poured her some wine and smiled. “I don’t really think about it.”

“It must’ve been awful for you.”

“It wasn’t as bad as what came after,” I said. “Once I hit seven, I was put through the foster care system. The stern nuns gave way to assholes who just wanted to collect a paycheck from the state. Every six months or so, I’d be put in a new family, but things never really worked out for me. Then I became a teenager, and I made a break for it.”

“What happened?”

“By the time I turned fourteen, I was no longer interested in making it work.” I shrugged my shoulders and leaned back, lost in the haze of dusty memories. “I didn’t care about having a family, and I kind of became a troublemaker. When I hit sixteen, I decided to ditch Fresno and run away from it all. Soon after, I came across this guy named Ben and he took me in. Ben showed me what it meant to have a family, and it was through him that I met my...brothers.”

A look of confusion washed over Serene’s face, and I couldn’t help but laugh. The bond that tied a pack together was hard to explain.

“Ben runs an MC club,” I explained. “It’s a tight-knit community.”

“An MC?” She knitted her eyebrows together. “Like one of those biker gangs on TV? That explains the Harley-Davidson.”

I kept laughing, but I also felt a stab of anxiety. Fear was a foreign concept to me, but this time it reared its ugly head inside me—I was terrified of what Serene would think of the real Tevin, the man that hid a Glock under his mattress and killed whoever his Alpha pointed at.

“It’s a bit like what you see on TV, sure,” I admitted, “but it’s not as bad as people make it out to be. We’re just a large family, and we help each other out. It’s also a business like any other. In fact, that’s why I came to Brightenville: my MC sent me here.” I was sharing too much, and quickly reined myself in. “It’s with them that I learned what a brotherhood is, and I also picked up a few skills, but there’s nothing really sinister about it.”

Now *that* was a complete detour from the truth, but I had no choice here. This bond I had with Serene...I didn’t want to risk it, even if that meant lying.

“It must be nice to finally have a family,” she offered, and her understanding was almost too shocking for me. She was so pure and innocent, but even someone like her would know that my hands weren’t completely clean.

Despite that, she didn’t shy away from me. I could see the fear in her eyes—I was a foreign and dangerous element in her life—but she couldn’t bring herself to pull back. Our motives were different, but it was comforting to know she felt just as compelled by this attraction as I did.

I put down the silverware, suddenly realizing I’d eaten more than half the meatloaf by myself. None of my brothers were any good at cooking, and I’d grown used to seeing food as fuel, but tonight it had been different. Then again, *everything* about tonight was different.

Dinner was followed by dessert—a blueberry cheesecake, of which I ate three slices—and our serious conversation gave way to more laidback subjects. Unlike me, Serene had had a good childhood, and I enjoyed all the little snippets of it she shared with me. She spoke with a nostalgic fondness for her childhood, and I wondered if that anything to do with her recently finding out she was adopted. She made no mention of a sudden fortune, nor did she mention the fact she was adopted, understandably. She was likely still processing it all.

“What do you say we finish this bottle outside?” Serene asked me, tipping her chin toward the door. “When it comes to sunsets in Brightenville, my terrace isn’t that bad of a viewing spot.”

“I’m sold.” I followed her out of the house, my hand on her lower back as she led the way across the living room.

Just that touch, as polite and innocent as it was, was enough to awaken my wolf. He’d been dormant through dinner, content with the fact that I was making progress, but his patience was wearing thin. He was fine with conversation, but that wouldn’t suffice for much longer.

Serene’s terrace was as small and quaint as the rest of her house, with a vine-covered pergola offering some protection from the sun. There were a few potted plants too, bright and colorful, but the main attraction here was the comfortable sense of shelter it offered. The terrace overlooked her tiny backyard, which was encased by a fence tall enough to shield us from the neighbor’s curious eyes. Both my wolf and I relished that.

Not long now, my wolf reminded me, acknowledging the swirling lust that danced inside me. The wine wasn’t helping. It dulled my rationality,

weakening my sense of right and wrong. I half considered coming up with an excuse to leave, but it was impossible.

I was in too deep.

“You know, I never thought I’d be doing this,” Serene said suddenly, her eyes roaming the sunset-tinged horizon. “You’re not the type of guy I’m used to dating.”

She turned to face me, an apologetic smile on my face.

“Is it the tattoos?” I teased her, showing her my forearms. “Maybe it’s the bike.”

“It’s none of those things.” She laughed, the sound of it bright and clear. “It’s just...you have a kind of attitude I’m not used to. Remember that day at the beach? You dealt with Joseph so easily. There’s this quiet strength to you that I envy.”

“You don’t need to envy it. I’ll lend you my strength whenever you need it.” I looked into her eyes, my heart beating faster and faster. “Any other rogue boyfriends that are going to pop out of the woodwork?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Good,” I said. “I’d rather spend my time with you than dealing with idiots who don’t know what they’re missing.”

“And what exactly are they missing?” She shifted her weight in the chair and her foot brushed against my calf, sending an electric jolt up my leg and fanning my lust from a burning cinder to an open flame.

“Everything.”

“I’m just a schoolteacher.”

“You’re so much more than that,” I whispered. “When I first saw you, I knew that you were different.”

“You must say that to all the girls.”

“Never. You really are unique. When I’m with you, I feel...” I ran my tongue over my lips, trying to find the right words, but what I felt couldn’t be explained through words. My body, though, knew exactly what to say. I reached out, grabbed Serene by the wrist, and pulled her into my lap. “With you, I feel whole.”

“I...I don’t know what to say to that,” she muttered softly, her cheeks turning red. She laced an arm over my shoulders, bit on the corner of her bottom lip, and locked eyes with me.

“You don’t need to say a thing.”

I kissed her then, and I did it with all the abandon I should’ve had during

our first date. I went all out, allowing my hands to explore the soft curves of her body. I traced the length of her spine with one finger, hooked my fingers on her thighs, kissed her collarbone, whispered sweet nothings in her ear. I surrendered to the moment, and she surrendered to me.

Claim her, my wolf growled, claim her now!

For a split second, I almost did. My wolf's instincts flared up, his thoughts meshing with mine, but I somehow managed to yank on his leash. I wanted to claim Serene just as badly as I needed to breathe, but I didn't dare go that far. As long as I had some self-control, I couldn't permit myself that.

Serene had no inner beast she had to keep on a leash, though.

Then and there, she offered herself to me with no reservations or inner conflict. Even if on some level she was cautious of me, the dangerous outsider who didn't belong, she made herself vulnerable. That only made me want her more.

Her fingers were hot coals as they moved over my chest, her knuckles brushing against my skin as she undid the buttons on my shirt. She went from sitting on my lap to straddling me, her skirt hiked up to reveal a hint of her blue underwear, and my body reacted the only way it could—I became impossibly hard, my cock straining against my jeans.

“Come,” I half-growled, half-whispered.

I rose to my feet and carried her in my arms, nudging the door open with my boot. Serene pointed to the bedroom with a trembling finger, and that's where I led us. We tumbled into bed as one, the mattress groaning under our weight, and we went back to that frenzied kissing.

It wasn't long before my lips were exploring the soft lines of her neck. I kissed her collarbone, my lips brushing against the lace of her bra, and my blood went from a simmer to a boil. Hungry for more, I gave her blouse a yank, ripping it apart. The buttons popped out like fireworks, scattering with a *pop-pop-pop* as they hit the floorboards, but Serene didn't seem to mind.

She returned the favor, grabbing on my shirt and tearing it open. With urgent movements, she raked her fingers over my chest and traced the outline of my abs, her fingers tight with desire. She turned her hand around and flattened her palm between my legs, pressing down on my erection.

Now, my wolf howled, NOW!

I held Serene by her wrists and pinned her down on the mattress. I pushed her legs apart with my knees and looked down, momentarily allowing my wolf to assume control. I wanted to ravage her, to claim her body and soul,

but something gave me pause. Serene was looking up at me, eyes wide with lust, need, and trust.

She *trusted* me.

I had no idea how I managed to restrain my urges, but I did. Instead of letting my inner predator out, I just focused on Serene. I put my need to claim her aside and surrendered to the wonderland that was her body.

“You have no idea how much I want you,” I breathed out, my voice ragged, leaning forward to kiss the valley between her breasts.

“Show me.” She ran her fingers through my hair, arching her back and pushing her skin against my mouth.

She was begging for more, and I was more than happy to oblige. I opened the clasp on her bra, the cups sliding aside to reveal her rosy nipples, and I traced the rising curve of her right breast with my tongue. I twirled it around her nipple, letting it grow hard, then sucked it into my mouth and wrapped my lips around it.

“Oh, God,” she breathed out, her voice trembling. “That feels so...”

I laid one hand over her knee. With maddening patience, I slid my fingers under the hem of her black skirt, exploring the hidden path that led her to her inner thighs. She trembled under my touch, moving her hips from side to side, and only stopped when I cupped her wetness.

“You’re so wet,” I said, brushing my fingertips against the drenched fabric of her underwear. Before I even knew what I was doing, I hooked my fingers on her thong’s elastic band and pulled it down her legs. I threw it aside, tore her skirt from her hips, then let my eyes bask in the glory of her naked body. The swell of her breasts, the dip of her thighs, the lure of her wetness...it was beyond perfect. “How can you be this fucking beautiful?”

I didn’t need an answer to that, nor did I give her the opportunity to come up with one. Kneeling between her legs, I dove forward and kissed her inner thighs, my tongue tracing a dangerous path toward her wetness. Her scent was driving me crazy, that sweet insanity of lust obliterating all my thoughts, and when I finally moved in for the kill...

My plan was to go slow, to tease her with my tongue until she was begging for more, but I couldn’t help myself. The moment I tasted her wetness, I moved in for the kill.

Opening my mouth wide, I pressed it against her inner lips, my tongue dancing over the sweetness of her desire. I traced the contour of her aching pussy until I found her clit, and Serene’s voice turned into a heart-melting

gasp of ecstasy. Digging her heels into the mattress, she yanked on my hair while thrusting against my mouth, as eager to be devoured as I was to devour her.

I explored her with my tongue and fingers, intoxicated with her scent and taste, and drove her straight to the edge. Her voice rose in pitch, her fingers turning into hooks as she held me by the hair, and her whole body tensed up from one moment to the other.

She pressed hard against my mouth, her legs trembling as she exploded. I held my position for a long time, my tongue dancing around her clit, and only dared move once she collapsed on the mattress. Her arms were sprawled beside her, as if exhaustion had overtaken her, and her eyes were closed shut.

I was even harder than I'd been before, so much that I couldn't think straight, but I considered holding her close and calling it a night. After coming this hard, Serene looked ready for a good night's sleep.

As it turned out, though, my assumptions were wrong.

"Come here," she whispered, suddenly opening her eyes. She propped herself up on one elbow, then laced one arm around my neck and reeled me in. I fell on top of her body, my naked chest against hers, and Serene took care of the rest. She pulled my belt out from its loops, pushed my jeans down my legs, then attacked my boxer briefs with a viciousness I wasn't expecting.

When my cock sprang free, she wrapped her fingers around it and looked into my eyes. Her lips were parted with surprise.

"You're so..." She gave my cock a squeeze, as if to make sure my size wasn't an illusion. "I've never been with anyone this big," she confessed, but there was no fear there; there was just anticipation.

"I'll be gentle," I promised, slowly adjusting my body over hers. Still gripping my hard length, she pushed it down so that the tip was right against her wetness. She laced her legs around my waist, trapping me in place, and we didn't move for a long time. We just looked into each other's eyes, fully aware of the scorching heat of our bodies, and waited for the right moment. When it came, I didn't hesitate.

One thrust and I was in.

Serene's body was tight, but it offered no resistance. It welcomed my hardness, her inner walls gently squeezing me in, and I buried myself deep inside her. In that moment, the connection I thought I had with Serene changed; it was no longer about ravaging, possessing, or claiming her. Those needs remained there, hidden deep inside me, but at the same time...the joy of

becoming one with Serene overpowered everything else and, like I'd told her before, I felt *whole*.

"Tevin..." Her eyes were half-lidded, a thin film of pleasure covering them. She moved her fingers down my back, dug her fingernails into my backside, and offered me a devilish smile. "I want you."

"Not as much as I want you."

"Show me."

I did.

I closed my eyes, kissed her, and let my instincts drive me. I rocked my hips against hers, thrusting deep and slow. I took my time building up a rhythm, slowly allowing for our bodies to settle into each other, and only let loose once we were both ready.

My slow thrusts gave way to a frenzied embrace, but Serene was ready—she matched my intensity with some of her own. We were fucking *and* making love, the contradiction of it all obliterated by our passion.

We gave it our all.

"I need you," I whispered against her lips, thrusting harder and harder. As dangerous as it was, I succumbed to my instincts and ravaged her, consuming her body like I'd never done before. "I need you so fucking bad."

She said nothing to that. Instead, she clawed at my back hard enough to draw blood, the swaying motion of her hips pushing me one step closer to the edge. When her body tightened around me, her inner walls gripping me hard, I didn't even have the time to think about it.

I let go.

We came at the same time, a wave of burning ecstasy washing over us both. The coiled springs of an orgasm made my insides clench, amplifying the sweetness of release, and I gasped as my cock throbbed inside her, responding to the spasms of her own body.

When it was done, we didn't move for a long time. We remained locked in that embrace, the silence in the room punctuated by our ragged breathing. Then and there, I forgot all about my past, the MC, and even the pack.

In that moment, I was just Tevin Novak...

A man in love.

THIRTEEN

SERENE

Tevin Novak.

Born and raised in Fresno, product of a dysfunctional foster care system, adopted by a quasi-criminal MC. He had every ingredient necessary for an explosive cocktail, and yet he had turned out all right. No, he was more than all right. I had never attributed the Mr. Perfect label to anyone, but in his case, I was tempted to do exactly that.

I rolled to the side, the bedsheets rustling as I moved, and propped my chin up on the palm of my hand. Tevin was still awake, hands behind his head, and he smiled as I pushed my body against his. Gently, he spread his arm to the outside so that I could use it as a pillow, and I nestled up to him.

I closed my eyes and smiled, enjoying the warmth off his body and the pervasive feeling of safety I felt when in his arms. How could someone like him, with such a tough upbringing, make me feel like this? Heads turned whenever Tevin walked into a room, his intimidating demeanor putting people on alert, and yet there was a tenderness to him that I couldn't resist.

Whenever he looked at me, there was always that slight movement of his lips, as if he couldn't control his smile, and his eyes became alight with a blend of frenzied lust and caring passion. He walked on the street side so that I was safe from traffic, he skipped a step ahead to hold the doors open, and he never failed to ask me if I was comfortable with whatever it was we were doing. Underneath that dangerous mask of a bad boy, there was a true gentleman. And the sex...

Oh, God.

But satisfaction has a way of drawing doubts—a way of trying to protect you when things feel too good to be true—and that’s exactly what happened then. Even as I basked in the perfect moment we were sharing, that sweet aftermath of sex and fire, Marion’s words returned to haunt me. They cut through the comfortable fog of my mind like a spear, and they hit me dead center.

Men like Tevin want a woman that can make their heart race, her voice came, hollow and nasty, and when that doesn’t happen anymore—poof!—they’re gone.

Was I that woman for Tevin? Did his heart race whenever we were together? I was pretty sure I knew the answer to that, and yet, how long could this really last? Tevin was only in Brightenville for business, and he was sure to leave once he was done with whatever that business was. A man like him wouldn’t uproot his life and settle on this hidden corner of Northern California...or would he?

Somehow, over the course of a week, I’d let my heart get caught up in how amazing Tevin was. Old hopes and dreams of a future with the perfect man had resurfaced, yet I had no idea how long he’d even be in town.

Don’t think about it, I thought, not now.

I tried, and I tried hard, but these doubts had already taken root. The thought of Tevin leaving had me feeling lost inside, as if someone wanted to cleave a piece of my soul and throw it into the fire.

“You okay?” Tevin whispered, softly laying his lips on my forehead. “What’s on your mind?”

“I’m just thinking of how happy I am.” It wasn’t a lie, but it wasn’t the full truth either.

“I sense there’s a ‘but’ in there,” he offered.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” I said. “It’s just that—”

I was interrupted by a loud crashing sound. It came from the kitchen, and this time there was no confusing it with a car’s exhaust. This was the sound of breaking glass, and it was quickly followed by the sound of rubber soles crunching on broken glass.

Fear washed over me like a tidal wave, and I reached for Tevin’s arm as if he were a life raft, but fingers found nothing but air. Moving impossibly fast, Tevin jumped out of bed and put on his boxer briefs, his expression turning hard and steely. His eyes, always so alive whenever he looked at me, were now filled with a deadness that made my insides clench with anxiety.

“What is going on?” I whispered.

Tevin flattened himself against the wall, right beside the door, and held his index finger to his lips. He listened attentively for a second or two, then turned his attention back to me.

“Wait here,” he whispered, his voice so low I could barely make out the words, “I’m going to check it out.”

I nodded, and Tevin nodded back. Silent as a shadow, he cracked open the bedroom door and slipped outside. I sat at the edge of bed, clutching the bedsheets against my naked chest, and waited. My hands started shaking and my nerves turned into nausea. The seconds ticked by slowly, stretching into what seemed like hours, and it took all that I had not to retch.

There was nothing for almost twenty seconds, and that’s when it happened. There was a low grunt, followed by the thud of something heavy hitting the floor, and a voice I didn’t recognize muttered a string of curses. I heard the empty meatloaf dish fall from the counter and explode into a million pieces, then the knives on my wall hanger clattered on the floor.

I gasped, fear gripping me so tightly I could barely breathe. Acting on instinct, I jumped to my feet and rushed to the door, needing to know what was happening. It was clear someone had broken into my house and that there was a fight going on, but I had no idea if Tevin was hurt. And *that* was important to know, even if I was putting myself at risk.

I marched into the living room, dragging the bedsheets after me, and my breath caught in my throat. There was a man sprawled on the floor, right next to the kitchen counter, and there was blood coming from his scalp, rivulets of crimson trickling down his neck. The broken baking dish lay next to him, bits of glass encrusted with the man’s blood.

“Fucking asshole,” a man growled, and I turned around to see a stranger and Tevin fighting their way across the living room. The man had a gaunt appearance, his cheeks hollowed and adorned by an old scar, and he was holding one of my kitchen knives, his spindly fingers holding the handle tightly. He tried a quick cut, but Tevin held the man’s wrist. Taller than the intruder and with a bulkier frame, he had the upper hand.

With a twist of his hips, Tevin threw the man off balance. Still holding his wrist, he bent it in an unnatural position, the sound of torn tissue and broken bones echoing in the air. The man let go of the knife instantly, but Tevin took hold of it before it hit the floor. He spun around, holding the knife with a backhand grip, and plunged the sharp blade straight into the man’s

heart.

The man's eyes widened and met mine. I could see the terror in his whites, the confusion over what was happening, and the sudden realization that this was the end of the road for him. With a gurgling sound, the man held the protruding handle on his chest and fell to his knees. He toppled to the side, a futile attempt at not impaling himself on the blade. His legs twitched, blood splattered from his mouth, and he was gone.

"No," I muttered, my voice sounding foreign to my own ears. I backed away until I found a wall behind me. "No, no, no."

Tevin looked at the dead man, rose to his feet, then looked at me. There was a large bruise on his collarbone, which would turn purple in time, and his naked torso had turned into a crimson canvas. Warm blood dripped down from his pectorals to his abs, and even his face was sprinkled with crimson droplets. His jaw, which I had always thought of as sexy, now seemed like the sharp feature of a killer.

A killer I didn't know.

I turned on my heels and rushed back into the bedroom. Or tried to. Tevin crossed the room with two wide strides and stood in front of the door, blocking the way. I stepped back, terrified, and almost tripped on the man sprawled underneath the kitchen's counter.

"Stay back," I said, my voice rising into a fearful shriek.

"Serene," Tevin whispered, taking a tentative step toward me. He sounded eerily calm, as if he hadn't just brutally sent two grown men to the afterlife. The way he'd plunged the knife into the man's heart, and all without batting an eye...just what kind of man had I invited into my house?

"Serene," he tried again, "I can explain."

"No one can explain this," I said, waving a hand at the chaos, blood, and destruction that had taken over my kitchen and living room. "What you did to these men...who are you? You told me about your MC, but you never told me about any of *this*."

"I'm not a good man, that much is true," Tevin admitted, and there was a note of sorrow to his voice. Or maybe I was just imagining it; it was hard to be sure. "But I only killed these men because I had to. They came here to kill you, Serene."

"How do you know that?" I asked, my fear and confusion turning into anger. "How can you possibly know such a thing? They could be robbers or, or... something!"

“They weren’t robbers, Serene,” he whispered, lowering his eyes. “They were working for your stepmother, Margaret Atwater.”

“Margaret?” I repeated. “I’ve never heard of her.”

“But she’s heard of you.” He took one step forward; I took one step back. “She stands to inherit a fortune, Serene, but for that to happen...you have to be removed.”

“I don’t understand.” I walked back until I could feel the couch pressing against the back of my knees. Dazed and confused, I sank into the cushions and held my head with both hands. My nausea had turned into a vicious sickness, and now I truly felt on the verge of vomiting. The only reason I hadn’t done it yet was because I was in shock. “How do you know these things?”

“Because...” He trailed off, swallowing whatever he’d intended to say. He lowered his eyes again, as if embarrassed, and this time I knew he was avoiding my gaze. “Serene, you have to understand—”

“Tell me!”

“Serene...”

“*Tell me!*”

“I know about it because I was sent here to kill you,” he finally said, but the words made no sense at all. They were just sounds, completely devoid of meaning and reason. I looked at him and blinked, waiting as my brain assimilated what he was telling me.

Tevin Novak, the man I was falling for, had been sent here to kill me.

“No, that can’t be...” I muttered. “If you were sent here to kill me, why put me through all this?” I waved at the open bedroom door, the memory of what we’d done in that bed twisting my insides like a knife.

“I first came to Brightenville to kill you, yes,” he said. “Margaret put a hit on you, she contacted my boss, and I was sent here to carry out the contract. But when I saw you for the first time, I knew I couldn’t do it. I just couldn’t.”

“Then why are you here?” I half-screamed. “Why are you here, in my house? What kind of sick game are you playing?”

“I stayed here to protect you.” He went down on one knee so that his face was level with mine. Even so, he kept his distance. “I knew Margaret wouldn’t give up that easily, and that she’d send more people after you, and so I stayed. I wanted to make sure you were safe. And this...” Now it was him waving at the bedroom. “This just happened. Because I truly care for—”

“Don’t,” I snapped. “Don’t you fucking dare say it!”

“Serene, please—”

“No, stop,” I shouted, jumping out from the couch and moving away from him. Even if I was angry, even if I was shouting...I was still terrified. If Tevin had been sent here to kill me, who was to say he still wouldn’t do it? I couldn’t believe a word of what he was saying, especially not after all this slaughter. “I want you out of my house. I want you out of my *life*. You’re a liar and a killer, and I want nothing to do with you.”

“I’m here to protect you,” he insisted, and I could no longer tell if the hurt I was hearing in his voice was real or imagined. Tevin Novak, the idealized man I’d created inside my mind, didn’t really exist. I couldn’t trust my eyes, ears, or thoughts. All I could trust was the fear that had welled up from deep inside me.

“To *protect* me?” I repeated, incredulous. “You just told me you were sent here to kill me. And then...then you took advantage of me. You pushed your way into my life, you made me believe that you liked me, and...”

The tears stung at my eyes, and the knot in my throat made it impossible to continue speaking. That was for the best, because the last thing I wanted to do was start bawling my eyes out in front of such a monster.

“I’m being hunted,” I finally said, “and you didn’t have the guts to tell me. You say you’re here to protect me, but I don’t believe it.”

Fear turned into courage, and I rushed past him and charged into the bedroom. I tried locking the door behind me, but Tevin just shouldered it open. I didn’t look back—I just threw myself on top of the mattress and reached for the cell phone on my bedside table.

My trembling fingers pulled up the keyboard with a desperate motion, and I jabbed in 911, but I didn’t even get to hear the tone. Tevin hurried in after me, snatched the phone from my hands, and hurled it against the wall. Plastic bits exploded everywhere, the sheer force of impact enough to shatter the screen.

“You can’t call the cops,” he told me, his voice completely devoid of emotion. Was this the real Tevin? A monster who couldn’t feel a damn thing, who thrived on manipulation, murder, and violence?

“Then kill me,” I sobbed, digging my heels into the mattress so that I could get away from him. “Because you can’t keep me quiet forever. If you think you can come into my life, kill at will, and—”

“This has nothing to do with me, Serene,” he insisted. “Do you think I give a fuck about the cops? This is about you. *Think*. How exactly are you

going to explain two dead bodies?”

“I’ll tell them the truth!”

“The truth will get you killed,” he said. “I’m dangerous, you’re right about that, but there are far more dangerous people out there. Don’t poke the hornet’s nest.” He looked into my eyes, and there was pain there. This time I was certain I wasn’t imagining it. “Let me take care of this. I’ll clean this up, make it as if nothing ever happened, and you’ll never have to see me again.” He pressed his lips together, as if what he wanted to say was cutting through his tongue. “I promise.”

For a long time, all I could hear was the incessant drumming of my heart. Part of me wanted to believe what Tevin was saying, but the other insisted he was just telling me what I wanted to hear. This was all about self-preservation for him. If I called the cops now, he’d be in trouble. He could try to play the gallant hero, all with his bravado of not caring about himself, but my rational side knew better.

Unfortunately, my brain didn’t get a vote.

My heart did.

I returned his gaze and nodded.

“Stay here,” he whispered. He gathered his clothes and slipped out of the bedroom.

Shaking, I closed the door behind him and sank to the floor, knees tucked under my chin. I cried, painfully aware that what had started like a dream had turned into a nightmare...and it was a nightmare of Tevin’s making.

FOURTEEN

TEVIN

My wolf was howling.

I stood at the center of the living room, drinking in all the gore and destruction, and closed my eyes. The sex and the violence had acted like a drug, sending my wolf into a frenzy, but the heartbreak...the fucking heartbreak was like being trapped inside an ice coffin, one from which there was no escape.

Serene, my wolf bayed, *Serene*.

He couldn't focus, couldn't see logic nor reason. For him, the present moment was a muddy river of conflicting emotions and power, and he thrived on it. He didn't feel my pain because he didn't understand it yet. Gripped tight by feral lust, he still hadn't realized we'd just lost Serene forever.

But that doesn't mean I'll stop protecting her, I thought. Even if she hated and despised me, even if she wanted to have nothing to do with me, I intended to make sure no one would ever hurt her. And for that to happen, I needed to focus.

I got dressed, grabbed my phone and called the clean-up crew. A group of professionals who sold their services to criminal enterprises all over northern California, they'd helped our MC countless times before, and were one of the most reliable operations in the state. Usually, Ben was the one dealing with them, but this time I knew I couldn't go through him. More than send a clean-up crew here, Ben would send some of my pack brothers and drag me back home, afraid I'd do something stupid that would expose the pack.

"I seem to have found a cockroach nest," I said after a man's voice greeted me. "I'd like a crew to get here as fast as possible. The situation is untenable, dangerous, and I'm ashamed of what the neighborhood will

think.”

The clean-up crew had a front as a legitimate pest control business, and so my specific phrasing was a way to let them know what kind of services I really needed. There were some cockroaches I needed to get rid of, yes, but I had already exterminated them.

“Very well, sir,” the polite male said, the clatter of his keyboard coming through the speaker. “I’ll send a crew right away. Can I have the address?”

I fed him Serene’s address, then threw the phone aside and got to work. The crew was still half an hour away, and I wanted to make sure the clean-up would be underway by the time they got there. Not only that, but there was something I needed to do first, and I needed some privacy for that.

I knelt beside the man I’d stabbed and rolled him to his back. I held the knife’s handle with both hands and pulled on it as hard as I could. Some people think it’s easy to get a knife out of a man’s body, but there’s the vacuum to contend with—once a blade is buried deep in tissue, it can be a real bitch to get it out.

Once that was done, I rummaged through Serene’s kitchen drawers, found an unused tablecloth, and spread it out on the floor. I rolled the man on top of it, so that he was lying flat on his back again and cut his shirt to expose his bare chest. He was skinny, his ribs on display like the keys of a piano; that would make my work easier. With quick, practiced moments, I angled the knife and buried it into the man’s chest once more.

The blood started pooling around his body as I carved a hole into his chest, mercilessly digging my way to his heart. Once I found it, I set the blade aside and ripped the organ straight from the chest cavity. It was still warm, as if the man’s life essence had refused to abandon his body.

For a split second, I imagined what Serene would think if she saw me there, kneeling with a man’s heart in my hands. Would she think me even more of a monster? Probably. She already saw me as one, even if I’d only killed these men to protect her, but I doubted she understood just how brutal a true monster like me could be.

In the end, though, there was nothing macabre or ritualistic about what I was doing. I simply needed to send Margaret a message, and I knew she’d only understand my message if the words were written in blood. A man’s heart, ripped straight from his chest, would do the trick. And if that didn’t work, at the very least it’d make her think twice about what she was doing.

Part of me thought it was all useless. Sending cryptic messages, guarding

Serene like a hound, and driving myself insane in the process...why do all this when I could just go straight to the source? Maybe instead of ripping this man's heart out, I should be ripping out Margaret's. But it was too late for that now, and I knew it. Ben was fully aware of how I felt toward Serene, and if he had an inkling I'd decided to kill her evil bitch of a stepmother, he'd probably think I'd gone off my rocker and put an end to my life.

And maybe that's a price worth paying, I thought. Even if I end up dead, at least Serene will be safe. No matter what I told myself, though, I simply wasn't ready to check out from this life, especially not after the moment I'd just experienced with Serene. To possess and savor my mate, it'd make me want to live...even if Serene just wanted me out of her life.

A knock at the door derailed my thoughts. Two men decked out with pest control uniforms stood on Serene's porch, their expressions somber but controlled. They gave me a quick look-over, taking in the few splatters of blood I hadn't managed to get off my skin, then shrugged their shoulders. Wordlessly, they marched into the living room when I waved them in, and they got to work with ruthless efficiency.

Limbs and body pieces were hacked off and thrown into trash bags, the blood was scrubbed off the floorboards, and a thorough inspection of the living room and kitchen followed suit. Broken glass was swept off, counters were sprayed, wiped, and cleaned, and even the dirty dishes on the sink were dealt with and put away.

It took them an hour and a half, but Serene's house was spotless once they were done. There'd be no fingerprints to be found here, nor would a devoted forensics officer manage to get a lone stray hair from the counter.

Not that the cops would ever get here. The crew I'd hired did more than just clean-up the scene—they also monitored all police and emergency service communications and ensured no out-of-place calls had taken place. As it was, none of Serene's neighbors had raised the alarm. While two grown men died, everyone in the vicinity slept peacefully.

I stood on the porch and watched as the cleaners dragged the bags to their van. They did it with the cool disinterest of someone taking out the trash, clearly not bothered by the scenario they'd encountered. They had come in, provided their services, and would later submit a bland invoice to the MC. For them, this was business as usual. It should've been the same for me, but it wasn't.

This was personal.

This was *everything*.

Sighing, I massaged the back of my neck and went back in. I gave the kitchen and living a quick look, just to make sure nothing was amiss, and made my way to Serene's bedroom. When I tried opening the door, I realized she'd locked it from the inside.

"Serene," I said, "it's done."

She said nothing.

I froze up, afraid something had happened. Could someone have broken into her bedroom while I oversaw the clean-up crew? Could she have climbed out the window and made a run toward the nearest police station? I was about to kick the door in when I heard her soft sobbing.

I closed my eyes and rested my forehead against the door. I thought of calling her name again, but what for? I'd broken her heart, and there was no fixing that. There was nothing I could say or do that would make her see me as something other than a monster. And how could I blame her for it? I *was* a monster, after all, and the sooner I accepted that the better.

"Goodbye, Serene." I remained there, rooted to the floor just in case she'd acknowledged me, but she didn't. Like I promised her I would, I turned on my heel and walked out of the house and her life.

Outside, the warmth of Brightenville's evening had given way to the night's cold, and I welcomed its biting embrace. Now more than ever, I needed to keep a cool head. I'd let my hotheaded wolf run the show for too long, and it was time to temper the madness with some reason.

I moved my bike off Serene's driveway but, instead of hopping on it and driving away, I took off my clothes and put them over the bag containing the heart I'd cut out. I popped my neck and shoulders, sucked in a deep breath, and let my wolf off its leash.

Serene, he growled, his presence growing inside me. My limbs thinned and stretched, my jaw turned into a muzzle, and my heart drummed with a wolf's fury. The searing pain of a shift washed over me and, for once, I relished the pain. I deserved it. *Serene*.

It took all that I had, but I whipped my wolf into submission. He wanted to head straight back into her arms, to finish what we'd started, but Serene was off-limits now.

She's ours, my wolf insisted. *We need her*.

What we need is to protect her, my inner voice threw back, and this time my wolf didn't argue. We patrolled the neighborhood, sniffing for anyone

with a death wish, but Brightenville was calm again. Even so, I stood watch. The night grew long around us, the shadows darkening with each passing hour, but we kept watch until the sun came. I'd pushed away my mate, shattered her trust in men, and broken my own heart in the process...but I couldn't—*wouldn't*—walk away.

Fuck my dreams, hopes and expectations.

All that mattered was Serene's safety.

I only abandoned my post when I sensed Serene moving inside the house. I padded away, exhausted, and made my way back to my bike. I shifted back, got dressed, and pushed the bike down the road so that Serene wouldn't hear the ignition. I only jumped on its seat when I was out of earshot, but I still didn't ride back to the motel or the pack lands. To be trapped inside the four walls of a motel room right now would just drive me crazy, and Ben would stop me from leaving the pack lands again if I showed up there...besides, I still had a message to send.

I stopped in a dingy shop on the outskirts of town, wrote a threatening note to Margaret, and packed it in alongside the heart I'd ripped out from the assassin's chest. I wrapped everything tightly, so that no one would suspect the package's contents, and mailed it to the address from the dossier.

On my way out of the shop, I bought a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. It was a nasty habit, and I promptly threw the whole thing into the trash except for one cigarette. I breathed in the smoke, letting it burn its way down my throat and into my lungs, and watched it funnel up into the sky as I breathed out.

What a fucking miserable day.

Serene, my wolf charged again. Serene will make it all right. We just need to—

“No.” My voice was flat, but my intention was so blunt even my wolf cowered. “We're keeping our distance.”

I sensed my wolf's misery, his sudden realization that we'd lost our mate, and I gritted my teeth so hard that pain shot up my jaw. This was my life now—a sprawling desert of loneliness and longing. My entire existence revolved around Serene, but she was the one thing I couldn't have.

You can have her, my wolf pleaded. You can have everything.

“No, I can't.”

I flicked the butt of the cigarette onto the ground and stomped on it with my heel. I was as desperate for Serene as my wolf was, but I couldn't force

her into accepting me. I'd already spilled enough stains on her spirit. I promised she'd never see me again, and I was going to keep that promise. Even if it cost me everything.

But until Serene was safe...

I'd be her shadow, her silent guardian.

FIFTEEN

SERENE

“Serene?” Melanie gave my shoulder a cautious squeeze. “You were spacing out.”

I looked away from the lunchroom’s window and offered Melanie a smile. It was an unconscious smile, one that belonged to the old happy-go-lucky Serene. In truth, I hadn’t smiled genuinely in almost a month. Brightenville seemed to share my mood—outside, the sky was overcast, a blanket of gray keeping the sun from view.

“Sorry.” I looked down at my half-eaten sandwich, then pushed the lunch tray away from me. Just like my mood, my appetite had also taken a toll lately. I could barely stomach anything. “I know I shouldn’t, but I just can’t stop thinking about it.”

“Boys, huh?” Melanie pursed her lips and rolled her eyes up to the ceiling, as if she was praying to the gods of love and heartbreak. “Guess it’s true what they say. Can’t live with them, can’t live without them. But it’s been a month, Serene...sooner or later, you *will* have to move on.”

I shifted in my seat. I knew Melanie was right, and I’d told myself the same countless times, but I couldn’t act on it. Removing Tevin from my mind wasn’t like pulling a thorn from my skin—his presence was ingrained deep in my soul, and to forget about him would be like severing a limb.

“Yeah, I’ll try.” Another smile, another lie. Even now, sitting in the school’s tiny lunchroom, my mind remained stuck on Tevin, and that slice of time we’d shared. Of course, I couldn’t expect Melanie to understand the extent of my heartbreak—I’d told her all about Tevin and the connection we’d shared, but I’d conveniently left out the part where he murdered two people in my living room. Some things were better left unsaid.

“Why don't you take a couple of days off?” Melanie suggested, snatching my sandwich from its plate. “Are you going to eat this?”

I shook my head, my stomach turning at the thought, and she promptly took a large bite out of it and wiped the crumbs off her chin. “Seriously, I doubt Louise would mind. The kids aren't exactly hard to manage, and I can cover for you.”

“That's not a bad idea,” I said with a sigh. I leaned back on the chair and groaned, the knots in my muscles feeling tighter than usual. Maybe I wasn't sleeping enough, but the past few weeks I'd been feeling more tired than ever. Then again, how could I sleep knowing all I did?

My stepmother, who I hadn't even known existed till a few weeks ago, wanted me dead, and the man I'd fallen for was the killer sent here to execute me. It was a miracle I could even close my eyes at night, let alone sleep.

Not only that, but I kept on seeing people I didn't recognize, and they were everywhere: out on the street, around the school, next to Beans and Leaves, and even on my street. Maybe I was being hypervigilant, but I was always afraid someone would jump out and try to shoot or stab me. The weird thing was, most of the outsiders I saw didn't stick around for long—I only saw them once or twice, at best, and then they disappeared.

“Hello?” Melanie tapped my forehead with two fingers. “Earth to Serene, do you copy? Jesus, girl, you really are a mess. Have you been sleeping?”

“Not much,” I admitted. “And I always have these stupid dreams...”

“Yeah, I know how that feels.” She gave me a little wink, but I knew she didn't really understand how I felt. More likely than not, Melanie's dreams had to do with nightmarish dating scenarios, while mine...

My nightmares always involved Tevin, but he wasn't there as my date. No, he was there as a ruthless killer, a looming shadow of evil ready to choke the life out of me. My stepmother always made an appearance too, urging Tevin to finish the job. Even though I didn't know what she looked like, my mind seemed happy to blend her appearance with that of Snow White's Evil Queen.

I'd already pushed Tevin out of my life, but Margaret and the inheritance remained a thorn on my side. If I didn't solve this, if I didn't get her to back off, I was sure to go crazy. Every day, I thought of calling 911 and spilling my guts—the FBI or some other three-letter agency would know how to put a stop to this. But every time I had this thought, Tevin's words echoed inside my mind. He'd warned me it was safer if I didn't go to the cops and, against

all reason, I believed him.

It's not just that, my inner voice added. *You want to protect him.*

Having an inner voice can be irritating, especially when it decides to cut past your excuses and rationalizations. And yet, that was the truth—I didn't want to go to the cops because I didn't want to put Tevin in harm's way. That, of course, left me with only one choice.

I would have to confront Margaret.

The thought of it was terrifying, so much it made me nauseous, but I refused to be bullied. I still didn't know what to do with the inheritance—maybe it would be easier to sign away my rights to it and be done with Margaret and her threats. But at the same time, my biological father had given it to me, and there was so much good I could do for this town with that money. It was all so overwhelming, and I started to feel lightheaded.

“Okay, that's it,” Melanie said, looking at me with knitted eyebrows. “Not only are you going to take the rest of the week off, you're going home right now.”

“I can't do that! The kids—”

“I'll take care of the kids,” she cut me short. “Seriously, you have to go home. The bags under your eyes make you look like a panda, and you're so pale that—”

I jumped to my feet before she could finish talking. My nausea had turned into a tight feeling on my stomach, and I was pretty sure the half-sandwich I'd eaten was about to make a comeback. Without a word, I rushed past Melanie and out of the lunchroom. A few of the kids looked my way, curious and surprised, but I only stopped once I was inside the bathroom, kneeling in front of the toilet bowl.

“What the hell?” Melanie slammed the door open and leaned over me. “Goddammit.” She held my hair up, her touch gentle. “This isn't normal, Serene. You gotta see a doctor. You look like you're sick. Or maybe you're...oh, *shit*.”

“What?” I groaned, one arm draped over my belly. It felt like something was pressing against my stomach, making it impossible to keep any food down.

“Please tell me you guys used protection.”

“Protection? What are you talking about?” I only had to say it out loud for the answer to come to me. I knew exactly what Melanie was talking about. The memories of the night I'd shared with Tevin flashed before my

eyes, and none of those memories involved a condom. I'd been so crazed with lust that I'd thrown common sense precautions out the window.

"Oh, shit, shit, shit," Melanie muttered, panicking even more than I was. She bit on her bottom lip and shook her head. "All right, gimme a sec. I'll be right back."

She rushed out of the bathroom and returned a few seconds later, clutching her bag against her chest. She rummaged through it, scattering her lipsticks and keys all over the floor, and fished out a pregnancy test kit. "Don't ask why I'm carrying a pregnancy test in my purse. Just be glad I have one."

She tore the package open and pushed the test stick into my hands.

"Do your thing, girl." She stepped out of the stall and closed the door behind her. "I'm right outside. Let me know if you need anything."

"Right," I muttered, still eyeing the stick. Could I really be pregnant? It seemed like such an improbable and surreal thing, and yet...

There was only one way to be sure. Sighing, I skimmed through the pamphlet and followed its instructions. A minute later and my unblinking eyes were set on the test stick, my heart beating hard as I waited for the results. I waited, then waited some more. Nothing happened.

I closed my eyes and breathed out with relief.

I wasn't pregnant.

And that's when a line appeared on the test.

"No." I reread the pamphlet, looked at the test again, and clenched my jaw. "It can't be."

"What?" Melanie asked from the other side of the door. "Talk to me! Unlock the door!" When I did, she burst into the stall and took the test off my hands. Her eyes widened into plates, and her jaw dropped so much it almost hit the floor. "Pardon my French, but holy *fucking* shit. You're pregnant."

"It's impossible," I said.

"Oh, shut up," Melanie threw back, waving the stick in front of my eyes. "You know how babies are made, right? This line right here means that you're gonna be a mom, Serene."

I sat on the toilet lid and buried my face in my hands. For a moment there, I thought I was going to cry, but I didn't—I was far too shocked for that. How could I have been this reckless?

"What am I gonna do?" I whispered, more to myself than to Melanie.

"It's up to you, really." She stroked my hair gently, her usually hyped

tone reduced to a kind whisper. “You don’t owe that asshole anything, and if you don’t want to tell him...I’ll help you raise the baby. And I’m sure your parents will, too.”

I merely nodded, grateful for Melanie’s support. Unfortunately for me, things weren’t as black and white as she had put them. I didn’t owe Tevin a thing, that was true, but could I really keep such a secret from him? He was a killer, but this was still his child.

“It’ll be all right, I promise.” Melanie hugged me tight and kissed my cheek. “I’ll help in whatever way I can, and I promise to be the coolest aunt ever. Maybe I can even start thinking about settling down, you know? I ought to be a role model for this kid. Besides, I really think I’m onto something with Max.”

That was Melanie’s new love interest, an out-of-towner who’d caught her eye. Tall, handsome, and with long dark hair, he was as gorgeous as he was mysterious—or so Melanie liked telling me. She was absolutely smitten, anyone could tell, but I wasn’t sure I shared her enthusiasm. This Max guy sounded too much like Tevin for comfort, and Melanie’s attempts at cheering me up were only making me think back to the man who’d broken my heart.

“I think I should head home,” I said, interrupting Melanie as she spun an imaginary wedding party out of nowhere, one in which my child would be carrying the wedding rings for her and Max. “I’m pretty tired, and I need to process this.”

“Sure, yeah.” She helped me up to my feet and led me out of the bathroom. I made a turn toward Louise’s office, to let her know I’d be heading home, but Melanie just pushed me toward the front door. “Don’t worry about Louise or the kids. I’ll take care of all that, all right? You just head home and lie down. Maybe eat some ice cream or something. And call me when you get there!”

Too weak to protest, I just did as I was told. Thankfully, I’d driven the Wrangler to school that day, which meant I wouldn’t have to drag my bike all the way back home. Exhausted as I was—both physically and mentally—I didn’t think I was capable of riding my bike.

Even so, I spent the short drive home tormenting myself. What was I going to do? I was going to be a mother—it was all I’d ever wanted, but this news had come with a bittersweet aftertaste. I was completely lost, now more than ever.

Amidst all the doubts and uncertainty, though, there was one thing I knew

for sure: no matter what happened, no matter the cost, I was going to keep this baby safe, and give him or her a good life.

Maybe that meant keeping the inheritance—the child would never want for anything. Or maybe it meant bringing Tevin into the baby's life. He was a killer, sure, but he'd also protected me from the assassins Margaret had sent after me. If Tevin could be ruthless on my behalf, I was sure he'd go to the end of the world for his own child. And maybe, just maybe, I could convince him to be a better man...and if he became such a man, maybe the two of us would still have a chance.

That, of course, was a scenario that lived in the future. Right now, I had more pressing matters to attend to. Before, the hit Margaret had on me kept me terrified, but that feeling was heightened by my pregnancy. It wasn't just my life on the line now, and I sure as hell wouldn't allow for that crazy bitch to hurt my child.

It was time for me to stop her.

Once home, I locked the door behind me and grabbed my phone. I gathered the letters I'd received from Mr. Samuels' office, the lawyer, and finally decided to give him a call. He picked up almost instantly.

"Hello?" His voice was soft, almost feathery. I figured that was his professional voice, the one he used when dealing with his clients.

"This is Serene Duran calling," I said, and his gasp was so audible I had to move the phone away from my ear.

"Ms. Duran!" He exclaimed, dropping all smoothness from his voice. In his excitement, he sounded reedy and unpolished. "I thought you'd never call! How are you doing? Have you thought about the—"

"Yes, I have thought about the will," I cut in. "But that's not why I'm calling. I want to talk about Margaret."

"Margaret?" He repeated. "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I don't understand. Mrs. Atwater wasn't a part of the will, so you don't need to worry about her."

"I want to have a meeting with Mr. Atwater's wife," I repeated. "She's clearly interested in the money, and I want her to know she won't be getting a single penny."

"Ms. Duran," Samuels said, his voice reedy, "please, think about it before making any decisions. I'm here to help you through this process and—"

"I appreciate that, but the only help I need is in setting up that meeting. Ms. Margaret owes me a face-to-face meeting, especially after trying to kill me. I want to know her reasons."

“I’m sorry, I must’ve heard wrong because it sounded like you said that —”

“I know what I said, and I have proof.” It was a bald-faced lie, but Margaret didn’t know that. And if she believed I had proof, she wouldn’t have me murdered during our little face-to-face. “Now, can you help me?”

He cleared his throat. “Certainly, Ms. Duran. If what you’re saying is true—which, I assure you, can’t be—I’ll personally call the authorities. I genuinely can’t believe Margaret would do such a thing, though.”

“But she has.”

He sighed heavily, as if he were dealing with a petulant child. “Ms. Duran, why don’t you stay in California? Maybe I can act as mediator between you and your stepmother. Wouldn’t that be easier?”

“I’m meeting her, one way or the other, Mr. Samuels. I need this situation handled.” *I need my baby to be safe.* “This isn’t a negotiation.”

“Margaret lives in Philadelphia and—”

“I’ll catch the next plane out.”

There was a moment of silence, then another sigh. “Very well, I’ll arrange it. I’ll also make arrangements for your protection, and I will be there myself. Mr. Atwater wanted you to be his heir, and as a representative of Mr. Atwater’s interests, I want to help and protect you.”

The last man who tried to protect me murdered two men and broke my heart, I thought wryly. Maybe I didn’t need protecting as much as I thought, though. After all, if I was going to take care of my baby, I needed to be strong and stand up for *myself*. Even if that meant going into the lion’s den.

SIXTEEN

SERENE

“**T**his is the address, ma’am.”

The taxi driver, a squat middle-aged guy with a faint Italian accent, stopped the car in front of a set of iron gates. Beyond them, the road continued into the Atwater Estate, with two rows of neatly trimmed maple trees on either side of it. I looked out the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of the house itself, but it was hidden from sight by the estate walls and a bend in the road.

“This is it, yeah.” I eyed the taxi meter, grabbed enough money to cover both the ride and the tip, and pushed the money through the gap in the screen divider. “Thank you so much.”

“My pleasure, ma’am,” the man said, tipping an imaginary hat at me.

I got out of the car and stood in front of the gates, my stomach tied in knots. Despite my nerves and exhaustion—the long trip from California to Philadelphia hadn’t been easy—I was as determined to confront Margaret as I’d been the day before. The few hours of shut-eye I’d grabbed on the plane hadn’t been nearly enough, but I felt energized enough to do what needed to be done.

I rang the bell and waited.

“Yes?” A buttery voice came through the speaker, expecting me to announce myself. When I did, there was a little electronic crackle, and the motorized gates swung back to let me in. I took a deep breath, summoning all my bravery, and walked in.

The private road cut across a sprawling manicured lawn, with the estate walls and the thick hedges keeping all outside noises at bay. Even if this was Evil Queen territory, the surroundings were definitely nicer than

Philadelphia's bustling atmosphere and head-spinning traffic.

The moment I saw the house, I immediately understood why Margaret had decided to stay here. In fact, it was wrong to call it a house—it was more like a mansion, a palatial structure which overlooked the gardens from the top of a flat hill. The vine-covered walls, which had been built with brown Pennsylvania stone, added a rustic feel to the mansion, taming the opulence with a little coziness. It was the kind of building one would expect to find in the English countryside; if I didn't know this was the Atwater Estate, I wouldn't have been surprised to find an obscenely wealthy English duke living there.

None of this is really hers, I reminded myself, trying not to be intimidated. Even if Margaret still lived here, the house didn't belong to her. Had things been different, I might have let her keep the house and some of Bryan Atwater's fortune—I would've never left her destitute—but her trying to kill me had left me a bit indifferent to her comforts. Depending on how our meeting went, she'd be lucky if I didn't go to the authorities.

Another deep breath and I climbed up the steps leading to the manor's entrance. There was no wall-mounted panel here, like there'd been at the gates, only an old-fashioned bell. I gave it a tug and, no more than five seconds later, a spindly man was at the door. He had thinning gray hair, which he'd tried to conceal by cropping it short, and an aquiline nose on which a pair of horn-rimmed glasses rested. He wore a dark suit with absolutely no creases, and his posture was so perfect you'd think he had a ruler strapped to his back.

"Ms. Duran," he said in a thick British accent, slightly bowing his head. This had to be Margaret's butler. "It's my pleasure to welcome you to the Atwater Estate. Mrs. Atwater is already expecting you in her office, as is Mr. Samuels."

"Serene!" A blond man, probably in his early forties, appeared behind the butler. He rushed down the imperial staircase that dominated the entrance hall, then shouldered the butler aside. Tall and with a strong jaw, he looked like an aging high-school football player with fading looks. His frame remained strong, but a few wrinkles decorated his face, and a little belly was starting to show. "The name's Horace Samuels, and I am—or, really, was—Mr. Atwater's lawyer. It's a pleasure to finally meet you."

"Likewise, Mr. Samuels," I said politely, allowing him to shake my hand. "On our phone call, you mentioned you'd be taking some security

precautions.”

“Yes, yes,” he said. “Of course. I hired a few good men for security. They’re stationed around the house and can be here at a moment’s notice. And you can call me Horace.”

I’d seen no signs of security on my walk from the gates to the house, but I had no reason to doubt Horace. The man’s duty was to protect Bryan Atwater’s interests, which meant his duty was also to protect *my* interests.

“Very well,” I said. “Then let’s get this over with.”

“Allow me to take your jacket, Ms. Duran,” the butler offered, somehow materializing behind me. Surprised, and more than a little uncomfortable with his straight-jacketed formality, I let him help with the coat.

“Ah, you look lovely,” Samuels commented.

“Thank you.” I didn’t intend to look ‘lovely’ but, before leaving Brightenville, I’d decided I needed to look my best for this confrontation. That, of course, meant I was wearing my favorite teacher outfit—a scarlet flared skirt with a white button-down and a cardigan, a pair of shoes that were remakes from the 1940s, and a square black purse. I didn’t look like a high-powered CEO on her way to a meeting, that much I knew, but this outfit had never failed to give my confidence a boost. That’s why it was my go-to when it came to parent meetings.

“Right this way.” Samuels led me across the entrance hall and through a vaulted corridor with a view of the gardens. The gaps between the windows were covered with old paintings and pictures of both Margaret and Bryan, and I took a moment to appreciate the man who was supposed to be my father.

He was a tall and imposing man, with straw-blond hair and pale blue eyes. He had a prominent forehead, which he partially hid with his combed hair, and a small nose that resembled mine. He looked older, but there weren’t a lot of wrinkles in his face. The only exception were his laugh lines, which had been carved deep. That made sense—he seemed to be smiling in every picture I saw of him.

His wife, Margaret, looked younger, but her smile was notoriously absent in most pictures. Her pretty face was completely devoid of wrinkles, and I doubted she even knew what a laugh line was supposed to look like.

There were a lot of those pictures strewn everywhere I looked, but most were of the Atwater couple and friends. There were no pictures of children, and I couldn’t help but wonder if that was by accident or design. Maybe

Margaret couldn't conceive, or maybe they'd never wanted children together.

"And this is Margaret's office," Horace announced, pushing a set of double doors open. The floor was hardwood, much like the rest of the house, but the similarities stopped there. Margaret had infused the office with some of her personality, adding a splash of modernity to the room. Instead of old paintings and pictures of herself and Bryan, she'd decorated the room with modern sculptures and abstract paintings, which paired surprisingly well with the massive wooden shelves that encased the room.

Margaret was so still she resembled a sculpture herself. She sat behind a mahogany desk, her back pressed against an upholstered, high-backed chair, and her unblinking eyes were on me the moment I entered the room. I had already seen her pictures, but it was different to see her in the flesh, and my first thought was that she looked completely unlike Snow White's Evil Queen.

My expectations had been colored by my nightmares—I'd never expected Margaret would be an old hag with a wart—but I still wasn't prepared for how stunningly beautiful she was.

Her skin was smooth, the color of unblemished ivory, and she had a short bob hairstyle that complemented her delicate features. She had high cheekbones, a narrow nose, and her lips were a perfect bloom of crimson. Her dress—form-fitting and with a nip at the waistline—was of a pure white, contrasting with the deep browns of the upholstered chair she was sitting on.

She didn't look a day over forty.

"Please, have a seat." She waved her delicate fingers at the chair facing hers, her voice so icy the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. "Mr. Samuels has told me a very interesting tale. Seems like you have a very active imagination, my dear."

"My imagination has nothing to do with this," I said, trying to match her iciness. Despite my best efforts, my anger got the best of me, and my voice trembled a little. Even so, I showed no fear and sat right in front of her. "I came here to put a stop to this madness."

"Believe me," she said, her voice going from icy to silky, "no one wants that more than I do. That's why I allowed Horace to join us here today. We should honor my late husband's wishes and take care of the will without any further delay." Without giving me the time for a reply, she turned to Horace and snapped her fingers. "Shall we?"

"Very well." The lawyer cleared his throat and sat down. He grabbed his

folders from the suitcase he'd been carrying and laid them out on the table. "Before we proceed, I have to follow protocol and read the entirety of the will, just so we're all on the same page."

I hadn't necessarily come here to take care of the will, but I figured this was for the best while we were all here. If I made my decision and signed the papers, then Margaret's reasons for wanting me dead would simply disappear. If the papers were signed, she'd no longer have any incentive to come after me—the deal would be done, and she wouldn't be getting any of the money anyway.

Horace Samuels droned on for about half an hour, going through every detail and legal minutiae. While he read, Margaret kept her eyes on me, barely moving a muscle. I was uncomfortable at first, but I soon matched her posture and returned her gaze. If she thought I'd cower just because she had a mean bitch face, she was in for a surprise.

When Samuels was done, he let out a sharp exhale and grabbed a pen from his shirt pocket. He twirled it around his fingers, then looked from Margaret to me. "I believe the time has come for us to decide what happens."

This was it.

The moment of truth.

"I have decided that—"

"You don't get to decide anything." Margaret sounded so casual it was as if she was commenting on the weather. With a slow but measured gesture, she opened one of the drawers and grabbed a dark revolver from inside it. She propped her skinny elbows on the desk and pointed the barrel at me. "I'm the one calling the shots here, sweetie."

I looked at Samuels, hoping he'd spring into action and call his men, but he didn't even bat an eye.

"Did you really think you could come here and take all of my money?" Margaret asked. "You really are as stupid as you look. Just because you share Bryan's DNA doesn't mean you're entitled to shit. You were never his daughter, no matter what he believed, and I'll make sure you won't get a thing. I was the one putting up with that bastard, not you, and I'm the one who deserves it all. You're nothing but a bastard child, Serene, and bastards get *nothing*." Her lips twisted into a cold smile. "I'm sorry, sweetie, but I won't let you steal my life away."

I pushed my back against the chair, my heart hammering away, and looked down at the revolver. Was this really it? Maybe Margaret was right,

and I truly *was* an idiot. I'd just delivered myself to her doorstep, even though I knew the woman wanted me dead, but I'd thought I had the protection of a lawyer and extra security.

"I have proof of—"

"You have nothing," Margaret interrupted me. "Do you really think I fell for your stupid bluff? That idiot I sent to kill you threw a wrench in my plans, but I'm pretty sure you have no proof of anything."

"What the hell?" Horace sprang up from his seat, his words coming out as a squeak. For a moment, I half-expected for him to call for help, but my relief was short-lived. "So the girl was telling the truth? Jesus, Margaret, have you lost your mind? This wasn't the plan. You told me you were just going to convince her to hand over the money, not *kill* her!"

"You were in on this?" I asked him, suddenly realizing the extent of my naiveté. I truly was an idiot.

"What's your plan, really?" Horace just ignored me and carried on. "We shoot her, hide the body inside a carpet, and bury her in the garden? Is that your brilliant plan? For fuck's sake, Margaret! This isn't you!"

"Horace," Margaret hissed, "shut the hell up, will you? We've gotten this far together, haven't we? I told you—I'm not going to let this girl steal what's mine, even if that means getting my hands dirty."

"Margaret, I love you, but this is not what I signed up for."

"You *love* her?" I was stunned at first, but then the pieces started falling in place. "Oh my God...you were cheating on my biological father with Horace. The two of you were conspiring to steal his money."

"Fine, fine," Horace muttered, wiping the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand. "We wanted your father's money, but that was it. We have never hurt anyone and—"

"Horace here doesn't have the stomach to do what needs to be done," Margaret said, giving me her full attention. Her gun remained pointed at me, her hand firm and steady. "Luckily for him, he doesn't need to get his hands dirty. I'll take care of you all by myself." She gave Horace a little wave with her free hand, and he dutifully grabbed another set of papers from a corner table. "You're going to sign these and give up your rights to all the money and assets."

"Why should I?" I was so anxious I was surprised I could speak. Hell, it was a miracle I hadn't thrown up all over Margaret yet. "If I sign those papers, you're going to kill me anyway."

She shrugged her shoulders. “Trust me, dear, I don’t give a damn if you live or die. Removing you was my first option, I’ll admit that much, but that didn’t quite work so...just sign the papers. We do this legally, and I’ll let you go.”

“You’re lying,” I muttered. “You’re afraid I’ll tell—”

“Who? The cops?” She let out a shrill laugh. “Oh, please, you’re smarter than that. Who’s going to believe you? Besides, I’ll have all the money, which means I can hire as many lawyers as I can to destroy your life and that of your family. And all of it legally. Be smart, Serene. Sign the papers and go live your life.”

I gritted my teeth and clenched my fists.

Part of me wanted to keep standing up to her, even if that would cost me my life, but that was just my anger speaking. I wasn’t willing to risk my child’s life over money. In the end, it had never been about the money—it had been about regaining my freedom and getting some closure, making sure my child would be safe and taken care of.

“Please, Serene,” Horace whispered, offering me his pen. “Just sign it.”

I accepted the pen with a trembling hand, looked from Margaret to Horace, then at the papers in front of me. Slowly, I leaned forward and put the pen over the dotted line. One quick scribble and that would be it. All I had to do was sign these papers and this nightmare would end.

I hesitated, the pen already on the paper, and Margaret lost it.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” She rolled her eyes at me, then pressed the gun between my eyes. “Just sign the damn thing or I’ll paint the wall with your brains.”

“Margaret!” Horace cried out. “Stop that! You’re just frightening her. Do you really think she’ll sign with a gun pressed to her head?”

“You’re too soft,” Margaret argued, her eyes still on mine. “Don’t you have any guts?”

Horace clenched his jaw, sorrow washing over his face. “I’ve had the guts to love you from afar, Margaret. I’ve had the guts to see you climb into bed with another man for the past ten years, all because you couldn’t stomach the idea of giving up the money. But look at us. We’re terrifying this girl, and what for?”

“Are you really asking me that?” Margaret’s words dripped with venom. “Don’t be an idiot. With this money, we’ll have the world at our feet. What if I kill her? Who gives a shit about a bumpkin schoolteacher?”

“You’re crazy.” Horace looked down at his feet for a moment, gritting his teeth so hard I could almost hear them grind. When he looked back up, something in his expression had changed. “I love you, Margaret, but you’ve gone too far.”

He moved faster than I could’ve anticipated, jumping over the desk and knocking the gun out of Margaret’s hands. I cried out in panic, afraid the revolver would fire accidentally, but nothing happened. The gun skidded over the tabletop and fell onto the hardwood floor.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she screeched, clawing at Horace’s face like a wildcat. “You’re ruining it, you idiot! I’ll kill this girl if I have to, and you’re not going to stop me!”

“Margaret!” He cried out, holding his arms up to keep her at bay. “Stop!”

While they fought, I ran for the door, but Horace had locked it behind him. When I turned around, Margaret seemed even more crazed than before, her teeth bared in a vicious snarl.

“And if you try to stop me, I’ll kill you too,” she told Horace, then made for the gun. She pushed him back first, throwing him off balance, then picked the gun back up and aimed it at me. Her expression, so cool and collected before, was contorted with manic rage.

“Please,” I breathed out. “I’m pregnant, I—”

“I don’t give a damn,” she snarled. “Your time is up. You don’t wanna sign? Fine. I’ll just forge the damn signature.” She put her finger over the trigger and looked straight into my eyes. “It’s been a pleasure, Serene. Goodbye.”

I’m sorry, I thought, draping one hand over my belly and mourning the child I’d never get to meet. *I’m so sorry*.

Margaret cocked the revolver and grinned.

SEVENTEEN

TEVIN

“**F**or fuck’s sake.” I massaged the back of my neck and sighed. The entire Atwater Estate was walled in, and every entry point—from the front gates to the service entrances—had a video surveillance system in place.

This wasn’t going to be easy.

I should’ve anticipated this, but there was no helping it. Serene hadn’t exactly given me the time to study the place and make a plan. Against all odds, she’d transformed from a quiet schoolteacher into a woman of extreme action.

Now, here I was, trying to infiltrate a place I knew almost nothing about. I didn’t like it, but my only option was to jump over the wall and pray I wouldn’t alert whatever security the Atwater Estate had. It was a ballsy move, but there was no time to play it safe—Serene had arrived almost five minutes ago, and I needed to be close at hand.

You shouldn’t have let her go in, my wolf said, angry at my passivity. Our mate must be protected.

As if I didn’t know that.

When Ben called to tell me that Serene had booked a flight to Pennsylvania, my first instinct had been to rush back to her place and stop her, even if I had to tie her up. In the end, though, I just gritted my teeth and let her go ahead with it. What she was doing was dangerous, maybe even reckless, but I had to trust her—as pure and innocent as she was, Serene was also bright, and she wouldn’t have come here without a plan.

Or so I hoped.

It didn’t help that I wasn’t sure of Ben’s motives. He could’ve kept me in

the dark, but he had decided to alert me. I hadn't gone back to the MC in more than a month—I was spending my days in Brightenville, tailing Serene and making sure no one got to her—and I knew Ben couldn't possibly be happy about it. Still, I had to trust him. If I didn't trust the Alpha, if I didn't trust the pack, then I was a man adrift.

“All right, let's do this.” I cracked my knuckles, stepped away from the wall, and then rushed toward it. Had I shifted, I would've been able to leap over it, but I didn't want to risk a transformation here—if the estate's security had any dogs, they would go berserk with my wolf's scent.

I grunted as I hit the wall, my legs slamming against it hard, but I managed to grab onto the ledge. Another grunt and I heaved myself up, so that I was straddling the wall. I scanned my surroundings for a split second, just to make sure there'd be no surprises, then climbed down.

Still holding onto the ledge, I pushed my feet against the wall and propelled myself away from it. I vaulted over a thick hedge and landed with a grunt and a quick roll. Immediately alert, I went up to one knee and looked around again, trying to absorb every little detail of my surroundings. Only when I was sure that no one had noticed me—the place appeared to be deserted—did I rise to my feet.

The path that Serene had taken was a few yards to my left, an extension from the road that cut through the expansive lawn. I followed it at a distance, not wanting to overexpose myself, and tried to ignore my wolf's angry remarks. He had no patience when it came to stealth—he was all about kicking doors down and ripping throats out.

Hopefully, it wouldn't get to that.

After a little bend, the path opened into a scenario straight out of a painting. With the sun at its back, the Atwater manor cast its morning shadow over the estate's gardens, like an ancient giant made of stone and mortar. There was no one in sight, and the only hint of movement that I could detect came from the trees that lined the path. Their leaves murmured softly, spurred on by a chilly Philadelphia breeze.

She's there, my wolf snapped, urging me to move faster. *I can feel her.*

I clenched and unclenched my fists, once again reminding myself that I didn't want to turn this into a bloodbath. I was only here as a precaution. If Serene managed to cut a deal with that Margaret bitch, then I had every intention of keeping the promise I'd made her—she would never see me again.

Ignoring my wolf's penchant for violence, I approached the manor at an angle. Still from a distance, I cut through a small courtyard that doubled as a parking lot and used the luxury sedans parked there to hide my movements. I went around the building, not really knowing where I was going, and let Serene's scent guide me.

My human senses were pathetic compared to those of my shifted form, but they were still more heightened than in any other human being. It didn't hurt that Serene was my mate—I could feel her presence just as easily as I could feel my own heartbeat. The only thing was that the strength of her presence seemed even more heightened than unusual. There was something different about her, although I couldn't really tell what it was.

There, my wolf snapped viciously, his raw energy spiking up so suddenly that I had to hold my head with both hands. For a split second, it felt as if my head was about to explode. *Serene!*

That sudden stab of pain disappeared just as quickly as it emerged, and I focused on what my wolf was trying to tell me and listened. It wasn't really about listening, though—it was more about attuning myself to my surroundings. One deep breath to clear my mind and I let my unconscious mind do its job.

About a hundred yards from where I stood, a large room protruded from the back of the manor, its L shape cutting into a stone patio. It only had one window, strategically built and positioned to allow as much sunlight into the room as possible, and it was through that window that I detected a hint of movement.

Careful to keep out of sight, I crouched and walked up to the window, my right arm brushing against the vine-covered walls of the manor. I was halfway there when my ears picked up a conversation. The walls were too thick to make out the words, but I recognized Serene's voice almost right away. She wasn't alone. Margaret was there too, her voice straddling the line between seething rage and icy aloofness, and then there was the voice of a man I didn't recognize.

It was hard to admit, but maybe my wolf was right. Margaret sounded like she was about to blow a fuse, the man seemed equally emotional, and Serene...fuck, I couldn't hear Serene.

I dropped all pretense of stealth and rushed toward the window at full speed. The sun hit it at an angle, turning the window into a screen that merely offered my own reflection, but I didn't care. I just kept on running. No more

than a few yards away from it, the voices finally started making sense.

“Please,” Serene said, “I’m pregnant, I—”

She was cut short by Margaret’s angry tirade, but I didn’t hear a word of it. Serene’s voice was still echoing inside my head, shaking me to my very core. Even my wolf was speechless.

And that’s when I heard it.

The sound of a revolver being cocked.

NOW! My wolf demanded, and all I could do was obey. I jumped straight toward the window, closing the distance fast, and shifted mid-jump. I shifted faster than I had ever done before, tearing my clothes apart in the process, and the pain was so searing I lost all control. I didn’t even feel anything as I shattered the glass and crashed into the room. Then and there, my body was anger made flesh.

Margaret stood at the center of the room, a revolver in her hands. Her finger was on the trigger, and that was all the information I could—and needed to—register. My wolf knew what to do.

Margaret spun around, her expression twisted by shock and disbelief as she laid eyes on the beast rushing toward her. She leveled the revolver, pointing its barrel at me, and squeezed the trigger. The gunshot cracked in my eardrums like the crack of a whip, but I paid it no heed—that was just noise. I ducked low, narrowly missing the bullet, and leapt into the air.

My forelegs hit Margaret in the chest, knocking her back, and I pinned her down on the floor. There was no rhyme or reason to what I did next. My wolf was in control, and after such a close call, I didn’t dare put him back on his leash.

Instead, I gave him free rein.

With a blood-curling growl, I sank my fangs into Margaret’s tender neck. Her eyes bulged, almost popping out from their sockets, and warm blood sprayed all over my muzzle. I ripped her neck open, my teeth sawing through bones and tendons, and I surrendered to the bloodlust. This was pure savagery, and it felt *good*.

Margaret didn’t last more than two seconds.

Breathing hard, the coppery taste of blood coating my tongue, I pulled back from her limp body. I noticed a man cowering behind the desk, his pants stained with fear and piss, and bared my teeth once more.

“No, please,” he pleaded, backing away from me. He was so afraid I could smell it, the scent of his adrenaline making me even crazier than

before. I could already see myself tearing him from limb to limb, my teeth ripping through flesh and bone, and I was dead set on making it happen.

Fate intervened.

Before I could kill him, I noticed Serene from the corner of my eye.

She was standing against one of the massive shelves that lined the room, and her face was as white as her cardigan. Her mouth was ajar, and she was clutching both hands against her chest, as if trying to stop her heart from jumping out from chest.

More than just shocked, she looked horrified.

Fuck, I thought, suddenly realizing I had gone too far. It was time to put my wolf back in its cage. Mercifully, he offered no resistance. Serene was safe, my wolf's bloodlust had been sated, and he was more than happy to stand aside. With a howl, I absorbed the pain of another transformation, my beastly limbs turning into those of a man. Naked, I rose to my feet and padded toward Serene.

"No," she merely said, pushing her back against the shelf. "No."

"It's okay." I reached for her with one hand, hesitated, and lowered it again. I wanted to touch her, to feel the warmth of her skin against my fingers, but not like this. "It's me, Serene. I know how crazy this must look...but it's just me."

"This isn't possible," she insisted, her unblinking eyes turning glassy. "I'm dreaming. Yes, that's it. I'm having a nightmare, and if I pinch myself, I'm gonna wake up in my bed and—"

I stepped forward and wrapped my arms around her. The moment I touched her, Serene deflated completely. Her knees buckled under her weight, her energy drained from her body, and she fell into my arms, her blonde hair splayed over my naked chest.

"Hey, hey," I whispered, gently lowering her to the floor. I knelt beside her, my anger and bloodlust fading away to nothingness. "You're safe now." I leaned in and kissed her forehead. "And I...I heard what you said. Is it true? Are you really...?"

I couldn't bring myself to say it.

Apparently, neither could Serene. She just looked at me with a blank stare, too shocked to say a thing. Even so, I could tell it was true. The strength of Serene's presence, the ever-growing need I had to be close to her...it all went beyond the pull of a mate. This was the pull of a *family*.

A whimpering sound derailed my thoughts.

I spun around fast, ready to strike, but it was just the man I'd seen before. He was crouching in the corner of the room, hands over his head, and he was sobbing openly.

Kill him, my wolf said with cool disinterest. I expended no energy turning him down. Now that Serene was pregnant, even my wolf seemed ready to give up on blind violence. The priority now was protecting our family. Nothing else mattered.

I kept the man in my sights while I stroked Serene's hair.

"Talk to me," I pleaded, the back of my hand against her cheek. "Please, Serene, I need to know you're okay."

She opened her mouth, but no sound came out. Her eyelids fluttered, eyes rolling up, and she went limp in my arms. Terrified, I checked her pulse, but she had only passed out.

Carefully, I picked her up from the floor and carried her toward the large couch at the back. I put a pillow behind her head, made sure she was comfortable, then turned my attention to the sniveling man by the corner.

"You," I growled, some of my old anger returning. I didn't need to know who he was to know he had a part in this—his guilt was so powerful it actually had a stench.

"You're not real," the man muttered, turning his eyes up to me. Despite his height, he now seemed more like a child than a man. "You *can't* be real."

"That's right," I agreed, enjoying how terrified he was. That worked to my advantage. "I'm not real. In fact, I'm not even here." I knelt in front of him and grabbed him by the collar of his shirt. "Can you tell me what happened here?"

"I...I..."

"I'll tell you what happened here," I continued. "Some wild beast made it into the estate, got inside the house, and killed Margaret in her office. A real tragedy, but an accident."

"A wild beast, yes," he agreed, nodding his head so fast I'm surprised he didn't break his own damn neck. "That's what happened, and no one's going to say otherwise. Margaret made sure nobody would be here today. Only the butler is here, and he's on the other wing of the manor, so I'm sure that—"

"You're the lawyer, right?" I narrowed my eyes. "You look like a lawyer."

"Yes, that's...that's me."

"Good." I let go of him and stood up. "I don't know what Margaret was

planning, but Serene isn't letting go of her inheritance. She's keeping it all, and she'll be free to spend it in whichever way she sees fit. Are we in agreement?" The lawyer nodded again, so fast I doubted he'd even processed my words. I needed more from him, so I slapped him across the face. "That's not good enough. You're a lawyer, aren't you? Make sure this is official."

"Of course, yes." He crawled away from me on all fours, and only got up when he was near the desk. He gathered a bunch of papers from the tabletop and ripped them up, his hands trembling hard. "These documents were Margaret's. I drafted them so that Serene could decline her inheritance and..." He must've seen the look on my face, because he shut up real fast. Smart. "I'll make sure the money is transferred tomorrow, and that the ownership of all other assets is transferred to Serene. She'll need to sign some documents but—"

"Tomorrow," I repeated, "unless you want to see me again. She'll sign later."

You should kill him, my wolf suggested again. *He's a loose end.*

I agreed, but I knew Serene wouldn't be too happy about it. What I'd done to Margaret had already left her shell-shocked, and I didn't want to make things worse. Besides, I still needed this idiot to make the transfer of assets. Maybe I was growing soft, but the lawyer would live to see another day.

"Before you go," I told him, "I need something else from you."

"W-what? Anything, just say the word and I—"

"Your clothes," I said. "Give them to me."

He was slightly shorter than me, but it wasn't like I had a choice. It was already going to be hard to get Serene out of this damn place and being fully naked wasn't going to help matters.

"Are you serious?" the lawyer asked.

"Now," I growled, and he undressed so fast you'd think he actually *wanted* to do it.

Once he was down to his boxers, I tipped my chin toward the door. He got the message right away and didn't need to be told twice. He walked backwards, keeping me in his line of sight, and turned as soon as he reached the door. He ran out as if the devil was chasing after him, the echo of his footsteps like the rattle of a machine gun. He shouldn't have worried. As soon as he was out of my sight, he was out of my mind.

I had far more important things to worry about.

Once I'd put some clothes on, I walked back to the couch and looked down at Serene, a tiny smile tugging at the corner of my lips. She looked so peaceful now, her chest rising and falling with a smooth cadence, and the last thing I wanted was to disturb her. I knew that if she was to process all she had seen, she would need the rest, but...

This wasn't the time or place.

"Don't worry, Serene," I whispered as I picked her up from the couch. "I'm here now, and I'm not going anywhere."

EIGHTEEN

SERENE

It was a dreamless sleep.

Wrapped tight in a cocoon of darkness, I surrendered to the sweet warmth of unconsciousness. There were no nightmares here, no murderers, no dark beasts with sharpened fangs, no violence. And just as long as I didn't open my eyes, the fears and anxieties of the real world wouldn't find me here.

Here, I was safe.

Serene.

I tried to pretend I hadn't heard it, but I couldn't ignore it.

Serene, wake up.

It wasn't about the name—it took me a while to realize that Serene was my name—but about the voice. It had a deep bass to it, one that sent a pleasant shiver up my spine, and it brought with it memories I'd tried to bury. Hadn't I heard this voice before, a long time ago?

"Serene." It was stronger now, with a solid quality to it. It broke through the darkness, strong as lightning, and it set my mind on fire. The memories trickled in—then they burst the dam and flashed before my eyes faster than I could comprehend them.

Tevin Novak.

His roguish smile as he gave me his phone number, the dinner we shared over the reservoir, the long night we spent between the sheets; then, just as fast, it was the memory of him plunging a knife into a man's heart.

My eyes flew open.

"Hey." Tevin looked at me, his eyebrows knitted together. He was sitting on a couch, and my head was on his lap. "I was worried about you. You've

been out for a couple of hours.”

“Where am I?” I mumbled. I tried sitting up, but my body didn’t appreciate the effort. Weak and disoriented, I was forced to rest my head on Tevin’s lap again. “And what are you doing here?”

“We’re in Philadelphia.” He smiled, and it was a smile I’d never seen before. His eyes were glowing too, and in that moment, I saw him differently than I had the last night we’d been together. The gentle concern in his eyes, the soft way he cradled my body as he looked down at me...he was dangerous, that much was true, but he wasn’t a threat to me. “I know what I’ve promised you, but I couldn’t stay away. I had to know you were safe.”

“Safe?” The word confused me. I knew Tevin had killed to keep me safe before, and I knew the lengths he’d gone to, but I still couldn’t understand what he was saying. Why were we in Philadelphia? And why couldn’t I remember anything? There was a shadow over my memories, like a blot of ink spreading over freshly written pages. “I don’t...I don’t understand.”

Tevin frowned, that glow in his eyes dimming. Tenderly, he helped me sit up on the couch and turned to face me. “Don’t you remember? You came here to see Margaret.”

“Margaret?” The name sounded familiar, but I couldn’t put a face to it. Wincing, I massaged my temples, trying to flatten the headache I’d woken up with.

“Bryan Atwater’s wife,” Tevin replied, his tone cautious. “She was your stepmother.”

All at once, the memories rushed back in to plunge that hole in my mind, like water circling into the drain. At first, I thought it was the word ‘stepmother’ that had done it, but I was wrong. It was the way Tevin had worded his sentence.

Margaret was.

I gasped as I remembered that dark shadow crashing through the window of Margaret’s office, a massive beast with amber eyes and dagger-like fangs. It was a hellish creature, as large as a bear but with a wolf’s appearance, and more brutal than the two of them combined.

It had torn Margaret apart, its teeth making short work of the woman, and her blood had spilled all over the floorboards. That’s what I remembered best. Not that ungodly beast, not the way Margaret’s legs had twitched as she died, but the blood as it pooled on the smooth floorboards of her office.

And then Tevin...the beast had vanished, and he’d appeared in its place.

Or was that my mind playing tricks on me after all I'd been through? I had to know.

"You're..." I couldn't even say it. It was too surreal. "You're a..."

"Yes," Tevin said, his expression inscrutable. I couldn't tell if he was angry, hurt, or simply looking for acceptance. Maybe it was all these things. "I'm a monster, but I'm also a man. But it really doesn't matter what I am—what really matters is that I came here for *you*. I love you, Serene, I always have."

I had spent all my life dreaming of love, of having someone like Tevin, but this...

Tevin reached for my belly, his movement cautious, and I realized that he knew I was pregnant.

"Get away from me!" I used whatever strength I had left to jump up from the couch, my heart beating furiously. I spun around, disoriented, and tried to look for a way out. I was in a tiny room with beige walls, the decor as simple as it was generic, and I quickly realized Tevin had brought me to some hotel in the vicinity of the Atwater Estate. How he'd carried me here, unconscious, I had no idea.

"Serene, please—"

"Stay back," I cried out, a raging storm of emotions wreaking havoc inside me. Tevin had lied and deceived me from day one. I felt hurt, betrayed, and crushed beyond measure. Surprisingly, the one emotion I didn't feel was fear—deep down, I still knew Tevin would never hurt me. But none of that changed the fact that he was a *literal* monster.

Nauseous, I pushed open the first door I laid eyes on. It didn't lead out of the room, as I'd hoped, but into a cramped bathroom with a clawfoot tub. Knowing my options were limited, and certain I wouldn't be able to force my way past Tevin, I closed the door behind me and locked myself in.

Focus, I thought, raking a hand over my face. *Focus on what matters*.

I stood in front of the mirror and stared at my reflection. My hair was disheveled, there was a splatter of blood on my white cardigan, and I had a bewildered expression on my face. I looked like absolute crap. Still, it wasn't my appearance that had me worried.

Carefully, I untucked my button-down shirt and lifted it up. I touched my belly, ran my fingers over my increasingly taut skin, and held my breath for a second. All this stress couldn't be good for the baby, that much was clear, but I felt no pain or discomfort. At least there was that.

I took long, deep breaths, and tried to calm myself.

Part of me wanted to banish all thoughts of Tevin from my mind, but there was no way that was going to happen. Never mind the fact that I was trapped inside this room with him; the man had taken residence inside my head a long time ago, and he wasn't going anywhere. And, deep down, I didn't really want him to. Despite the terror of his violence, whenever we were together, I felt whole. But how could I accept—or even comprehend—what he was?

I could live with the fact that he had a shady past, and that life had made a ruthless criminal out of him. If he changed his ways, I could accept who he was, but what really troubled me was *what* he was. It simply went beyond anything I could've imagined. This bordered on insanity, and insanity was something I wanted to keep my child away from.

And yet, despite all of that...there was some part of me that just couldn't imagine the rest of my life without Tevin. The month we'd spent apart had felt like an eternity, and it was hell to have such hollowness inside me. And now that I was pregnant, the desperate craving I felt for him was getting stronger and stronger, threatening to overwhelm me.

God, I can't even think straight. I pressed my forehead against the mirror and closed my eyes. What was I going to do?

"Serene?" Tevin knocked at the door, the sound of it almost too polite. "Are you all right?"

I will never be all right, I wanted to say, but I kept my mouth shut. I wasn't ready for any of this, and I didn't want to talk with Tevin or anyone else. Right now, what I wanted was to be alone with my thoughts and try to make sense of the madness. Unfortunately for me, I didn't have a choice.

"I get it," Tevin said, "this is hard for you."

"*Hard?*" I repeated, and the word came out as a hysterical laugh. "This goes beyond hard, Tevin." I pulled back from the mirror and stared at the closed door. I couldn't see him, but I could *feel* him on the other side of it. "Who are you, *really*? Because right now I have no idea who or what is real anymore."

"I'm real," he replied. "And what I feel for you is real too."

I said nothing.

The door gave in a little, as if someone was pushing on it from the other side, and I realized Tevin was leaning against it. Drawn to him, I took one step closer and rested my back against the doorframe.

“Tell me,” I whispered. “Who are you? And Tevin...no lies.”

He was silent for a heartbeat. “No lies.”

“Tell me.”

He started with his earliest memories, those of a dark bedroom in a Fresno orphanage. He was three or four when he realized he wasn't quite like the other kids—he was faster, stronger, and he had a supernatural intuition about his surroundings.

Those things weren't bad by themselves but, when coupled with his uncontrollable anger, they turned him into a lonely child. He put up walls around himself, and whenever anyone tried reaching in, he would lash out. His entire childhood had been spent keeping everyone at an arm's length, and the indifference of an underfunded foster care system hadn't helped either.

His first transformation happened when he was thirteen.

A drunk man thought it'd be funny to pick on the scrawny thirteen-year-old heading home from school, and he cornered him on an alleyway. Tevin got angry, which the drunken idiot just found amusing, and soon enough the drunkard pulled out a switchblade.

Instead of getting scared, Tevin just got angrier.

Everything that followed was a blur.

“I just remember ambling out of that alleyway,” he said, his words brimming with sorrow. “I was covered in blood that wasn't my own, warm and thick, and I was in so much pain I couldn't even think. My bones, my joints, my head...everything hurt. I don't even know how I made it home that day.”

“How did you realize that you were a...?”

“A wolf?” He chuckled softly, his sadness still thicker than his amusement. “After that day, I started having nightmares every night. I relived what happened in that alleyway a hundred times. Initially, I thought that it was just my brain trying to deal with things, you know? I couldn't really explain what happened, and I assumed my unconscious mind was trying to come up with some fantasy rationalization. But it wasn't a fantasy.”

He fell silent for a couple of seconds, and I knew he was immersing himself in his memories. Somehow, I knew he didn't like reliving those early days—there was too much pain hidden in there.

“Those nightmares kept happening for months,” he finally continued, “and I was always a wolf in them. Eventually, the nightmares started spilling into my real life, and I started listening to that wolf's voice every waking hour

of the day. It was surreal. That voice belonged to me but, at the same time, it didn't. It was as if I was carrying a hidden passenger inside me. I thought I was going crazy."

"But you weren't."

"About a year later, that voice inside my head got so loud, I couldn't even hear myself think. It stayed like that for days, and I was constantly in pain, as if my bones were on fire. I couldn't think, eat, or sleep. Eventually, I lost the plot and left the foster home I was in. I wandered the streets, having no idea where I was or where I was going, and I ended up following some train tracks. They led me deep into the woods, away from everything and everyone, and it was there that I found some peace."

"How?"

"I think it was the quiet," he replied. "I remember feeling as if someone had vacuumed every single thought I had inside my head. There was only stillness. Then, of course, that stillness gave way to something else."

I swallow hard, knowing what was to come.

"I shifted consciously for the first time that day," he said. "It was painful, but it felt good at the same time. And it was easy...so damn easy. I harnessed all that pent-up pressure and simply let it happen. My body transformed, my wolf took over, and I prowled those woods for almost a week straight. I survived on deer meat and the thrill of the hunt. But then I got back and..." He hesitated. "Once I understood what I was, I felt even more disconnected from everyone else around me, and I decided to leave Fresno shortly after."

"And that's when you joined the MC?"

"Not just the MC, but the pack."

"Are you telling me that—?"

"Yes," he replied. "We're all shifters. Not that anyone can tell. The first time I came across these guys, they were making a pit stop in a service station by the highway. Their bikes looked expensive and fun to ride, and so I thought it'd be fun to jack one of them. Unfortunately for me, Ben—that's our pack's leader—caught me before I could pull it off. The moment he laid his hands on me, he knew what I was. Instead of punishing me, he took me in and taught me the ropes. He gave me a home, a family, and a purpose: whatever my pack needed, I would do."

"Even if that meant killing innocent people," I added.

"Yes," he said without a moment's hesitation. "Even if it meant that. I'm not proud, Serene. My wolf is as dangerous as he is violent, but I take no joy

in causing suffering. What I do, I do for my family.” He sucked in a deep breath, then let out a sharp exhale. “And now you’re my family too—my mate. You and the baby are what matters.”

“The baby...” I repeated, a knot in my throat. “Will he...will be like you?”

“It doesn’t always happen,” Tevin said, “but it’s very likely. It’ll be different for him, though. You have to understand, I had no one to guide me. I was completely alone, and I didn’t even know what I was before it was too late. My wolf had already grown wild, and I was too disoriented to tame him. But when a shifter is taught from a young age to harness his powers...he’ll be in control, not his wolf.”

Tevin couldn’t see me, but I still nodded.

I unlocked the door and opened it. Tevin was there, right in front of me, his dominant frame making my insides clench.

“What about you?” I asked him. “Who’s in control? You or your wolf?”

“We both are,” he replied, his voice dropping into a whisper. As for his eyes, they remained on mine, drawing me in. “That doesn’t always happen, but you made it possible. You are what matters most to us and the rest...” He made a little wave with his hand, as if brushing the entire world aside. “Nothing else matters, Serene. You’re my world. My mate.”

There was that word again. “What does that mean—to be mates?” I asked carefully.

“It means that we’re meant to be together. Not just figuratively. But we are literally destined to belong to each other. Two halves of a whole, only complete when they’re made one. It usually only happens among wolves, but something about you must be special, because there’s no doubt you’re my mate—and that means everything to me.”

I looked at Tevin, trying to piece together the different sides of him. The wolf, the killer, the lover. The child who hadn’t known a family, but who had now found his mate. He was all these things but, at the same time, he was none of them. He was far too complex to be put inside a box. It was madness, but maybe he was someone I could love.

Could? I thought. *I already love him.*

It was useless to fight it.

I laid a hand on his chest, my heart skipping a beat as my fingers felt his warmth. “Promise me, Tevin. Promise you’ll take care of us.”

“I promise,” he breathed out. “I’ll do everything for you and the baby.”

“Not just for me and the baby. You said it yourself—we’re a family now, and that includes you. I need you to be...” I trailed off, not sure what I needed him to be. He couldn’t abandon his wolfish nature, nor could he turn his back to his pack. And yet, he had to change, for all our sakes.

“You need me to be better,” he said, “and I will be.”

That was all I could ask.

“Enough talking.” I grabbed the collar of his shirt, went up on tiptoes, and he did the rest. Moving fast, he wrapped his arms around me and crushed his mouth against mine. His kiss was both tender and fierce, and I offered no resistance, desiring him with all of my being.

I opened to him, and his tongue swept eagerly across my own, sparking my body to life. He was all I wanted. The only man who could make me feel the things I did. I wanted all of him, just as he wanted all of me. Then and there, my surrender was complete.

“Come,” Tevin grabbed my hand and led me to the bed, sparks of lust dancing in his eyes. He wasn’t the only one being guided by lust and so, before we fell onto the mattress, I decided to take the lead. I threw my arms over his shoulders and jumped on him; his lightning-fast instincts kicked in, and he caught me right away. I wrapped my legs around his waist, threaded my fingers into his hair, and kissed him deeply, my tongue finding its way past his lips.

“I’ve missed you,” he whispered against my lips, sitting down on the edge of the bed. “I’ve missed you so fucking much.”

“Makes for two of us.”

Breathless, I pulled his shirt over his head and let my fingers roam over his naked torso. Wanting more—so much more—I gave him a hard push and forced him down onto the bed. I didn’t take his clothes off; instead, I ripped them off his body as savagely as I could. I threw his belt aside, yanked his pants down, and freed his erection.

His cock sprang free right away, and my unconscious mind took over. I gripped his hardness by the root, my fingers traveling up and down its length, and pressed my body against his. Tevin quickly returned the favor, getting rid of my clothes in the blink of an eye. He only changed gears when he reached my underwear, his touch going from lustful to gentle.

With a flick of his fingers, he unclipped my bra and the cups slid aside to reveal my hard nipples. He took them into his mouth, his tongue going from one to the other, and let his right hand drop to my thong.

“You’re so wet,” he whispered into my ear, the deep rumble of his voice making my whole body tremble. “God, I need you so bad.”

As if to prove it, he freed me from my underwear and offered me his touch: in a single motion, he flattened his palm over my aching wetness and draped his thumb over my clit.

My body was immediately racked with pleasure, my nerve endings sizzled with anticipation, and I lost myself in his touch. It was like we’d been made for each other and he knew exactly how I wanted to be touched.

He moved his finger in slow circles at first, teasing me until I was ready to beg for more.

“Tevin...” I whimpered, squeezing his throbbing cock tighter, twisting my hand as I pumped him faster, letting my desperation for him take over. Feeling as feral as Tevin’s wolf was, I laid my hands flat on his chest and pinned him back down. Straddling him, I looked straight into his eyes as I grinned slowly, wickedly. I knew exactly what I wanted right now.

Without waiting to see what he would do, I bent and lowered my head, licking his shaft from root to tip in one fluid motion that had his hips arching up off the bed.

“Fuck, Serene,” he growled, his eyes wild as he stared at me. “That feels incredible.”

“How about this?” I opened my mouth and took him in, first just the tip, and I rolled my tongue over it, earning another growl.

“I don’t know if I can hold back when you do that,” he said, his voice strained.

I simply gave him a naughty smile, then lowered myself further down, taking his thick cock as deep as I could, flattening my tongue and hollowing my cheeks as I begin to bob up and down.

Tevin tried to say something, but his words became unintelligible as I continued to work him over, loving that I was the one bringing him this pleasure. And doing this for him made me impossibly wetter.

I squirmed, grinding myself against his leg to get some friction, and pleasure bloomed inside me.

Suddenly, Tevin reached down and cupped my chin, stopping me. “I don’t want to come like this. I want to be so deep inside of you that I don’t know where you end, and I begin.”

“I want you now,” I whispered in a half-purr, a tingle racing through me at his words. I moved up, aligning our bodies. “Make me yours.”

“You already are.”

He laid one hand on the nape of my neck, his long fingers caressing my skin, and went for the kill. My eyes rolled in their orbits as he entered me, my inner walls struggling to accommodate him, but then it was as if we'd been designed to be one. Our bodies fit perfectly, our ragged breathing synchronized, and we claimed all the pleasure we deserved.

I rocked my hips hard, my movements matching his, and it wasn't long before my voice was filling the entire room. Gasps of ecstasy, moans of delight, screams of utter madness. I didn't even care who could hear us. In that moment, we were the only two souls in existence.

Together, we climbed into the heights, where the air was more rarefied, and a deep tension settled in both our bodies. My spine arched, his muscles clenched, and the inevitable happened. A swirling inferno of flames lapped at our bodies and souls, and we let it consume everything. And it was in that deep oblivion of forgetfulness, where neither Serene nor Tevin existed, that I finally realized it.

No matter what happened, no matter what the future held in store for us...
Tevin and I were one.

We were *mates*.

NINETEEN

TEVIN

The Wrangler rolled down the dirt road at a steady clip.

I tried to make the ride as smooth as was possible, my foot constantly on the brake, but the roads leading into the pack lands didn't make my job easy. Behind us, a cloud of dust rose in the air, announcing our presence to the world. Not that my brothers would need that—the Wrangler hadn't exactly been built for stealth, and every shifter in the vicinity would be able to hear the engine from miles away.

“How do you feel?” I asked Serene, sneaking a quick glance at her. She was in the passenger seat, hands tight around the seatbelt, and her expression was a blend of anxiety and determination. I couldn't even imagine what was going through her head—coming here wasn't exactly a walk in the park, especially since she'd only learned about who I truly was a couple of days ago.

She's ready, my wolf chimed in, *she's our mate.*

That was the truth, but it didn't make it any easier.

The supernatural world was supposed to be kept in the shadows, and to reveal ourselves to a human was one of the most serious transgressions anyone could commit. More often than not, the punishment was death...and that was precisely why we'd come here.

I didn't want Serene to live as a fugitive, nor did I want for my child to grow as a pariah, shunned by humans and shifters alike. Even if this was a gamble, I needed to believe that my brothers—and Ben—would welcome Serene into the pack. She would never be a shifter, but she'd be safe if the others accepted her.

“I'm nervous,” she admitted, offering me a little smile. Her golden hair

had been tied into a ponytail, and the end of it swung around her neck as the Wrangler hit a hole. Instead of a dress, she'd chosen a simple gray blouse and jeans, opting to go for practicality instead of beauty. That was the right choice—she wasn't coming here as a bunny someone had picked up at the club—but as my mate; even so, she'd never seemed more beautiful to me.

"I'm nervous too," I admitted, eyeing the rearview mirror so that I was sure no one was following us. It was a life-saving habit to have, but useless in the pack lands—by now, I was certain everyone knew I was coming in with a visitor. My stomach did a flip as I thought of everything that could go wrong, and my fingers tightened around the steering wheel. "It'll be okay. My brothers will understand."

And if not, I thought, I'll make them understand.

I'd never coveted the position of Alpha, but if that's what it took to protect Serene, I would have to go for it. If I wrestled the position away from Ben, the others would have no choice but to submit and accept her. I hoped it wouldn't come to that—Ben was the father I'd never had, and it would break me to kill him—but I'd stop at nothing to make sure Serene was safe.

"It's just down there." The road snaked alongside the mountain, and I pointed to our right, where a dozen cabins dotted the incline. A plume of smoke rose from the main cabin's chimney, and that was a clear sign that there was a gathering there. One of the pack land sentries must've spotted the Wrangler and, once word got around that I was the one driving it, I assumed my brothers ran here en masse. I hoped that was because they missed me, and not because they wanted my pelt.

I drove straight into the clearing where the main cabin was, and the Wrangler's wheels locked as I hit the brakes. We stopped no more than a stone's throw away from the cabin, and I eyed its porch expectantly. Once the door swung open to reveal a shotgun-wielding Hal, I readied myself for a confrontation. Mike and Sal, two of the wolves Ben liked using as muscle, followed after him, their faces betraying no emotion.

Not a good omen, but the worst was yet to come.

"Shit," I muttered, suddenly realizing why it was just three of them up in the cabin. Wolves emerged from the woods all around us, calmly padding toward the Wrangler. No one seemed hostile, at least not yet, but I knew things could change in a split second. If Ben ordered the pack to tear me apart, they wouldn't hesitate to obey. They wouldn't like it—I was still their brother—but they'd do it all the same.

“Stay here and lock the doors,” I told Serene, glad I’d brought her car and not the Harley. “If things go south, drive away from here as fast as you can.”

It wouldn’t really help—there was no escaping the pack lands, especially if you were a regular human—but it was enough to keep hopelessness at bay. Besides, I’d never let things get that out of hand. This was a calculated risk.

I hopped out of the Wrangler and looked at Hal.

“Hey, Hal,” I said. “It’s been a while, huh?”

Hal leaned the sawed-off barrel of his shotgun against one shoulder and offered me a toothy grin. “A while? I haven’t seen your ass in more than a month. Tevin Novak, chasing after tail like a goddamn pup. I tell you, that’s not something I ever expected to see.”

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Ben shoved Hal aside and stepped out of the cabin, his face twisted by rage. He looked at his right-hand man, his eyes shooting daggers at the barrel-chested shifter. “Do you think this is funny, Hal? Does it amuse you? Wipe that damn smile off your face, you fucking idiot.”

Even from a distance, I could tell this wasn’t a calculated display of anger—Ben was on the verge of losing his shift. His hands were balled into fists, and he seemed more than ready to punch the living shit out of Hal. When he turned his attention to me, I quickly realized that being punched in the face was the least of my concerns.

There was murder in Ben’s eyes.

With gritted teeth and rounded shoulders, he made his way toward me. Mike and Sal just looked on, clearly having no intention of stepping between the Alpha and his prey. I liked these two—it wasn’t rare for them to accompany me during a job—but I knew they would never side with me in a confrontation. Ben was the Alpha, and everyone here was loyal to him.

“Ben, let me explain what—”

“Explain?” he bellowed, the strength emanating from his body almost palpable. He was struggling to control the shift, his eyes already elongating into those of a predator. My wolf snarled inside me, sensing the danger, but he didn’t try to impose his will on me.

“Ben—”

“Shut your fucking mouth.”

I saw the haymaker coming, but I didn’t try to move out of its way. Ben’s knuckles crashed against the side of my face, and I stumbled away from him. Somehow, I managed to regain my balance, and straightened my back to

show Ben I wouldn't back down. He would have to let me explain.

"I took you in," he growled, his voice fluctuating as he tried to control his shift. "You were nothing but a lost kid, Tevin, and you wouldn't have lived past eighteen without us. We gave you everything, and *this* is how you repay us?" He pointed a finger at Serene, and that's when my wolf decided he didn't care about loyalty. No one talked about Serene like that.

I stepped forward, fingernails digging into the palms of my hands.

"What's your plan?" Ben scoffed. "Are you going to challenge me? Do you want to lead the pack, is that it?"

"The pack is yours," I said, "and I'm not a leader. All I want is for you to give Serene a chance. Whether you see it or not, she's my mate, and she deserves—"

"Are you so naive that you can't see it? Shifters don't have human mates," Ben snapped at me. "Do you have any idea about what it takes to keep our existence a secret? And I'm not talking about just our pack, Tevin. We've managed to keep to the shadows because everyone follows the same damn rule: no humans get to be a part of this. If word gets out, how long do you think your little friend is gonna last? The other Alphas are gonna have a field day with it. They're gonna drum up support, use this little stunt as an excuse, and they're gonna carve a large chunk of our hard-earned territory. Hell, they might even slaughter us all, just for kicks."

"That doesn't have to happen." It was hard, almost impossibly so, but I did my best to rein my worst instincts in. Now more than ever, I needed to be cool and collected. "We can take Serene in. She can be a part of the pack."

"A human as part of a pack?" He pushed the words out past gritted teeth, sounding more wolf than human. "Do you know why I told you she was going to Philadelphia? Because I was afraid you were going to lose your shit if she did. But now I see that I was wrong...you've already lost your mind. What you're asking me is not possible, Tevin, and you know that just as well as I do."

"But it *is* possible," I insisted. "Serene is my mate."

"And why exactly should I believe it? You've lost touch with reality, Tevin."

"Maybe you should believe it because it's the truth." Serene's voice rang loud and clear, and when I looked back to the car, she was already out and making her way toward me. Without a hint of fear, she stood beside me and eyed the Alpha. Not something anyone should do, especially when

surrounded by an army of loyal shifters, but Serene was completely unafraid. Or maybe this was just too much for her—maybe she'd finally snapped.

"And what's this?" Ben asked, his anger replaced with surprise. "Are you gonna let her do the talking now? I should have you *both* killed."

"You're welcome to try," I snapped back at him, but Ben was no longer listening to me. His expression had softened, and his clenched jaw had finally relaxed. His eyes were set on Serene, and the more he looked at her, the more he seemed confused.

"That's not possible," he muttered to himself. Almost awkwardly, he walked toward her. I was about to step in front of him, ready to cut him in half, but Serene met him halfway. Then, before anyone could make a move, Ben closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. "Fuck me...the woman's pregnant."

"You're damn right she is," I said. "And I'll do anything to protect her and the child." A slight pause and I dropped my voice. I needed Ben to get the memo. "I'll do *anything*."

Ben looked at me, eyebrow cocked, and sighed. "You really don't listen, do you? I tried teaching you about the pack, but you always preferred going on those solo hunts of yours. You remain as dumb as the day I grabbed you outside that service station."

"And what the hell's that supposed to mean?" I asked him, having no idea what he was talking about.

"Shifters and humans can fall in love, but it's rare for a shifter to get a woman pregnant," he said. "That only happens when the two are mates and, even then, it's not a given. She's carrying a member of our pack in her womb. And *that* makes her a part of the pack."

Ben's voice carried through the clearing, and the wolves gathered around us sat on their haunches. They turned their faces up to the darkening skies and howled, their wild chorus loud enough to startle Serene. On the porch, Hal gave me a thumbs-up, cocked his shotgun, and promptly emptied it into the air.

"This...this is good, right?" Serene asked me, nervously licking her lips.

"Good?" I laughed. "This is everything I was hoping for."

"And what happens now?"

"Now," Ben roared, draping his arms over my shoulders and Serene's, "we drink!"



“I THOUGHT HE WAS A MANIAC.” Serene laid her hand on top of mine and smiled, her eyes following Ben as he belted out a dirty song. “But he’s actually a sweetheart. I didn’t think he’d actually apologize.”

“But he did,” I said, watching as our pack’s distinguished Alpha jumped on top of his desk, drunk as a sailor on leave, and started waving his hands around, urging the others to join him in song. Hal was the first, but the others were close behind. The mood was electric but, unfortunately, none of my brothers knew how to carry a tune. “I think they might need some singing lessons.”

“What I think they’re gonna need is an industrial quantity of Advil,” Serene said, waving at the empty bottles that littered every piece of furniture on the cabin. Even the floor was covered with them. “They’re gonna have one hell of a hangover tomorrow.”

I laughed at Serene’s innocence. She still had a lot to learn about shifters—we could process alcohol better than most humans, and it took a lot for us to get a hangover. Despite what Ben believed, I had paid attention to his teachings...but only when the subject matter interested me.

I drained the rest of my whiskey and slammed the glass down onto the table. This celebration was more than I could’ve asked for, but I had little interest in getting roaring drunk. Now that Serene had been inducted into the pack, I wanted to show her to my cabin and give her a proper welcome.

She must’ve read my mind, because she squeezed my hand and gave me a little wink. “They’re so drunk I don’t think they’re gonna miss us,” she said, her voice as honeyed as it was inviting. “What do you say you show me your place?”

“Consider it done.”

Hand in hand, we slipped out from the main cabin and into the night. Outside, the skies were painted with a million dancing stars, but the afternoon’s warmth still lingered. We went around the Wrangler and the dozen Harleys parked around it—as soon as word got around, my remaining brothers rushed here from the MC—and I led Serene up the slope and toward my cabin.

The porch was covered in leaves, the eaves were going to need a thorough clean-up, and some wild thorn bushes had grown close to the house during my absence. Nothing a morning’s work wouldn’t fix. As soon as I had

the time, I was going to turn this cabin into a proper home.

“It’s not exactly a manor but—”

“I’ve had enough of manors,” Serene laughed. “This is cozier. I like it.”

I grabbed the key from under a moss-covered rock and opened the door. My eyes were immediately drawn to the dust that had settled on the furniture; apparently, my neat-freak instincts were to be back to normal.

Serene couldn’t care less about any of it. In fact, she didn’t even let me get the lights.

“You really couldn’t wait, huh?” I whispered, gently biting on her bottom lip.

“Now that I have you, I want to make good use of you.”

“I live to please.” I spun her around and pinned her against the wall. Desperate for her—I always was—I pressed my body against hers and leaned in. She met me halfway, her lips meeting mine, and we stumbled through the house in a blind daze, making out like teenagers.

Our clothes were thrown left and right and abandoned on the floor. Naked and desperate, we found our resting spot on the wooden kitchen table I’d built years ago. I sat Serene on the edge of it and, before I let our bodies do the talking, I brushed the hair away from her face and kissed her nose.

“I didn’t think it was possible to love anyone as much as I love you,” I admitted. Even after living with these feelings for weeks, sometimes I still struggled to accept they were real. Against all odds, they were as powerful as my wolf was.

“But it is possible,” Serene whispered, “and we’re proof of that.”

She threw one arm around my neck and reeled me in, no longer in the mood for words. Our bodies met as we kissed, and I found my way into her wetness. We held our breaths as I entered her, the connection we shared turning physical, and it was like coming home.

Everything about Serene was perfect, including the way our bodies melded together, as if they were made only for each other. I slid inside her inch by inch, taking my time, enjoying the sheer pleasure of knowing she was mine. Her warm inner pussy walls squeezed and massaged my cock, and it took superhuman strength not to just bury myself to the hilt.

Our eyes locked, Serene moaned when I finally bottomed out, filling her completely, and I could barely breathe as I took in her beauty. My chest ached at her perfection while also soaring to the heights, knowing this precious woman was mine, forever and always.

We whispered sweet nothings, our bodies moving in a dance as old as time and drowning in an ocean of perfection. It wasn't just about the sex either; it was something that cut deeper than that. As impossible as everything had seemed weeks ago, things had worked out for us. Serene was pregnant, I had secured her safety, and the pack had welcomed her. Most important of all, we were together.

What else did I need?

You know what you need, my wolf said, his inner voice carrying the same energy as a shot of adrenaline. He didn't even have to mention it—I could feel that urgent need inside me welling up, carrying with it the threat of losing all control. I still hadn't claimed Serene.

"Is everything okay?" Serene asked, my change of rhythm betraying my mood. With a smile, she brushed her fingers against my cheek. Her legs remained laced around my waist, and she didn't ease the pressure as she looked up into my eyes.

"Everything's perfect," I whispered, taking in every detail of her beauty. Did I really need to claim her? I could keep my instincts on a tight leash, couldn't I? But then I looked into her face—her hair was disheveled, locks of it cutting across her face, but there was a glow to her that made my heart tighten—and knew that I was walking on a tightrope.

"There's something you're not telling me," she said.

"Everything's fine," I replied. "It's just..."

"No lies, remember?"

No lies, my wolf echoed.

"We're mates, and when I'm with you, I feel this urge to..." It was hard to explain, but I still had to try. Serene deserved it. "When a shifter finds his mate, he doesn't just feel possessive. He needs to *claim* his mate. It's a merging of essences, and it solidifies the bond between mates. It makes it permanent. It's also dangerous, especially when you can't control your wolf that well, but you don't need to worry. We don't have to—"

Serene laid her index finger against my lips.

"But we do have to," she breathed out. "We're together now, and I want it to be permanent. I want this forever." I opened my mouth to protest, but Serene wasn't having it. "I'm your mate, right? So, *claim me*."

Her words destroyed what little control I had over my instincts. I could keep it together if this struggle remained inside me, but with Serene spurring me on, I couldn't help it—nor could my wolf. Our essence fused, our

instincts as aligned as they'd ever been, and both past and future stopped mattering.

I wanted to ask Serene if she was sure, if she really wanted to do it, but it was too late. My heart was a war drum, my blood was boiling, and every fiber of my being burned for Serene. This was life or death.

Half-crazy with lust, I hooked my hands on the back of her knees and reeled her in. She gasped as I thrust again, burying my cock deep inside her, and her inner walls tightened around me. My right hand shot to her neck, and I pushed her down onto the table, my hips moving faster and faster. Part of me was afraid I'd hurt her, but whatever dark instincts had taken over me, Serene's safety was never a concern—my fingers were tight around her throat, but I was in control.

I fucked her with savage intensity, going as fast and hard as my body allowed me to. When that wasn't enough, I drew on my wolf's strength, using his energy to fuel me. Beads of sweat dripped down my forehead, a deep-seated exhaustion took over my body, but I still kept going.

More! That was the only thought I could process. *MORE!*

It happened fast.

Fire shot up my spine, electricity crackled under my skin, and I felt the searing pain of a shift—except I didn't shift. The pain settled on my jaw, breaking through my gums and into my teeth, and I felt my canines elongate into two short daggers.

I drove into Serene and bit her at the same time.

My teeth sank into the tender flesh of her neck, and I finally realized what it meant to claim one's mate. I was still in my body but, at the same time, I could feel myself in hers. We loved each other, that bond was real enough, but I could feel a new bond being forged inside our very souls. Heavy as a chain, hard as a diamond, the bond snapped into place.

It wasn't just *me* inside *her*.

I could also feel her inside me too, her warmth and innocence filtering past the shadows that inhabited my soul. Down in the depths, in a place even I struggled to reach, Serene nestled up inside me. For the first time in my life, my wolf was appeased.

And for the first time in my life...

I was happy.

TWENTY

SERENE

Monday morning rolled around, and since I still had a few more days left of the personal leave I'd requested before going to Pennsylvania, I thought it would be nice to spend the morning curled up in Tevin's bed.

It had been an exhausting week, and pregnancy fatigue was real, as I was learning the hard way. Not only was my body physically tired, but my heightened emotions were taking a toll.

Not that I would change anything that had happened—well, maybe the whole evil stepmother trying to kill me bit—because there was nowhere I'd rather be right now than wrapped in Tevin's arms, the scent of his body all over me, mingling with my own.

The weekend had been perfect, but to be honest, I was still trying to process everything that had happened. From finding out I was pregnant, to discovering Tevin was a shifter—and an entire community of them lived here on these lands—it seemed not just a little unreal. Then there was the claiming bite and the mating bond.

I lifted my arm and rubbed my neck, remembering vividly just how that had felt. Not so much physically, as the bite had already healed, but the emotional bond that had snapped into place when Tevin had claimed me as his mate. When he first told me, it seemed crazy. But after having experienced it myself, I was a believer.

It was as if Tevin had become a part of my very soul. Our thoughts and feelings, while still our own, were more evident to the other. We were tuned in to each other in a way that surpassed any level of intimacy I'd ever known.

I was his. And he was mine. And there was nothing I wanted more.

My movements must have woken him, because Tevin stirred, his arm wrapping more tightly around my waist from behind, his hand splaying over my lower abdomen, an instinctive and heart-melting gesture.

“Morning,” he murmured against the back of my neck before pressing his lips there. A shiver raced through me. “How did you sleep?”

“Honestly?” I asked, rolling over in his arms to face him. I reached up and traced his chiseled jawline. “I don’t think I’ve ever slept better since coming here with you.”

The huge smile that spread across his face told me he was genuinely thrilled by my words. I wasn’t just saying it, though. I’d never felt safer than I did with this man. I knew him in a way most people would never experience with another person, thanks to our bond. I trusted him with my heart, my life, and with the precious life growing inside me.

“That’s what I like to hear.” Then, with a feral growl and an impossibly fast movement, he had me on my back, his hips nestled between my thighs and his magnificent body hovering over as he grinned wickedly.

Anything else I might have said was lost as a wave of lust rocked through me. I just couldn’t get enough of this man. Thankfully, he felt the same way, and nearly an hour later we were still in bed, a bit sweatier than before, but I could get down with starting my days like this.

“So,” he asked, tracing light circles over my stomach with the tips of his fingers, “what do you want to do today?”

“Actually,” I began, an idea I’d had yesterday taking clearer shape in my mind, “I think it’s time I introduced you to my parents.”

“Your...parents,” he practically croaked, his throat bobbing as he swallowed, and I could have sworn his face looked a little pale.

I arched a brow, a teasing grin tilting my lips. “Surely the big bad wolf isn’t afraid of a couple of middle-aged humans.”

“I’ll show you big bad wolf,” he said, his voice raspy as he wiggled his eyebrows.

I laughed and shook my head. “You already have.” I reached up and cupped his cheeks, growing serious now. “I mean it, Tevin. My parents don’t know anything about you, yet here we are—mated, with a baby on the way.”

My pulse ratcheted up a bit, something Tevin didn’t miss. Instantly, his gaze turned concerned. “Of course, I’ll meet them, if that’s what you want.” He frowned. “Are you...nervous?”

“Not about you,” I reassured him instantly. “I’ll proclaim my feelings for

you from the rooftops.”

That earned me a small smile, but he wasn't letting up. “What are you nervous about then?”

I pressed my lips together then blew out a heavy breath. “I guess I'm not nervous as much as I'm just uncertain about what they'll think when I tell them I'm pregnant. They don't even know I've been dating you.”

Tevin cocked his head, his gaze trained on mine. “From everything you've said about your parents, it sounds like they love you more than anything. I don't think hearing that you're going to make them grandparents is going to do anything to make them think less of you, if that's what you're worried about.”

“I know.” And I did. He was right. “It's just that they're pretty traditional, you know? Growing up, it was first comes love, then comes *marriage*, then comes the baby carriage.”

Tevin smirked, clearly amused at my little rhyme.

“What? I'm an elementary teacher, what do you expect?”

“I expect that I need to get prepared to meet your parents.” Tevin pressed a soft kiss to my lips. “When do you want to go?”

“The sooner the better, probably.” It was like pulling off a Band-Aid. Worrying about it was worse than just doing what needed to be done.

“We'll go today, then,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Today?” I squeaked.

“Yeah. Less time to think about it.” He reached behind me and swatted my bare butt. “Now, get your lazy ass out of bed.”

Before I could say anything else, he'd jumped from the bed, swept me up into his arms, and carried me straight to the shower, where we might have taken a bit longer than planned to get our day started.



SERENE'S POV

“Serene!”

The moment Tevin pulled the Wrangler to a stop in front of my parents' house, they bounded down the porch steps and toward us. It had actually been Tevin's idea to drive it instead of his motorcycle—he said he didn't want to make my parents think he was dangerous, to which I just laughed.

I'd thought he was dangerous—and he was—but I knew now that there was nowhere safer than being by his side. He would never put me or the baby in danger.

Mom widened her brown eyes as Tevin climbed from the Wrangler and came around to my side to help me out. No doubt, she was stunned by how massive the man was. And covered with tattoos, he definitely looked the bad boy part. I'd called her earlier, telling her that I'd met someone—someone who I'd fallen for hard and fast, and that I wanted her and Dad to meet him.

But her excitement at me finally bringing a man home seemed to override her reaction to Tevin's appearance.

"Sweetheart, so good to see you." She rushed forward to meet us, wrapping her arms around me in a giant hug. A second later, Dad was right there to get his own hug.

"Serene," he murmured, pulling back and giving me a kiss on the cheek before taking me in. He smiled, his eyes softening. "You look radiant. I'm guessing that has something to do with this guy, huh?"

He nodded at Tevin, who was right by my side and immediately offered a hand. "Mr. Duran, I'm Tevin Novak. It's a pleasure to meet you."

And there it was again, the juxtaposition of this man on full display. He looked menacing, and definitely could be, but he was also a perfect gentleman. Then he turned to my mom and offered her a kind smile. "Mrs. Duran, you as well."

"Mom, Dad. This is Tevin, the man I told you about." I smiled up at him, and when he met my gaze, his entire expression softened as he looked at me as if I were the most precious thing in the world. When I glanced back at my parents, they were looking between us, wide-eyed, and my mom gave me a knowing smile.

"Lovely to meet you, Tevin," Mom said. "Please, come inside. I hope you like Italian. I've made a lasagna for dinner."

"Love it," Tevin replied, wrapping his arm around my waist as my parents led us to the house.

As the four of us walked toward the home I'd grown up in, my eyes welled with happy tears. I was so lucky to have such wonderful parents. Even though I was a bit unsure about the conversation we'd have tonight, I knew they loved me unconditionally. That wasn't about to change. And even finding out they were my adoptive parents had ceased to matter. They were the people who'd raised me, who loved me, and I was sure I couldn't ask for

better parents.

The smell of my favorite lasagna greeted us as we walked through the door, and Tevin sniffed the air before leaning down to whisper, “Get your mom’s recipe. This smells delicious.”

“Thank you,” Mom said. Apparently, she had super-hearing, but she looked thoroughly pleased. “Come on into the kitchen and I’ll get you both a glass of wine.”

Shit. I didn’t think that far ahead. We always had wine with lasagna. Tevin looked at me, and I just shrugged. I’d just have to wing it.

“So, Tevin, what do you do for a living?”

Double shit. We hadn’t discussed any of this before coming over, and Dad was throwing us right into the deep end.

Tevin was quicker on the draw than I was. “I have a body shop a couple hours outside of Brightenville.”

“Ah,” my dad said, lighting up. “You ever get any classic cars in there?”

Immediately, the two of them started talking about old cars. Restoring them was an interest of Dad’s. Looked like I was worried for no reason, as they seemed to be hitting it off.

Mom linked her arm with mine and leaned in. “He’s handsome, Serene.”

I bit my lip but couldn’t hide my adoring smile. “I think so too.”

Mom gave me a knowing look. “Seems like you’re smitten, sweetheart.”

That didn’t even begin to cover it, but I just nodded and helped her with getting some wine glasses and a bottle of red.

Dinner was ready to serve, so the four of us made ourselves comfortable around the dinner table. Not a moment went by when there wasn’t something to talk about. Tevin really held his own when my dad’s questioning started to feel—at least to me—like the third degree. But wasn’t that what fathers were supposed to do?

I watched Tevin interact with my parents as we ate, and for the first time it really registered how he wasn’t quite comfortable in the presence of humans. I’d never really noticed it before. Then again, why would I have? We hadn’t exactly spent a lot of time around other people together. But now that his wolf had claimed me, I noticed the tell-tale signs—his preternatural senses, the barely caged power that was just beneath the surface. My parents were none the wiser, though, and dinner seemed to go off without a hitch.

Until we reached the end of the meal and my mom noticed my untouched glass of wine. She frowned. “Are you feeling okay, Serene? It’s not like you

not to enjoy your favorite red with dinner.”

If I'd been waiting for an opening, a better one couldn't have presented itself. I looked at Tevin, who smiled supportively, then drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Actually...”

“Oh my God!” Mom squealed, catching on right away. She looked between the two of us, and suddenly her eyes filled with tears. “You're pregnant!”

We all sat in stunned silence for a moment, Dad in particular. Tevin shifted in his chair, and I could sense the nerves now skittering through him.

“Well, ah, actually, yeah. I am.”

At my admission, the tears welling in Mom's eyes overflowed. “I'm so sorry. I can't believe I'm crying.” She fanned her hand in front of her face. “I'm just a bit overwhelmed—but happy!” she added quickly when she looked at me. She reached across the table and placed a hand over mine. “So very happy.”

I smiled then, relief washing over me, as well as a pure simple joy that my parents were taking this so well. Meeting the man I was going to spend the rest of my life with was one thing, but I'd had no idea what they'd say to the news about my pregnancy.

“Congratulations are in order!” My dad beamed, surprising me a little with his enthusiasm, then he raced from the room.

I glanced at Tevin and shrugged.

Dad was right back in the room a few seconds later, and I couldn't have been more surprised when he pulled a tiny velvet box from his pocket and pressed it into Tevin's hand.

“I know this may be jumping the gun a little,” he said. “But this was my mother's ring, and I've saved it all these years hoping one day I could give it to Serene's future husband.”

I'd had no idea he had this. And the fact he was giving it to Tevin...well, that had to mean one thing if nothing else—he approved of him and accepted him as the father of my baby.

“I'm sorry if I'm getting ahead of myself,” he continued. “Or ahead of plans you two have talked about. But I just know this man cares for you, Serene. I can see it in the way he looks at you. And I want Tevin to have the ring—just in case—if that's okay with you.”

Tears welled and spilled down my cheeks. I was so overwhelmed with how accepting they were of Tevin and the baby that I just couldn't help it.

Mom stood from her seat and rounded the table to give me a hug. “You’re going to be a wonderful mother, Serene. I just know it.”

And just like that, a bright future unfolded before me. I could already see it in my mind’s eye. So much had happened in such a short time that I was still processing it all. But there was one thing I didn’t have to think about at all—the fact that I loved Tevin and I couldn’t wait for us to start our life together, however quickly it had all happened. It just felt right. Perfect, really. Like fate had stepped in and given me everything I’d ever wanted, even though I hadn’t quite known it myself at first.

A little over an hour later, after overindulging in Mom’s tiramisu and plenty more ‘getting to know you’ conversation, I started to feel a bit tired, so Tevin and I headed out. It was a couple hours’ drive back to the pack lands, and I didn’t have any more clothes at Tevin’s, so I asked him to take us to my house for the night.

We got home, went inside, and then settled down together on the couch. Tevin grabbed my feet and pulled them into his lap, then began gently massaging them.

I groaned and rested my head on the couch. “That feels amazing. I could get used to this.”

“You better,” he murmured. “Because I plan on treating you like a princess for the rest of your life, starting this very moment.”

I looked up at him as he reached into his pocket and set the ring box on the coffee table. I bit my lip, not sure what he thought about my dad being so eager.

“Tevin...I don’t know what to say. I don’t want you to feel like you have to—”

“Serene,” he said softly. “I plan on spending every day for the rest of my life by your side. Nothing would make me happier. You know this. Marriage isn’t something we do in the shifter community—the mating bond is so much more. But I would be more than happy to do it if it’s something you want.”

I smiled, my heart feeling so full I thought it might burst. “I understand that. And I get what you mean. With the bond, I already feel as if we belong to each other.”

“Because we do,” he whispered, leaning in to kiss my forehead. “Always and forever.”

Always and forever sounded just about perfect to me. But there were other things we needed to figure out as well. The weekend on the pack lands

had almost been like an escape from reality where Tevin and I could fully be ourselves and just be together. Reality had a way of creeping in, though.

“Where are we going to live?” I wondered aloud. “I love my little house here on the beach.”

“You don’t have to get rid of it.” Tevin resumed massaging my feet. “But I do need to stay close to the pack. As my brothers, they’re part of me, just as you’re part of me as my mate. Plus, there’s the very real possibility that this baby will be a shifter, so he or she will need to be raised with other wolves. Wolf shifters are inherently pack animals—we need the pack to survive and thrive. Plus, raising a shifter child in the human world comes with all kinds of risks.”

I nodded. That made sense. “So we’ll live on the pack lands, and keep the house for when we want to get away for a bit. But what about my job? My friends and family? My life here in Brightenville?”

As much as I wanted to start my life with Tevin, the idea of leaving it all behind made me sad.

Tevin reached for me, pulling me onto his lap, and I turned to straddle him, staring down into his eyes as he leaned back on the couch. “I know how important all of that is to you. And I’m not asking you to leave it all behind. Sure, teaching at the school won’t be very feasible if we’re living hours away. But there is a pack school on the lands. And we can come visit your friends and family anytime you want. If we keep your house, we can even make weekend trips out of it.”

I smiled. “That sounds nice.”

And it truly did. It wasn’t like he was asking me to go live on the other side of the world. And the pack school—that sounded promising. I’d miss the kids in my class here in Brightenville, but they’d be moving up to Melanie’s class before long anyway. And with the inheritance Tevin had helped me secure, I would be leaving them with anything and everything they needed in the form of the largest donation Brightenville Elementary had ever seen.

“Whatever you need to be happy, I want to give you, Serene.”

“Being with you is what makes me happy,” I replied, meaning it with my entire being. As long as I had Tevin, the rest would fall into place. As long as we were together, everything was perfect.

TWENTY-ONE

SERENE

Seven months later

Iwalked out of the small school building and turned the corner, then ran smack into a brick wall—or rather, what felt like one.

“Whoa, easy there,” Tevin said, looping his arms around my waist as I stumbled back, and pulled me right back against his chest before capturing my lips with his.

For a moment, I forgot all about where we were or who was around and lost myself in the feel of mate. Then the final school bell chimed, and I came back to myself and reluctantly pulled back from my mate’s embrace.

“Tevin, what are you doing here?” I asked, looking behind me as the shifter children began pouring from the school, eager to get outside after a long day in the classroom.

“What do you mean? I always pick you up after work.”

He did, every day, and it was something that still warmed my heart. This hard, tough beast of a man was still proving himself to be a total softie—at least when it came to me and the baby. I’d never seen someone be as overprotective as Tevin was when it came to us, but the safety and security it brought was one of the many reasons I loved him.

“Yes,” I said slowly, “but you usually wait in the car. School barely let out.”

Tevin shrugged, glancing away and not meeting my eyes, but before I could ask him about it—was he taking his protectiveness to the next level now and wanting to meet me at the door?—little five-year-old Carson from my new class came running up to me.

“Have a good weekend, Ms. Duran,” he said. “I’ll spend lots of time reading this weekend, promise.”

“Thank you, Carson. I hope you have a great weekend too.”

And then he was off, darting through the trees with his friends. I watched as more of the children raced from the school building, eager to play and have fun. It had been an adjustment at first, being the only human living on pack lands, but over the past few months I’d really started to feel at home here.

Sure, I missed my old students, but I was loving all the new ones. The pack school was much smaller than what I was used to—only one classroom per level, and small ones at that—but I’d realized the benefits of that, too. I could really get to know my students on a deeper level.

The kids had been just as welcoming as the rest of the pack. When Tevin had first brought me to live here on the pack lands, I hadn’t known what to expect. But as Tevin’s mate, everyone treated me with the utmost respect and kindness. The women had been welcoming, inviting me to social events and helping me acclimate to life out here. It was pretty crazy to see men and women and children mingling among giant wolf shifters, but that was my life now. Learning about shifter culture was fascinating, and I couldn’t wait to see what life would be like with my baby growing up in the community.

My hand went to my belly, almost uncomfortably round, and I smiled. I was one of them. While I wasn’t a shifter, my baby almost certainly was. I felt like part of the pack now, and it was a good feeling.

I turned back to Tevin, who grabbed my hand and started pulling me along toward the Wrangler. “Why are you in such a hurry?” I asked, scrambling to keep up.

He glanced over his shoulder at me and squeezed my hand. “Just need to get to the lake,” he muttered.

I nodded, understanding his urgency. This had become our ritual every day after school. Tevin’s wolf practically demanded he be close to the baby in wolf form, even while he or she was still inside my belly. Some days didn’t seem quite so urgent, but other days, I could sense his wolf just under the surface, demanding to be set free.

Today must have been one of the harder days. Tevin had confided in me about his struggle for dominance with his wolf, how it was such a careful balance and how he couldn't be tamed. Since he'd claimed me, though, his wolf had settled somewhat, pacified and relaxed in the knowledge that Tevin and I were mated.

The drive to the lake was quick—it was just around a few hills on the pack lands—and Tevin asked me about my day as he drove. He didn't seem too out of sorts, but every once in a while I'd catch him with his hands clenched around the steering wheel, knuckles white with the force of his grip, and the muscle in his jaw ticked.

"Are you okay?" I asked gently.

He flashed me a grin and consciously loosened his grip on the wheel. "Fine." He shook his head. "Sorry, it's just been a long day without you."

I bit my lip, my heart melting a little more. The depths of this man's love for me had been proven time and time again over the past few months, and it was almost hard for me to remember a time when I hadn't felt so loved and cared for. With Tevin, I really did feel like a princess who'd found her prince—or in our case, Snow White who ran off to live out her happily ever after with the brawny huntsman.

I smiled at that though. I definitely preferred my protective huntsman to a pampered prince.

Tevin pulled the Wrangler to a stop, and I looked out the window, surprised to see we weren't by the lakeshore but on an outcropping that provided a spectacular panoramic view of the lake from above.

Before I could ask him why we were here, he'd jumped from the Wrangler and headed around back. I climbed out on my side, expecting to see him already shifted. He must have needed it badly.

But when I rounded the back side of the Wrangler, I saw Tevin still standing there in human form as he opened the hatch. When I got a good look inside, I gasped with delight.

"A picnic?"

Carefully arranged in the back were a picnic basket, several plush blankets and pillows, a bottle of sparkling cider and wine glasses, and a giant bouquet of flowers that he'd somehow managed to hide from me the whole ride here.

"What is this for?" I asked him, grinning.

Tevin leaned down and brushed his lips over mine. "Can't a guy just woo

the woman he loves without any other reason than the pure joy of doing it?”

My smile widened, and I reached up to wrap my arms around his neck, kissing him softly. “Do you want to shift and run, and I can set this stuff up?”

“Actually, I don’t think I need to shift right now. I just want to be with you.”

Not letting me help one bit, Tevin got the blankets and pillows and laid them out near the outcropping, creating a cozy little nest for us to sit and take in the stunning beauty of the lake and rolling hills that seemed to stretch as far as the eye could see. It was gorgeous, and I thought I’d probably be content to just sit here all night.

When we both settled down with the picnic basket and wineglasses, Tevin opened the bottle of cider and poured us each a glass.

“To my beautiful mate,” he said, his voice husky and his eyes shining with love. “Thank you for being mine.”

I leaned into him and grabbed his hand to place it on my belly. “You’ve given me everything I ever wanted.”

“I could say the same,” he murmured, his gaze intense as he stared into my eyes. “To our little family,” he said, then clinked his glass against mine.

“To our family,” I echoed, my heart so full I didn’t think anything could make this moment more perfect. Until I looked into my glass as I took a sip.

My eyes widened and I nearly choked on the cider as I spotted something gleaming in the bottom of the crystal flute. My grandmother’s ring. The one my father had given Tevin all those months ago.

When I jerked my gaze to Tevin, he was already on one knee, taking my free hand in his. I sucked in a sharp breath, my heart pounding.

“Serene, you are everything to me. You’re my night, my day, my entire world. The woman I want to wake up to every morning and go to bed with every night. Until you came into my life, I thought I was too wild, too feral to every deserve someone like you.” He paused and shook his head. “I still don’t know what I’ve done to be so lucky. But I want to declare to the world in every way that you’re mine, forever and always. My true love, my mate, the mother of my child, and my *wife*.”

Tears filled my eyes at his last words, and I found myself rising to my knees and throwing myself into his arms before he’d barely finished.

“Yes! Yes, yes, yes,” I cried, the tears of joy spilling over. It may have seemed insignificant when compared to something as strong as the mating bond, but something about this proposal captured my heart in a way that

nothing else had. Tevin wanted it all with me. And I wanted the same.

When our lips met, it was magic, just like every time before it. The bond surged between us, the union of our souls even more intense than the union of our bodies, and I could feel his presence wrapping around me in a way that only true mates understood.

He lowered me to the pillows, trailing kisses all along my jaw and neck. I ran my hands over his broad shoulders and down his back, then gripped the hem of his shirt and pulled it up and over his head. He tossed it aside, and I took a moment to enjoy the way his carved body rippled and bunched as he moved.

Then slowly, he began unfastening the buttons of my shirt, revealing my lacy bra and then my rounded belly. When he pushed the shirt aside, he paused for a second to caress my baby bump, then reverently bent and placed a kiss there before coming up to kiss my lips once more.

We took our time, exploring and enjoying each other's bodies for what felt like hours, as if we had all the time in the world.

And we did. We had our entire lives ahead of us, a future with our baby. A little family that was only just beginning.

As the sun began to dip below the horizon, our kisses became more urgent, more frenzied, and we'd long since removed the obstacle of clothing.

I gasped when Tevin's lips wrapped around my sensitive nipple. It seemed every sensation was heightened, and the slightest scrape of his teeth and flick of his tongue sent heat coursing through my body, leaving a trail of tingling fire in its wake.

I reached for him, wrapping my fingers around his thick length and tugging gently. He groaned, the vibrations of the sound on my breast making my body quake and ache with desire. He reached between my legs, finding me already soaked, and plunged two fingers deep inside of me.

"Tevin," I cried out, my body bowing into him as my pussy clamped down around his fingers.

"That's it," he murmured appreciatively, pulling back enough to watch my face as he worked his fingers in a steady rhythm, building to a crescendo that wouldn't take long to crash over me. His eyes were dark with lust as he said, "Come for me, baby."

And I did, as if on cue. Our gazes remained locked as my body convulsed, my pussy squeezing and massaging his fingers.

"Fuck," he muttered. "So damn sexy watching you come."

I squeezed his cock again, then shifted my hips. “I want you inside me,” I practically begged. Even though that orgasm had been incredible, there was nothing like having Tevin buried deep within my body. Our connection, already beyond anything I’d ever imagined possible thanks to the mating bond, was amplified when we were joined as one, and I craved that intimacy with Tevin like the very air I breathed.

“Who am I to deny my mate?” he asked with a grin. “Or should I call you my fiancée? My future wife?”

My heart swelled and the threat of more happy tears tightened my throat as Tevin settled over me, supporting his weight with his arms, and stared down at me as if I were the most precious thing in the world to him.

“I love you, Serene,” he said, his voice thick with emotion.

“And I love you.”

As Tevin sank inside me, pleasure suffused my entire body, the mating bond making me intensely aware of our heightened emotions as well as the ecstasy of our bodies being joined as one.

I’d never known a love like this, one that surpassed all human understanding, and I was more than grateful that fate had brought us together. It had been a journey to get here, but there was no place I’d rather be.



I TRIED NOT to laugh as Tevin paced around the cabin like a caged beast—which honestly wasn’t far from the truth. The man didn’t like feeling helpless, especially when it came to me and the baby. So when I’d told him I was in labor and he had absolutely no idea what to do, he’d gone into full-on alpha protector mode.

“Are you sure there’s nothing I can do?” he demanded of the midwife, a female shifter from the pack who handled all the births, as he came to stand by my side once more.

A lesser woman might have cowered in fear from the intensity he was putting off as he towered over her, but Anna merely glared at him as she squared her shoulders.

“You can chill out, Tevin. And if you don’t, you can leave.”

I could hear Tevin grind his teeth and looked up to see a vein in his forehead bulging. Reaching out, I placed a hand on his arm. Immediately, he

seemed to settle slightly, his wolf responding to my touch.

“It’s okay,” I told him for the hundredth time. “I’m feeling good.”

As I said it, though, another contraction gripped me, and I dug my fingers into his arm with a strangled cry.

Tevin dropped to his knees and clutched my hands, his eyes wide. I’d never seen such a combination of fear and protectiveness wrapped up in one look. As if he were ready to kill anyone and everyone that might harm me but knowing that this time there was nothing he could do.

“Just breathe,” Anna instructed. “It won’t be long now.”

We’d met quite a few times over the course of my pregnancy, and she’d prepared me for what was ahead. Since we weren’t in a hospital, we didn’t have all the fancy medical equipment. But we did have pain medication the shifter healers used for the community—and the stuff was potent. While the contractions didn’t feel good, I knew the pain was hugely diminished.

For the next half hour, I labored through intensifying contractions with Tevin right by my side, holding my hand and coaching me as he’d been instructed as well. He was doing surprisingly well restraining himself, but I could see it in his wild eyes that his wolf was raging internally at his mate being in pain. It was all worth it soon enough.

A sharp, high-pitched wail filled the room, and my breath caught in my throat. My baby.

Anna bundled up the tiny thing in blankets, then placed him in my arms. The entire time, Tevin watched, his eyes full of awe and reverence.

“Come meet your son,” I whispered, holding out a hand to him. He came even closer, bending down so that we were all three ensconced in our own little bubble, and stared at the miracle I held in my arms.

“My son,” he breathed, not taking his eyes from the little bundle. The baby’s eyes were closed, and he looked quite peaceful for someone who’d just made his entrance into the world. “What are we going to name him?”

“I was thinking Pax,” I said softly, my gaze drifting back and forth between the two boys who now made up my entire world.

“Pax? What does it mean?”

“Peace.” I smiled up at him. “I can’t think of a better description for what this child has brought into our lives.”

While it may not have started out that way, Tevin and I coming together, as mates and now as the parents of this baby, had brought his wolf an inner peace. He didn’t speak of it often, but I knew things had changed with the

mating bond. The wild, feral wolf would always be a part of who Tevin was, but it no longer controlled him.

“Pax,” he repeated softly, his gaze tender as he studied our son’s tiny features. When Tevin reached out one hesitant finger to brush along the baby’s cheek, I marveled at just how tiny he was compared to his massive father. “I think it’s perfect. He’s perfect.”

“He is indeed.” As Tevin wrapped his arm around me and we stared into the perfect face of our newborn son, I couldn’t help but think that everything was perfect. My life with the man I loved, our baby boy—there was so much ahead of us, and while I couldn’t wait to see where life would take us, I savored this moment, this brand new adventure we were embarking on together as a family.

And I had never been happier.

TWENTY-TWO

BEN

It had been a long day, and there was nothing I liked better than putting a pin in my work, shifting, and going for a long run while in wolf form to shake off the stress that came with running both a pack and an MC.

I leaned back in my chair, stretching my arms over my head as the anticipation of a run and maybe even a chance to *hunt* took over. Yep, time to call it a day.

Just as I started to put some work away, though, the door to my office flew open. Framed in the wooden archway was Charles, my beta.

His eyes were wild, his breath coming in ragged pants, and I could see by the way he was shaking that his wolf was riding him hard. If I didn't know him better, I'd say he was about to shift on the spot.

"What's going on?" I demanded, already on my feet. "Has there been an attack on the pack lands? Is someone hurt?"

But Charles didn't say anything. He just gestured for me to follow him, then turned and raced out of the cabin.

Whatever the problem was, it was clearly urgent. I was right on his heels as I raced from my office and out the front door. In no time at all, we were in front of Tevin's cabin, and I didn't stop to be polite.

I banged on the door once but was already pushing it open without waiting for a response. "Tevin?"

No answer.

"Serene?"

I glanced behind me at Charles, my stomach clenching when I saw the look on his face.

"Haven't seen them all day, Ben," he said quietly, and the look in his eyes

reflected the mild panic that was setting in.

If I hadn't been able to tell by looking at the undisturbed house—the floor was usually littered with baby stuff by the end of each day—that they hadn't been here all day, the faintness of their scents would have clued me in. The scents lingering were a good twelve hours old.

It didn't make sense. Tevin always kept me informed of when he and Serene were leaving the pack lands. It's just what we did as a pack. Knowing each other's general whereabouts kept everyone safer.

I clenched my jaw. I shouldn't be surprised. Humans were unpredictable. They got you to do crazy things sometimes. Had Serene gotten Tevin into trouble?

Instincts kicking into gear, I began searching the house, looking for any type of clue as to where they might be, but it was as if they'd been plucked right from the house in the middle of the night. If they'd left of their own accord, it had been without a trace.

“When's the last time you saw them?” I asked Charles sharply.

“Last night.” He stared at me for a moment. “It's like they just disappeared.”

I grabbed my phone without another word and called my security team. “Rob,” I said as soon as he picked up. “I need you to pull footage from the cameras outside Tevin's cabin. I want to know anyone and everyone who entered or exited within the last twenty-four hours. Then pull the guards together. I need to question everyone.”

“What's going on, boss?” Rob didn't normally ask questions, but I didn't normally grill him about the security tapes either. There was never a reason to. For so long, they'd simply been a precaution to guard us against the many enemies my pack and MC had collected over the years.

“Just get it done. I'll be at the club in half an hour.”

I glanced over the cabin again, wondering if I'd missed something. I supposed Tevin and Serene may have taken Pax somewhere for the day, especially since I didn't see any signs of a struggle or detect the scent of anyone who shouldn't have been here.

Charles and I could just be overreacting.

But I hadn't gotten to where I was by not listening to my gut. And my gut told me something wasn't right here.

Less than thirty minutes later, I charged into Rob's office.

He whirled around, eyes wide. “It's okay, boss. They're fine. At least, I

think so.”

I frowned, still feeling uneasy. “What does that mean?”

“See for yourself.” Rob gestured at the array of monitors.

I grimaced when my gaze landed on a video of Tevin and Serene packing up her Wrangler with a bunch of suitcases and baby gear. “What are they doing?”

Rob didn’t answer, but he didn’t have to. As they finished loading the vehicle, Tevin walked right up to the security camera and lifted both hands, flipping it off. Flipping *me* off. Then he flashed an arrogant grin and sauntered away.

A growl rumbled low in my chest. Serene was nice enough, but ever since she’d come into Tevin’s life, he’d been even harder to keep under control than usual—at least when it came to the pack. He was loyal when it came to our business and our safety, no questions there, but his true loyalty had shifted to Serene. *A human.*

Heat flooded my body, and I felt my wolf stalking around in my subconscious, raging at the thoughts and emotions that one word brought. There was a reason I’d kept the pack as isolated as possible from the human population. It was too dangerous, brought too much trouble.

Yet now I was going to have to go out into the midst of them to find Tevin.

Why did Tevin’s mate have to be a human? Serene was the only human female I’d spent any amount of time around in years, and that was more than enough.

Seventeen years, to be exact.

I growled again, ruthlessly shoving those thoughts away. I’d buried them for so long it was almost second nature.

But now...now another human female was sucking me back into that world, where I’d have to go out, hunt Tevin down, and drag him back here. I could’ve sent Charles, Rob, anyone really. The less interaction I had with humans, the better.

But I’d learned long ago that when it came to Tevin, I was the only one he’d listen to. I only hoped that still applied.

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POSSESSIVE ALPHA WOLF

DEMON HOLLOWERS MOTORCYCLE CLUB: BOOK 1

Skye Wilson & Lindsey Devin

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