



COMPLETE
SERIES

REJECTED MATE

ALEXA B. JAMES
& CALINDA B.

Rejected Mate
The Complete Trilogy

Alexa B. James
Calinda B.

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Banished from the Pack

Book One

Chapter One

Axel

I'm balls deep in Trixie, but I can't come. I've tried everything, from domination to trying different positions, but nothing's working. And if we can't come, we can't know for sure whether we're True Mates.

We've tried tilted missionary to get her G-Spot singing. I put her in my lap, but my legs went to sleep. We explored something she called "The Amazing Bee," where she was on top, squatting, which was supposed to allow me to explore different kinds of thrusts. But Trixie said my cock kept jamming against her cervix and it hurt, so she couldn't climax.

It might seem like no great loss. After all, we're friends, but we don't love each other. We're not even particularly attracted to each other. We're here because we got to talking about True Mates, and how you could know that person, the other half of your soul, your whole life and never know they were the mate to both your wolf and your human if you never fucked them.

I have my suspicions that you'd know it somehow, that you couldn't help but feel a soul-bond even without fucking, though you might not know what it was. But you don't get a True Mate mark until you come together—literally. We were both bored and horny, so we thought we'd try it out and make sure. If it turned out we were True Mates, we'd laugh about how we were right in front of each other all along.

I've heard fucking a True Mate is like nothing else in the world, and seeing as how today we can't even reach the finish line, I'm guessing that once again, I've struck out.

It's entirely possible that I don't have a True Mate. In fact, most wolves don't. Just because I'm the Alpha of the Jacksonville pack, that doesn't increase my chances. I inherited the position, but it wasn't magically

ordained. If the older wolf who challenged me soon after I took over had won, he'd be Alpha right now, not me. Fate doesn't choose a pack's Alpha.

Finally, Trixie shakes her head. "This isn't working, boss. I'm going to head home and finish up with my vibrator."

"You can use your fingers while you're here," I say, squeezing one of her little tits.

"Nah. I need a shower, anyway." She climbs off of me, and my cock lands with a sticky, wet splat against my belly. "Maybe next time."

"Sure," I say, peeling off the condom and tossing it. We both know there won't be a next time. Our connection doesn't work, just like none of the other empty lays have worked. Even when I come, it's a disappointment when I look down and find my arm unmarked, when I feel nothing but the usual release of emptying my seed. No True Mate by my side to lead the pack. No heir to take over when I'm gone.

After Trixie leaves, I pick up my phone from the chipped-wood bedstand and see I missed a text. I'm thankful for the distraction—until I read the message. Then, my blood turns white-hot.

It's a text message from one of my wolf scouts, a guy named Tiva.

The vampires struck again. Six injuries. No fatalities... Yet.

I let out a low growl and snatch up my clothes. I've had just about enough of these fucking vampires. Taking a few deep breaths calms my anger. I direct a glare out the front window to my pack's wet little corner of Jacksonville, Florida.

A half-inch of water covers the road, as usual. At least we didn't get another mega-flood last night. Like many of Jacksonville's homes, the dull beige-colored house across from mine has boards over the windows. It's uninhabitable. Since my small house stands ever so slightly uphill from the houses across the street, I was spared from the last great flood. The house has miraculously remained intact despite the endless storms that hit this region, though I've spent way too damn many hours replacing shingles, shutters, and carpet.

I may be our pack's Alpha, but the bayous, swamps, and rivers are the land's true kings.

I squeeze my phone nearly to the breaking point, hoping to channel some of the rage I feel. "Fucking vampires," I mutter through gritted teeth. Fuck them and their bloodlust and lack of respect for our boundaries. Six of my pack are injured. At least no one died—*this* time.

Anger burns in my chest as I remember what happened the last time the bloodthirsty motherfuckers struck. My Second—the wolf with whom I’d explored, romped, and played with as a pup and adventured with as an adult—was killed.

Life without Phoenix has been brutal. We were always together—fighting side by side, covering each other’s back, or whooping it up in the bars at night. Now he’s dead.

They’re going to fucking pay.

Fully intending to storm their lair and exact justice, I shove my phone in my pocket, don my clothes, and head out of the bedroom. On the way out, I shove my feet into my leather boots and kick open the screen door.

The door whacks against the side of the house with a satisfying crash, probably shaking loose a few ash-gray flakes of paint. One of these days, I’m going to have to re-paint this house. But that day is not today. Today, I’ve got bloodsucker ass to kick.

“Temper, temper,” comes a voice to my right.

I spin to find Ama, my new Second in Command, spread out on the porch swing, with one leg resting on the cushioned arm. Short and muscular, she reclines on the swing with her onyx hair draped over one shoulder and her left tit.

She lowers the supernatural gossip rag she’s been reading and rests it in her lap. “Where you off to in such a fury?”

“The vamps struck again,” I snap, fury pounding in my temples.

“Shit,” Ama says, removing her leg from its comfortable position and sitting up straight. “Who’s dead?” She finger-combs the long strands of hair still trailing along the front of her torso. It’s a gesture she resorts to when she’s agitated or nervous.

“No one, this time.”

“And you’re going to go kick some ass, am I right?” She stands and sashays toward me, placing her small hand on my bicep.

The too-familiar gesture makes me tense.

Ama regards me through thick black lashes. “Do you think it’s wise to go off all half-cocked like this? Shouldn’t you think things through?”

“You’re probably right, but fuck that. I’m sick of this shit.” I step back from her, and her hand drifts to her side.

She sighs the way she always does when I rebuff her affection. “You know,” she begins, licking her lips. “If you’d take a mate, you’d be the

strongest wolf in southeast territory. No one would fuck with our pack.”

“This again.” I tromp to the porch steps and lower myself onto them, with my booted feet two steps down.

The air outside is sultry and thick, like clotted cream, bringing instant sweat to my limbs and neck. Holding my head in my hands, I consider her words. Of course I need a mate. I’m already thirty, for fucks’ sake. I should have mated years ago when I became Alpha of the Jacksonville pack. I just haven’t found the right partner. Holding out hope for a True Mate is a romantic notion that I should have outgrown a long time ago. A True Mate is like a soul mate to a human. It’s a wonderful thing, but you don’t waste your life waiting for one to show up. True Mates are rare. Most of the other Alphas in the country don’t have them. They chose partners who were strong, cunning, and politically connected. I need to do the same. It’s long overdue.

Ama sidles over and sits next to me on the step. “You know,” she says in a dulcet voice. Her fingertips trail along my forearm. “I’m available.”

I withdraw my arm from her ministrations and brush the lingering sensation from my skin. I already fucked Ama and know she’s not my True Mate, but she’d be a good mate nonetheless. The thought sits uneasy in me, though. I blow out a lungful of air. “That’s real sweet. But you know I can be a handful.”

“I can handle a handful,” she says, walking her fingers up my arm.

Abruptly, I stand. “I don’t have time for this right now. I’ve got a vampire problem to deal with.”

Ama stands, too, a frown creasing her brow. “Don’t get yourself killed.”

I hold up two fingers to my chest. “Wolf scout’s honor.”

I head for the beat-up old pickup, not looking back at what is sure to be disappointment painted all over Ama’s face.

Engine roaring, I speed down the wet street, spraying water in a rooster tail behind me. I have a new plan that doesn’t include the fucking vamps.

At least not directly.

Once outside the city limits, I floor it and roar toward Wild Wolf Swamp, aptly named, since our clan used to live there. Now, it’s nothing but a waterlogged cesspool where panther shifters hunt and old-timers like Sterlina Vayzen cling to their tiny plots of land and take refuge at Gideon’s Bar during floods. I wouldn’t be going there at all except that Sterlina’s the most powerful diviner in the area, and though I’m convinced I don’t have a True Mate, I have to make damn sure before I choose someone else to fill the role.

I can't imagine a worse fate than giving up and having a brood of kids with some other woman, only to then find my True Mate.

When I arrive at the witch's treehouse, a giant gator crawls from beneath her tree and waddles toward the water, where it slips silently into the murky, liquid embrace of the swamp. More gators make their presence known by the bulge of their eyes lining the surface of the water. Spanish moss drapes listlessly from the trees as if exhausted from the incessant heat, and vultures line each branch, watching as if hoping I'll turn into their next meal.

I hop down from the truck and stride toward the bell dangling from a tree branch, swatting mosquitos as I go. Grabbing the bell, I shake it back and forth, making it clang so loud that birds scatter from the nearby trees and wheel into the sky overhead.

"Think I don't know you're here already, shifter?" calls a voice like dried grass.

Shielding my eyes with my palm, I tip my head back to try and find her, but the sun prevents me from seeing anything but harsh light. "My truck's hard to miss."

"It's your scent that makes itself known, wolfie. That and your intention. You projected your desire to come and see me the second you stepped from your porch." A phlegmy cough rattles her throat. "You're not going to like the answer to your question."

I still can't see her. It's like asking the sun to give me information. "What's the answer? Tell me, and I'll be on my way."

"Not so fast. I need cash."

"How much?" My eyes sting from the sun's assault, but I don't look away. I've heard this lady's tough, but I'm a match for anyone in the area.

She names her price, and I curse under my breath. "I'll give you half that. It's all I've got."

"Full price."

"I don't have it."

"Then I don't have an answer for you. Go on then. Be off with you!"

Nearby, birds chitter and rustle in the foliage surrounding her treehouse.

I squint into the shadows of the thick copse of trees flanking her dwelling. "Come down so I can talk to you face to face," I say. "I like to see who's swindling me."

"If you don't have the cash, we have nothing to discuss," she says. Her words sound like leaves rustling in the wind.

I dig into my pocket and retrieve a fat roll of cash. It's supposed to hold me until the end of the month. "I can give you two-thirds of what you asked."

"Nine-tenths," she counters.

"I won't be able to eat human food for two weeks," I say. My ears fill with silence. If I give her two-thirds of what I have, I can live on whatever we bring in from the hunt. Not ideal, but I've done it before.

A rope with a mesh bag slides down from her tree-top deck.

I count off most of my cash, place it in the bag and yank on the rope. "It's all in there."

"Good. If it isn't, you just lost a lot of money."

Sweat trickles down my neck and soaks my sleeveless shirt, and I swat more mosquitos as I wait. Above me, I hear a faint, steady swish of paper on paper as she slowly counts the bills. "All right, wolf boy, here's your answer."

"Are you sure you know my question?" Another round of silence greets me. I hope I haven't pissed her off enough to make her go back on our agreement after she nabbed my cash.

Several gators slide beneath the swamp surface, leaving a rippling wake where eyes once watched me.

"You have a True Mate."

My chest constricts, and excitement races through me. All those years of holding out weren't for nothing after all.

"Who is she?" I ask. "And where do I find her?"

"She is a wolf named Luna. Look around you, and you will find her."

"Luna?" I scratch my head, trying to remember if I've heard the name mentioned in any meetings with other packs. I know all the Jacksonville wolves, of course, and she's not among them. The only other wolves in the area are the poacher triplets who like to hunt on our territory to piss me off instead of finding unclaimed land to hunt. But that's a different story, and those fuckers are thugs who definitely don't carry a delicate wolf name like Luna.

I try it out in my mind. *Luna*.

It's the perfect wolf name, beautiful and ethereal, like a morning glory or a moth.

And here I am, waxing poetic at just a name. Since having my dick balls deep in Trixie didn't have the same effect, I can safely say she's definitely off the list of potential mates.

Hell, I don't even have to keep a list of potentials anymore. I don't have to pick a suitable mate to help me run the pack, give us heirs, and carry on the bloodline. I have a *True Mate*.

"I don't know a Luna," I admit to the witch. "Can you tell me where to find her?"

The sound of wood scraping wood meets my ears, as if a door has opened. Then, the door slams shut with a loud thwack. I blow out a breath. I know when I've been told to fuck off.

Damn it. I kick a stone as my boots crunch over the stones to my truck.

I have a name. That's it.

Still. Damn. After all this time, I don't have to wonder.

I have a name.

I have a *True Mate*.

Excitement speeds my pulse as I hop into the cab of the pickup. There could be countless women in the world with that name, but only one of them will be my mate. I won't know for sure until we mate, but I'm counting on having a real good fucking idea before that. They say when you meet your *True Mate*, the whole world shifts.

But then, they also say you might live next to them your whole life and never know. So, yeah, there's a fuckton of legends and lore around *True Mates*. Guess I'll know which parts are true when I find her.

I crank up the truck and ease away from Sterlina's domicile, heading home. The windows are down, and the wind rushes in my ears as I speed along the potholed road. I try not to look like a giddy teenager in love. I have a fucking *True Mate*. The best news I've had since I fought and kept the *Alphahood* from the last man who dared challenge me—Warrick Armstrong, who was banished from the pack for that stunt.

A *True Mate* will make me even stronger than choosing a mate on my own. Having a *True Mate* gives a man respect, as it's rare. I hope she's strong like me, a good fighter, a political strategist.

The only trouble is, I don't know who or where she is. Sterlina said to look around me, and when I asked again, she shut the door in my face. Guess I insulted her by asking what she'd already answered. "Look around you" doesn't mean shit, though. Was I supposed to look around right then, under her treehouse? Is Luna coming to the Jacksonville area soon? Or am I supposed to look for her across the country, across the world?

I'll fucking do it. I have to find her—the sooner the better. The vampires

are getting way too fucking cocky.

Ama can help me find her. That's the sort of thing a Second does while I'm running the pack here. Only the last thing Ama wants to do is to find the woman who will fill the role she so desperately longs to fill.

Chapter Two

Luna

Standing knee-deep in murky swamp water, I thrust my bare hands into the catfish hole I discovered a second ago. Some of my wet hair lands in my eyes, making it hard to see. When my fingers curl around the slimy beast, I yank back, lifting my prize high.

“Gotcha!” I crow to the wriggling critter, avoiding its stinging spine. “Dinner is served.”

Clutching the fish with both hands, I use my upper arm to push the hair from my eyes. Mama always tells me my light hair reminds her of the swamp buck’s hair when it’s standing in the sun. Then she always adds, “and your eyes are the color of the sky after sunset.”

Right now, I’m guessing I resemble a drowned fox more than anything.

As I wade out of the water, hauling my bare feet from the mud with each step, a scream pierces the air. I stand stock-still, attentive. The dying fish flapping in my grasp jabs me with its dorsal fin, immediately flooding my hand with an explosion of venom. “You bastard,” I say to the fish. I pick the spines from my skin with my teeth.

Another howl lances my eardrums.

“Mercy on the swamp dogs, that’s got to be Mama!”

Still clutching the catfish with my now-swollen hand, I take off at a sprint. Nothing can happen to my mother—*nothing*. Mama has been through enough, and on top of that, she’s all I’ve got. After losing Daddy to murder while I was still a pup curled in her belly, Mama broke with the savage pack of demon-dogs nearby and headed for the safety of the swamp. We’ve been here ever since.

When I was young, Mama took care of me, filling me with the knowledge

of every danger in the swamp, the skill to hunt, and the companionship of each other. She taught me that ogres might look scary, but they're harmless to us, since they only eat magic. She taught me how to know when a storm means rain and wind that could take down the little house I built for us six years ago on a hillock in the swamp, so we need to take everything we own and get up in the trees, where the water won't rise.

Most of all, she taught me that danger comes in the form of man, even when they wear the disguise of a panther or wolf. I've never spoken to a soul besides my mother in my life, though when Mama's not looking, I sometimes sneak a wave to the panther shifters in their fishing boats that glide silently through the swamp like gators. If more than one of them's in the boat, sometimes I hear them whisper to each other, "There goes Looney Luna."

That's my name.

I like the sound of it hissing across the water and into the mossy trees, like a secret only the swamp knows.

"I'm coming, Mama," I shout as I sprint through the boggy landscape. If Mama took care of me growing up, that slowly changed after I came of age until now our roles have reversed. I take care of Mama now. So that's what I gotta do right now, when she's shrieking like a panther. Pushing through the underbrush, shoving aside branches, I come face to face with a terrifying sight.

A panther is attacking my mother's human form.

I don't think about it. I pitch the fish into the glade, shift into my wolfskin, and launch my body at the big cat. It drops Mama to fight back. Success! My canine teeth snarl and snap, trying to get purchase on the feline's neck. I manage to sink my teeth into the puma and rip some of the skin from muscle with several mighty shakes of my head.

It's enough. The panther lets out an ear-shattering snarl and turns tail. As it takes off into the swamp, I turn to Mama. Panthers usually leave us alone, both the shifter and regular varieties, though maybe if they're starving, they'll attack. The panther shifters are as wary of us as we are of them, and besides an occasional wave from a fishing boat sliding under the trailing Spanish moss, they've never paid us any mind. They keep their distance and don't bother us, even though technically, Mama says this part of the swamp belongs to them.

I don't have time to think about why that panther attacked. Why doesn't matter, anyway. It happened, and now Mama's in bad shape, and it's my job

to make sure she heals. I focus on her moaning form.

“Mama,” I say, shifting back to human and crouching next to her. “Mama.” Out of the corner of my eye, I spy the catfish still engaged in a listless struggle with death. “Look, Mama. I brought food.” I crawl toward the fish, pick it up and bite off the head. Then, like a good wolf pup, I bring my morning catch, gripped in my teeth, to my mother. “Look, Mama, see? Here’s food. Eat some and get your strength back.”

Eyes closed, Mama sniffs the fish and shakes her head. “I don’t need fish, Luna love,” she wheezes. “It can’t help me. I’m afraid this is it for me.” Her voice comes out in a gurgle. Claw marks crisscross her body, and blood seeps from the jagged tears in her skin.

Don’t die on me. Please don’t die. I’ll be all alone out here.

My head whips around as I search for something to staunch the blood oozing from Mama’s side. As I search, I swat at the blood-sucking insects attempting to make a meal out of me.

A giant gator drags its body from the slew and makes its way in my direction.

You can smell the blood, can’t you, you bastard?

I toss the fish and send it flying. The gator catches it with a snap of its hinged jaw. Then, it makes an ungainly pivot and waddles back toward the water.

I scoop up Mama’s limp body with a bit of a struggle and carry her toward our house, the one I built with my own hands when I was twelve years old, according to Mama. I don’t know how she knows that.

“I’ll get you help,” I say as I scramble through the damp bog. “Don’t you die on me, Mama!”

She doesn’t answer, and I’m afraid she’s done for. I swallow hard, tears flowing down my cheeks before I offer the suggestion that comes to mind. I only dare speak it in a small voice, and only then because I’m not sure she’ll hear. “Maybe the other wolves can help?”

A fierce growl emerges from my mother’s throat, and her eyelids pop open, staring at me from a long-ago time and place. “No wolves. Never the wolves. They killed your father. Never trust a wolf!”

“But Mama. I don’t know what to do,” I say, rounding the bend with a noisy splash through the swamp water. “I don’t know how to fix something this bad, and I can’t lose you!”

I sniff up my tears and scramble up the bank toward our house, out of

breath from carrying her weight.

Mama's breathing comes weak and shallow "You're eighteen," she wheezes. "That's full grown in the human world, and you came of age as a wolf a long time ago. I raised you as best I could. It's time to let me go. Remember all I've told you."

"No!" I cry, kicking in the door to our home. As I enter, I lurch to a halt. There's someone in our house.

Fear bolts through me like lightning strikes. The intruder is a woman with long, glossy hair the color of the night, like the panthers. Is she another one here to finish us off? What did we do to offend them?

"Are you a wolf known to the panthers as Looney Luna?" she asks.

"Who wants to know?" I say, backing against the tin wall. My arms shake with the effort of holding my mother's body, so I squat and gently lay Mama down. Then, I move in front of her to protect her.

The panther-haired woman shakes her head and gives me a look I can't decipher. "I'm Ama, and I came to fetch you. Our Alpha has requested your presence."

My head whips around to gaze at my mother. If Mama didn't bark out a retort, it means she's unconscious... Or *dead*. I reach out and shake Mama's still form. "Mama. Mama. Are you with me?"

Mama lets out a low moan, indicating life still thrums through her veins. But she doesn't speak.

"Didn't you hear me?" the Ama-woman says, speaking in Mama's hurry-up tone.

"Of course I heard you," I snap. "I'm not deaf."

"Then let's go." Ama stands tall and steps toward the door, and something in her commanding presence makes me want to quake. But I stand firm, for Mama.

"I'm not going anywhere. *You're* the one who should leave."

I cross the packed-earth floor in two steps and reach for one of the plastic water jugs I use to catch rainwater. I pour water into my favorite cup, a tall, red plastic glass that you can see through when you hold it up to the light, that I found floating in the swamp one day after a flood. Maybe it'll let the light shine from Mama again, too. I turn and make haste back to her side. Crouching, I lift her head with one hand and try to get her to drink some water with the other. "Come on, Mama. Just a little water."

The water simply drips onto her face and pours off her chin.

“She needs more than water,” Ama says, crossing her arms and raising her chin.

“Are you a healer?” I ask hopefully. She hasn’t attacked yet, so that’s a good sign, but I don’t know her, and Mama told me to never trust strangers. Everyone’s a stranger, so I don’t trust anyone.

“No,” says Ama.

“Then you should probably shut up.” I use my index finger to pry open Mama’s lips, then pour a little water into her mouth.

A violent coughing attack ensues.

“Shit, shit,” I say, setting the glass of water to the side. I help Mama to sit up and whack her on the back a few times, desperation making me cry again. “I’m sorry, Mama. I don’t know what to do. Tell me what to do!”

Mama collapses in my arms as her blood pools on the dirt floor.

“Damn it.” I press my fists to my stinging eyes, my mind reeling. I know how to deal with Mama’s moods, her quiet spells, her thinking things are out to get us. I know how to bandage scrapes and put poultices on bruises and swellings and snake bites. But this... There’s too much blood.

“I can help you,” the Ama woman says.

I lift my tearstained face. “What can you do? Are you a shaman? A witch?”

“No,” Ama says, tipping her head to the side, but not like she’s curious. She doesn’t look interested or sad or scared Mama will die. Her expression isn’t anything. “But I know a healer. She can help your mother.”

“Why would you do that for me?” I ask, my eyes narrowing with suspicion. “Are you a panther? One of yours just did this to us, so why are you offering to help?”

She huffs out a breath. “I’m a wolf.”

My back stiffens and my heart races. This is what Mama warned me about all my life, the moment I’ve been taught to avoid since I could speak. “Wolves lie,” I whisper. “And murder their own kind.”

A flicker of something—surprise? confusion?—flashes across Ama’s face like a summer storm. “I’m here because you have something my Alpha wants,” she says, going back to her non-expression. “And that’s why I’m offering to help.”

“What do I have?” I ask, giving a panicked glance at the four walls, the leaky tin roof, and the bed of rags.

Ama stabs her finger at me. “You.”

“Me?”

She rolls her eyes up and then back down. “Yes, you.”

“Then you’re shit out of luck,” I say. “I can’t go anywhere with a wolf. Mama says so.”

“Suit yourself,” Ama says. “But from the looks of things, your mom won’t be saying anything for much longer.”

Desperation claws its way to the surface of my heart. I want to be a good wolf pup and obey my mama, but I also don’t want her to die. It’s my job to protect her. I’m the caretaker now, and I have to take care of her the way she did when I was young. So, I make a split-second decision.

Swallowing hard, I nod at the she-wolf. “Then save her. I’ll come with you and see what this Alpha person wants. But then I’m taking her home. Deal?”

“I’d like nothing better, but I’m afraid it’s not up to me,” Ama says with a sigh.

I don’t want to go without a deal, but nothing in my life has prepared me for this. Cuts and scrapes, even broken toes, are healed by our wolves, but serious injuries like Mama’s are another matter entirely. And dealing with other people, well, that’s even further from my experience than injuries.

But what choice do I have? I need to save Mama, the way she’s always saved me. If Ama’s lying, and this is a trap, I won’t be surprised, but the wolves can’t do anything worse than what’s already been done. Mama is dying. If I go to the wolves, even if it’s against her orders, at least I’ll know I did everything I could. If I don’t do anything, she’ll surely die.

So I make the decision to help her, even if that means doing the very thing she always warned me against, even if it means walking straight into the enemy’s lair.

Chapter Three

Luna

The second we emerge from the safety of the bayou, my instincts soar into high alert. Instead of being surrounded by pine-oak and tupelo trees and picking my way through the inkberry or Joe-Pye weed, I find myself on a road, which I've only seen from a distance. Up close, they're bleached-out, hard surfaces with the texture of a dried alligator carcass.

Cars zoom past at alarming speeds. When trekking through the swamp, I'd heard the distant sounds of these beasts and seen them from afar, but up close, the rectangular metal boxes are bigger than a swamp monster and even more intimidating. I stop and shake my head, unwilling to take a step into this foreign land and be trampled by one of their metal monstrosities.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Ama mutters. "Has Axel made a mistake or what?"

"What do you mean?" I ask, grabbing her sleeve.

"I didn't say a thing," Ama says. She steps onto the hard surface of the road, yanking on my wrist.

I plant my feet and turn to look behind me.

We dropped Mama off at a healer's hut not far from here, and now Ama is taking me to her Alpha. I know what that is from Mama. It's the head of all the wolves, the most dangerous and fearsome of them all. I long for her comfort and wisdom as I take this giant step, but I'm on my own, with only Ama, who seems none too friendly.

Though I wanted to stay by Mama's side until she was looked after by the healer, the wizened old woman with skin the color of clay and eyes like an eagle shooed us away, saying, "Your mother is standing at the edge of a precipice. I must tend to her at once to keep her from jumping."

She assured me it would take a while and that I had better leave while she

did her best to save my mother. So here I am. I turn to look over my shoulder in the direction of the healer's home. My voice trembles as I speak. "I should stay here and wait for Mama... Make sure she's okay."

"No, what you should do is get to Axel's so we can burst his bubble and get this over with. Then, when he's accepted his fate is just a fancy that isn't compatible with reality, I can assume my rightful place by his side."

"What does that mean?" I ask again, completely lost by this talk of bubbles and fate and rightful places.

Ama tugs at my arm. "Forget it. Let's go. We need to get you cleaned up, so you look less like a bog hag and more like what Axel wants to see. Although..." Her mouth turns up at the corners in a secretive smile.

I don't like that smile. I pull my skinny frame as tall as I can, though I'm still no taller than her. "I'm not a bog hag," I say loudly. "I'm a lone wolf, and I'm proud of my heritage."

"You shouldn't be," Ama says. "Lone wolves are fools."

I step onto the coarse surface of the road. "What is this stuff?" I ask, crouching to run my fingertips across the textured surface. It feels hot, the way rocks heat in the midday sun. I always thought it was stone, but it doesn't feel like any stones I ever felt.

A loud, blaring sound fills the air, startling me. I look up to see one of the beastly cars rocketing in my direction. Mama told me people ride in them, but this one is roaring like an animal.

I leap out of the road, my heart pounding, just as it whooshes by so fast it makes its own wind—a stinky wind I've smelled in the swamp from time to time when the wind blew just right.

"Christ, you're stupid," Ama snaps. "You almost got yourself killed. Quick reflexes, though." She looks me over the way Mama did last time she was thinking about going to town to get me clothes, a look like she hadn't really seen me in a while.

Ama grabs my wrist in a fierce grip. "This," she says, sweeping her free arm before her, "is a road, also known as a street. It's made of concrete or asphalt. And those things are cars. You never get in front of one when they're moving. Got it? And that, over there..." She points to a group of structures. "That's the shopping mall where we're going to get you cleaned up and buy you some new clothes. No way can I take you to Axel looking like that."

I look down at my nearly naked body, covered with dirt and mud from the swamp and a few old rags of the same color. Before we left, I wound a few

rag and Spanish moss around my hips and breasts, the way Mama had taught me to do. “What’s wrong with the way I look?”

“You’re dirty, smelly, and you look like a wild thing. Axel expects something a bit more... *Civilized*.” Ama sneers, towing me along.

I frown. “Why does this Axel man care what I look like?”

“You’ll see.” Ama drags me away from the road and heads for the buildings. They’re massive and look way more sound than the little house I built. I wonder how they got their stones cut into such precise shapes. I could have built a stronger house with rocks like that.

Ama gestures toward the buildings marked by a sign that says, *Paradise Acres*. Around it, a few cars sit unmoving in the places that aren’t marred by long cracks and gaping holes in the ground, which is covered with the same stuff as the road.

“What happened here?” I ask, pointing to one of the holes filled with dirty water. “And why are some of these houses falling to the ground?” I gesture toward a pile of wood and metal a ways off through the weeds.

“They’re not houses. They’re stores. And shit happened. While you’ve been shacking up in oblivion in the swamp, the rest of the world has been dealing with the effects of the natural disasters. Winds, rain, hurricanes, storms... You name it.”

“That stuff happens in the swamp, too,” I say, feeling defensive at her nasty tone.

She snorts. “And I’m sure your little hovel has been knocked down at time or two. Some people have simply given up on repairing something that’ll only be destroyed again and gotten the hell out of dodge. Others have built more substantive buildings that can withstand the storms.” She points toward a formidable building that looks like it was made of the same stuff as the streets. The words *Lew’s Bossy Beauties* are painted onto the concrete.

“Why do you need all these buildings if you don’t live in them?”

“You’re literally dumber than a rock,” Ama says. “We choose to live in the real world. The real world has stores.”

“I’ve never been to a store,” I say, feeling a little tendril of excitement growing inside me.

“Shocking,” Ama says. “Seeing as how you’re basically a bog hag who knows nothing except how to wrestle alligators and catch fish. Now stop asking so many questions. You’re making my head hurt.”

Despite her nastiness, I let the first smile I’ve felt all day form on my

face. Things are bad, but that doesn't mean there's not good in the world. Mama never let me come to town, even when she went to get supplies every few seasons. She said it wasn't safe. But I don't feel scared today. The cars are a little intimidating, but they seem to follow predictable patterns when I watch them on the road, and I think I can escape them if I stay out of their way, like Ama said.

I'm too busy marveling at all the newness around me to be very scared. Ama swings open the door of the concrete structure, and we enter. Inside the store, a tall, midnight-skinned man grins at us. He reminds me of the panthers that move through the swamps under the cover of night.

"Friends," he says, holding out his arms. "Is this the woman you told me about, Ama? The one we'll be grooming for the Alpha?"

Colorful clothes surround us, hanging from metal tubes, while light streams from glass balls in the ceiling.

My mind swims with all these new sights to take in. Half of me longs to head back to the swamp and huddle in our cozy tin house, and the other half wants to touch everything, see if the yellow dresses feel like sunshine and the blue like sky.

The male saunters toward us. I sidle backward, away from him, baring my teeth. I've never spoken to a man before, but Mama told me they are to be feared. This one inches closer and seizes my chin, turning my face from side to side. "Exquisite. Beautiful cheekbones. I think we can do a lot with her."

I snap my teeth at his hand, but he yanks his arm back before my teeth connect. I wrench my face away, glowering at him and trying to back away. Ama gives me a little shove forward, back in his direction. "Don't touch me," I warn, fisting my hands, ready to return to my wolfskin if he tries to attack.

Ama snorts. "See what I mean? I'm telling you, Axel got swindled by that old diviner. This must be some sort of joke because this chick can't be anyone's mate. She probably couldn't find her way around a dick if you drew her a map."

"She does seem a bit... Untamed." The male strokes his chin with his thumb and forefinger, appearing thoughtful. "Mademoiselle, forgive me."

He extends his hand to me. I stare at it. I don't know who Mademoiselle is, or why he's holding out a hand like he'll help me up when I'm standing right in front of him.

Ama chuckles. "He's making a gesture of friendship, dumbass. Take his hand and shake it."

My brow furrows. “Why?”

Ama huffs out a sigh, wraps her fingers around the man’s hand, and gives it a small shake. “Lewis, I’m pleased to make your acquaintance. I’m Ama.” She turns toward me, her lips pressed together in a flat line. “That’s how we greet people outside the swamp. Think you can manage that?”

I try it, taking Lewis’s warm hand and moving it up and down. I’ve never touched a male before, but his hand feels the same as mine or Mama’s, only softer. It feels warm and nice enveloping mine, but I pull away quickly. Mama said not to trust people outside our family.

“Say what I said, but use your name instead of mine,” Ama says to me before meeting Lewis’s gaze. “I have to spell out the most ridiculous things to her. I thought I was getting his mate, not babysitting an overgrown toddler.”

“She seems a bit feral,” Lewis says, gazing at me with soft eyes. “But she’s not so bad.”

We exchange names the way Ama did. “I’m Luna,” I say when it’s my turn. “You don’t seem so bad, either.”

Lewis throws back his head and lets out a deep, coyote-like laugh. “That’s wonderful. I think I’m going to like you, Luna.”

Then, he turns away from me and extends his hand again, only more from his side than straight on.

“What do I do this time?” I ask.

“You take it—but only if you’re willing—and we proceed to my cave of mysteries.” A smile spreads across his face and up into his dark, sparkling eyes.

Behind him, Ama glowers.

I went in a cave with Mama once, and it wasn’t scary. I avoid Lewis’s hand but follow him when he gestures toward a back room. Hardly the kind of shelter I expected, I’m confronted with a room where pieces of fabric in various colors are draped over chairs scattered around the area and a huge mirror. A table in front of the mirror is covered with tiny pots of color and sticks with soft-looking furry ends. I reach out a fingertip and stroke the end of one of the sticks.

“She probably doesn’t know what that is,” Ama says with a sneer.

Lewis picks up one of the stick-things and explains, “This is a makeup brush. And this is a hairbrush. We’re going to use it on your abundant tresses once you’ve taken a shower.” He waves a piece of wood with boar bristles

poking out of it.

“A shower? Like rain?” I ask, dizzy from all the new information.

“Sort of.”

I pick up a jar with blackish goo inside from a rack next to the table.

“What’s this?”

“This is hair dye,” Lewis says, grabbing the jar and replacing it on the rack. “Some people like to use it to turn their hair different colors. We’ll not be doing that to you today.”

“Why not?” I ask, wondering what different colors of hair I could have. I never much thought about my hair because I never knew I could change it. Looking around at all the colors of fabric in the room, I think of all the colors in the world that my hair could be. Blood red, or sunset orange, or pink as my tongue; blue as twilight or green as a coiled fern.

Ama scoffs. “Let’s not make ourselves more of a freak than we already are.”

Lewis grabs my shoulders, pivots me around, and marches me toward the corner. He urges me inside an outhouse-sized room with golden-green walls like dragonfly wings that smells damp, like the bog. Only this dampness smells sweet, like springtime flowers. Metal things protrude from the wall. Lewis twists one of them, and water pours from another metal device on the ceiling. “Strip out of these rags and step under the water. You can use any of those bottles...” He points to several items on the floor. “And wash your hair and your body *thoroughly*. Got it?”

I nod, wondering how to use the bottles. Of course Mama and I washed ourselves. Sometimes we stood in the rain, especially in summer when it was hot out and the rain chased off the bugs for a few minutes. In winter, we collected rainwater and heated it over the fire to have a warm bath, standing outside and rubbing ourselves with a wet rag that we dipped into the water to rinse. I decide this isn’t so different, except the rain comes from the wall and the bottles must be used to squirt more water on myself.

“We’ll be right here. Holler when you’re done.” Lewis nods and backs away, shutting the door behind him.

I’d like to go check on Mama, but there are no windows to escape. Since I’m curious about the shower, I peel off the moss and rags and step under the falling water. A gasp of pleasure escapes my lips. It’s warm, and it covers my whole body at once instead of just a bit dribbling from a rag while I stand outside, hurrying to clean myself before I freeze my buns off. This... This is

wow.

Dirty water streams down my body, heading toward holes in a metal grate on the floor. I pick up a bottle, but it's not empty, so I can't fill it with water. I open it, and the smell of flowers comes out. I tip it up and pour some of the contents into my hand, using it to wash my hair and body *thoroughly*, as Lewis instructed.

When finished, I twist the metal thing, and the water stops. Soaking wet and feeling amazed, I open the door.

Lewis's jaw drops when he sees me. He grabs a thick sheet of fabric and hurries toward me. "Let's get you a towel, honey. Here you go. Dry yourself off and put on this robe."

He seizes a white, fluffy garment from a hook on the wall and hands it to me. After drying myself and donning the robe, I let Lewis comb out my tangled hair and do something called "styling" to it. After that, he brushes various powders and creams onto my face and dresses me in some silken garment that feels wonderful against my skin. Finally he stands back and looks me over.

"You look fantastic. Doesn't she look amazing?" He turns to Ama, who looks up with a scowl.

She sits in the corner in one of the wooden chairs with a small rectangular device that she's been tapping with her thumbs every few minutes since we met. "Sure. You always do good work," she says to Lewis. She shoves her hand in her pocket and passes him some green papers. "Will that be enough?"

"This is more than enough," he says, clasping his hands beneath his chin. "Tell your Alpha thank you from the bottom of my heart. He's as generous as he is handsome."

Ama laughs. "Don't encourage that man's ego."

I stare at myself in the mirror. I've been dressed in a waterlily green top and pants the color of cattails. The garments feel smooth and supple, and they don't restrict my movement, which I like. My face has no mud or dirt, only a powdery substance Lewis brushed on my skin, black goo on my eyelashes, and pink cream on my lips.

I look so different from the girl I know from looking into pools in the swamp. I'm not sure who I look like, but it's not me. And I feel as odd as I look.

"Let's go, chica," Ama says, seizing my wrist once more. She drags me out of Lewis's cave of mysteries, through the big room with clothes, and out

the door into the bright sunshine.

I want to slug her for dragging me around like the catch of the day, but she's stronger than me, and my wolf instinctually obeys the commands of an older, more intimidating wolf.

"Where are we going now?" I ask, blinking into the glare of the afternoon sun.

Ama lets out a sigh of irritation. "We're going to meet Axel, our Alpha. He's your True Mate."

Chapter Four

Axel

Ever since Sterlina the Seer told me who my True Mate would be, I've had dozens of fantasies about the kind of woman I'll meet. I picture wild and stunning, svelte and shadowy, gorgeous yet strong. What I haven't anticipated is this wisp of a barely adult woman who stares at me from my front porch with all the ferocity of a puppy.

Jesus Fucking Christ. Is it even legal to breed her? She looks like a mere child.

I study her through my screen door. Even with all the make-up, as well as the curve-hugging clothes, she looks like jailbait. Sure, she's pretty, but I prefer real women. Still, it doesn't really matter. She's my True Mate, and if she were only eight, I'd just have to wait for ten years to be with her. Sometimes that happens, though it's definitely not ideal, especially in this situation, when I need an equal at my side to help lead the pack.

But this is what I've got to work with, so I put on a presentable smile, ignoring the snide expression my Second has on her face and hoping Luna is older and less timid than she looks. It could be an asset if she's fierce as fuck but looks unimposing.

That hope is dashed when I let my wolf surface for a second, and she drops her gaze so fast he barely has a chance to see her, let alone show dominance. Opening the screen door, I welcome them both, standing over them with a simple Alpha command. "Come in."

Luna drops into a half-crouch, like she's going to shift and tear my throat out. "What kind of hex did he just lay on me?" she hisses over to Ama. Even her voice sounds young.

"It's not a curse. Axel's making you feel welcome." Ama gives my mate

a little shove toward me. I flash my Second a glower. Her disdain for my True Mate is evident, and she needs to remember her place.

In a blur, Luna whips around, shifts into a wolf, and pins Ama to the porch floorboards. Just as quickly, Ama shifts and rolls to pin Luna, and for a second, I think this game will be over with one dead wolf, and it's obvious who will win.

It's not an option. Though we haven't formed the True Mate bond, that comes before even my Second.

"Enough!" I growl, and both werewolves still.

That's a good sign. Luna recognizes my stature as an Alpha, even though she hasn't been bonded with the pack, which means she's submissive. And she might be diminutive, but she's tough... Although I'm not sure what kind of person just shifts in broad daylight and attacks another person with no provocation.

The females shift back to human. Both of them now sport a few scrapes, but they're intact for the most part. They're also naked, their clothes lying in tatters on the floorboards. I've seen all my wolves without clothes before and after hunts, so nudity is hardly notable, but damn... Maybe it's because she's my True Mate, but seeing Luna for the first time makes my cock jerk inside my jeans like I'm the damn teenager. But I don't have time to admire my new mate because there's always another fucking fire to put out around here.

The shewolves scramble to their feet, eyeing one another warily.

"I said *enough*," I grit out.

Ama bows her head, but Luna stares at me defiantly. I have to force myself to keep her gaze instead of staring at her sexy little tits. They're so fucking perky.

I stare her down, and she drops her gaze and ducks her head, a submissive wolf instinct that has nothing to do with her feelings about me. Though she's not a member of the pack, and therefore can't be compelled, any wolf can sense dominance and defer accordingly.

Her manners leave something to be desired, but that will come soon enough, when she's integrated into the Jacksonville pack and learns our ways. All the more reason to bring her into the safety of the pack as soon as possible. Tonight, I'll introduce her as my True Mate, and she'll begin to learn how we operate.

I hold the door for her, and she grabs up her clothes and skulks past me while Ama remains on the front porch.

“Ama,” I say to my Second, a warning in my voice. “I trust you found my True Mate easily enough?”

She needs to remember who she’s dealing with. Luna isn’t just some stray pup we’re absorbing into the pack. She’s going to be the Alpha’s mate, which is a tricky position filled with endless, delicate intricacies if said mate is less dominant than the Alpha’s Second. One look at Luna shows she’s as submissive as they come.

“Easily as expected, given the terrain,” Ama says, a touch of frost to her voice. She jerks on her clothes as she speaks, tying her shirt in front where it tore when she shifted. “It took a bit of asking around, but once I enlisted the help of a couple panthers to find exactly where their place was, I found her soon enough.” She gives me a haughty look, and I know she’s proud of her sleuthing and that I should be, too. But the attitude she’s sending my way is close to crossing a line.

“Thank you,” I say grudgingly. “We’ll talk later.”

She bristles at not being invited in, included in what to her must seem like pack business. But I want a chance to meet my True Mate, to marvel at her existence. This afternoon, while I dealt with a puffed-up teen wolf who thinks he’s going to challenge me in a few years, Ama found Luna. Once she located her, she checked in with me, letting me know the condition she’d found her in, but I know nothing about her. I’d like to know her personally for a few minutes before she becomes the latest pack business.

Ama grits her teeth. “Will that be all, sir?”

“It’s been a long day for you,” I say, trying to appease her with my concern. “Go home and rest up. Pack meeting tonight.”

She stares at the porch’s rotting wood, a frown on her face. I know I should replace the boards, but with all the shit I deal with on a daily basis, I hardly have time to keep my own house fixed up. It will only be torn apart by the next storm, anyway.

“As you wish,” Ama mutters at last, resentment boiling in her voice, like it’s my fault the True Mate mark didn’t show up on her arm when I fucked her. Without another word, she pivots and strides away.

I sigh and close the door, turning to take in my True Mate for the first time without a distraction or audience. She stands stiffly in the center of my living room, her breath chuffing quick and shallow in her lungs.

“So,” I say, striding toward her. “Here we are.” She’s pulled her clothes on, arranging the shirt to cover her tits and not much else. Her midriff is bare

and almost emaciated, her hipbones jutting out above the top of her pants. Lone wolves are seldom healthy and well-fed, so I'm not surprised. A few months with the pack, and she'll fill out and look more like a woman capable of carrying my child than a mere girl.

I circle her slowly, taking in her scent. The perfume Ama applied to her can't mask her natural odor. She smells earthy and delicious, and suddenly, her age doesn't seem as big an obstacle. If I thought fucking someone was the only indication of a True Mate, now that I'm meeting mine, I know it's so much more than that. I'm instantly, unnaturally drawn to her, so attracted to her that I feel my cock stiffen from her scent alone.

I find myself hoping she finds my scent equally appealing, something I never worry about with others. As I circle her, she pivots, eyeing my every move.

She's got fire, I'll give her that, but it's fueled by suspicion, if her attitude is any indication. Once she's adjusted to our ways, she'll be a lovely addition to the pack, and though she's younger than expected, in time she'll grow to be a match for me, tempering my dominance with her submissive nature and cooling my impulses with diplomacy and tact, something that both Ama and I lack. Submissive wolves are highly valued, maybe more so than dominant ones, since they can calm the storms that so often brew between hotheaded alpha types. I hope she'll be a skilled political strategist in no time, not only helping relations within the pack but between our pack and other supernaturals.

I come to a stop in front of her and tip her chin up with my forefinger. She tenses but doesn't back away. "What are you going to do to me?" she asks.

"I've been told you're my True Mate," I answer. "Once we confirm that, you'll have one of the most important roles in the pack. I'm the Alpha, which means together we'll rule our pack and maintain order in our territory." I tip her head side to side, noting the natural beauty lurking behind the makeup. "How old are you?"

"Eighteen." The word comes out in a whisper. Her luminous lavender gaze stays fixated on mine. "You?"

"Thirty," I say, releasing my grip on her chin. At least she's not as young as she looks. We can be mated right away and begin soothing relations with the vampires. I became Alpha when I was her age, and if I could run the pack on my own at that age, she can certainly learn the ropes at my side.

She backs away. “What do you need me to do before I go home? I already told that Ama woman that I can’t stay.”

I can’t help but laugh. She’s not just naïve to the pack’s customs. She doesn’t seem to know the most basic laws. “If the True Mate mark appears as predicted, you’ll be staying here,” I say, offering her a reassuring smile. “It’s dangerous for lone wolves out there, especially young ones, and most of all for young, unmated females. You’ll be safe with the pack.”

Ama told me she lived in a shack that looked like it could barely withstand a windstorm, let alone a hurricane. My house isn’t exactly the Knight brothers’ mansion, but it’s comfortable, and now that I have a reason to fix it up, to make it the home my mate wants, I’ll bust my ass to do just that.

Instead of excitement, I see only trepidation in Luna’s eyes.

“That’s not what my mama taught me,” she says, shaking her head slowly. “She says wolves can’t be trusted. I might be murdered like my daddy before me. You’d best save us both any trouble by letting me go home right now.”

As we looked for Luna in the weeks after my visit to Sterlina, I’d asked old man Waters about wolves who might have left the pack before I became Alpha, and he mentioned a murder and the disappearance of the man’s wife. In itself, death isn’t any more rare among werewolves than it is humans. We live rough lives, have hot tempers, and can turn into vicious animals at the drop of a hat. What’s rare is a woman choosing to leave the pack bond and set out as a lone wolf instead of grieving with the pack.

But once the pack bond is severed, a lone wolf is just that—alone. She chose to cut ties with the pack, and they respected her decision. No one knew she was carrying a child... Until now.

“We can discuss this later,” I say to Luna at last. “Tonight, I’d like to introduce you to the pack.”

Her eyes go wide, and she crosses her arms over her chest, her lip jutting out in defiance. “I don’t want to.”

“Why wouldn’t you want to meet the pack?” I ask, confused.

“They’re not my pack,” she says, her chin rising. “Mama and me are lone wolves. We don’t need a pack. We got each other.”

“Okay,” I say. “I understand that’s how you lived up until now. But that way of life leads to this—your mother’s in critical condition, and you have no one to protect you. That’s what the pack is for. They’ll protect you.”

“She said you’d say that.”

“She did?”

“She said wolves are liars and tricksters, and you’ll tell me what I want to hear. And here you are. I don’t know you, and I’m not about to believe you!” She turns and bolts toward the back of the house.

In a few quick strides, I catch up to her, my arms wrapping around her. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Home,” she says, and her voice quavers. “I don’t like it here, and I don’t like *you*.”

Her words slice through my anger. This is not the kind of happy introduction I anticipated. How can anyone not care that they have a *True Mate*? It’s like walking away after finding out you won the fucking lottery—and that the ticket is held by the love of your life.

“You’ll feel differently once you’re bonded with me and the pack.”

“No, I won’t,” she hollers, kicking to free herself. “I will never be bonded to anyone but my mama. Never never never!”

That’s about enough of her tantrum for me. I pick her up and throw her over my shoulder, amazed at how light she is. She’s just a whisp of a girl, but she’s also eighteen, which is way too old for this shit. “You’re just going to have to learn to accept it,” I growl, stalking out the door.

I carry her down the front steps and toward my truck. She shrieks like a banshee the entire way. No doubt the neighbors are getting an eyeful of my new mate and me, if they’re not already at the cookout, preparing for the meeting.

I place Luna on the passenger seat and flatten a hand against her torso, pinning her there. I stare her down, my wolf rising to the surface to show his dominance. “Stay,” I grit out.

She stiffens but drops her gaze, her submissive nature unable to stand up to mine for long. I rarely use my dominance against a submissive—I rarely have to. Submissive wolves usually don’t challenge dominant ones this way. It’s something I’ve had to do with other dominant wolves more than I’d like lately, though. I thought taking a mate would fix that problem, but if she’s the mate, I’m not so sure. I expected a woman, not a headstrong little brat.

I crush the urge to bend her over the seat and fuck her hard and deep, forcing her submission until she’s bonded with me and has no choice but to bend to my will. But that’s only fun when the woman is being a brat on purpose because she wants that treatment. So I slam the door in Luna’s face

and circle the truck, grinding my teeth in irritation and frustration. It's one thing to be new to a pack and not know our customs, but Luna's doesn't seem to understand how to be a werewolf at all.

I hate to admit it, but I'm relieved to be joining the pack for dinner, so I don't have to deal with the crazy on my own for the rest of the night. Luna is... A lot. I thought I was getting a partner to help me, not a child to raise. She turns to the window, crossing her arms and sulking as we zoom along at an ungodly speed like the devil's on our tail. We sail past boarded-up buildings, decrepit, decaying parts of town, and head for the place we all gather—the Creebay Preserve at the edge of town.

All the wolves in Jacksonville hunt in the Creebay Preserve, though we all live in town, most of the pack making homes in the same neighborhood as mine. The preserve is our hunting ground, and though we could get there in a few minutes of brisk running, I don't trust Luna not to take off.

The preserve is seventy-five acres of old-growth oaks, magnolia, and water oaks, with creeks and saltwater marshes throughout. It's teeming with life, and it belongs to our pack. I'm hoping Luna will feel at home here, too. As I drive, I calm my temper and try to see things from her point of view. She must be rattled at her departure from the swamp into the God-awful city Jacksonville has become after decades of storms.

When we arrive at the picnic area, the scent of cooking meat tickles my nose and stimulates my growing hunger. I park the truck at the edge of the clearing, hop down, and circle the hood to open Luna's door. Before assisting her down from the truck, I hiss in her ear, "Behave."

"Why should I?" she snarls. "You don't listen to what I want."

"Just behave," I repeat. "You're here to meet the pack. They're not enemies, Luna. They're here to protect and welcome you as my mate. They'll be your new family."

"I don't need a new family," Luna says, her lip quivering. "I've got Mama."

"And now you'll have so much more," I assure her, taking her hand in a firm but gentle grip and leading her away from the truck.

Members of the pack have already started a fire in the fire pit. A deer is roasting on a spit over the flames. Several wolves lift their hands in greeting as we approach.

"Greetings, Alpha," Hati calls to me from across the fire pit.

"Jacksonville pack," I say with a nod. "I've got someone I want you to

meet.”

Luna yanks her hand away from me with a low snarl.

I whirl to face her. “That is not behaving,” I growl in a deadly voice. “You are going to meet my pack—*your* pack. If you give them a chance, they’ll welcome you with warmth and hospitality. Can you stop with the suspicion and give them the benefit of the doubt?”

She glares at me, extends her hand, and stiffens. I take her hand and lead her across the sandy clearing. Everyone is waiting, watching my new mate, a wolf they’ve never met. No one even knew she existed, since we don’t hunt in panther territory, where her mother retreated after leaving the pack eighteen years ago.

The rest of the pack—Adolfa, Lobo, Borris, Bleddyn, Chann, Trixie, and the others—form a half-circle.

“Jacksonville Pack,” I announce in a loud, clear voice. “Meet my True Mate, Luna.”

I draw her hand toward my lips, intending to kiss her knuckles. When I feel her resistance, I flash her a warning glare. She relents, but I doubt the effect looks exceptionally loving. When I glance at my packmates, some give me sympathetic smiles, some appear confused, a few shake their heads.

As I release my grip on her hand, my anger starts to boil. It’s not like I’m asking to mate with her in front of them. The girl could chill the fuck out a little.

Adolfa, sweetheart that she is, comes to my rescue. Hurrying over to Luna, she smiles warmly and extends a hand. “Welcome, little one. You’re downright lovely. We’re all mighty pleased to make your acquaintance.

Luna smiles uncertainly and shies toward me. My chest swells with warmth.

“I’m Adolfa and those squealing monsters over there—” With her free hand, my packmate points to a group of children splashing in the saltmarsh through the trees. “Are my kids. Well, at least a few of them.”

Luna shakes Adolfa’s hand with solemn precision. “I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.”

I turn and smile broadly at my pack. “My Luna is tired from her journey. She’s had a long day. Let’s all make her feel welcome.”

“Of course,” Lobo says, stepping forward. He, too, extends his hand to Luna and introduces himself and adds, “I’m Adolfa’s mate.”

Luna repeats her overly formal greeting, introducing herself to him.

Then, in turn, each pack member does the same. I stand by proudly, watching my mate meet her new packmates. When they've finished, Luna looks a bit overwhelmed, so I wrap an arm around her waist to comfort her. Instead of relaxing into me, she tenses.

"Let her have some breathing room," Adolpha says, prying Luna from my grip. "I'm sure our new member would like some girl talk after a day with you."

I growl low in my throat at the thought of being separated from my mate, but Luna's grateful smile at the older female lets me know she welcomes the idea. With a grumble, I relent and go attend to some business with Hati. After all, if Luna is to be my True Mate, she'll have to learn to be left on her own at times.

When I reach Hati, I glance back at Luna, who eyes me from a couple of yards away. I smile at her, and she pivots away, quickly following Adolpha. But she was looking, watching me. Does she already feel the attachment the way I do?

"Do you have all the needed weapons for our siege?" I say in a low voice to Hati.

Standing much shorter than my six-foot-six height, Hati draws himself tall and leans in. "Sure do, boss. Lobo and I forged wooden bullets. Enough to put the motherfuckers into the afterlife ten times over."

"Good," I say, frowning and squeezing the back of my neck to ease some of the tension from my muscles. "Then we're set for the night of the full moon."

"A month from now, we'll be rid of the bastards." He pauses and nods over to where Luna and some of the women are talking. "She's the one, huh?"

"According to Starlina," I confirm.

"You went to see that old witch?" Hati says with a shudder. "She scares the shit out of me."

"She's formidable," I admit. "But I needed information, and she's the one who could give it. That little sprout over there is apparently not just my mate, but my True Mate." Smiling, I turn my head to gaze at Luna only to find her in a half-crouch, pivoting in a circle of females. Same as on the porch, she looks like she's about to wolf out and launch into an attack.

"Stay back," she hisses, holding out a hand in front of her as if to ward them off.

“Jesus Christ,” I mutter, rushing to retrieve her.

“Ladies,” I say, nodding as I take Luna’s arm and drag her away from the others.

“Let me go,” she shrieks, wrenching her arm free and drawing the attention of some of the other wolves in the pack.

“What the fuck?” I growl.

“Th-they were getting too close,” she says, looking a bit chastised. “I was scared.”

Her big lavender eyes blink up at me, her expression so lost that I want to comfort her.

“Guess I shouldn’t have left you to fend for yourself,” I say, my irritation melting. “Just stick with me through the rest of the evening.”

She nods mutely, allowing me to put a protective arm around her as I lead her back to the others. Second thoughts creep in. Could Starlina have been fucking with me? She could be wrong, or it could be a different woman named Luna. The pull I feel for this pup could be just pity and my own dumb hope that somewhere I’d find a True Mate. More likely, I don’t have one at all, like most wolves, and I should take a mate in whoever is most able to help me lead the pack.

It was a mistake to bring Luna before the pack so soon. I should have mated her first to make sure. My Second appears, sauntering from the woods, and my thoughts turn to her. Is she the one fucking with me? Is this her sick way of making a point, that just because someone is labeled a True Mate, that doesn’t make them a good match or able to lead. Ama has what it takes. If shewolves were Alphas, she’d be one. She’d certainly be an excellent choice to stand beside me against encroaching supernaturals—she’s cunning and strong and fierce.

Everything the waifish girl beside me most certainly is not.

I glare at Ama but gesture for her to join us. She better hope she’s not playing a prank on me because there’s not one thing funny about this shit.

“Yeah, boss?” she says, once she’s standing in front of me. Her face is neutral, void of expression.

“I want you by my side through this event,” I order.

Her eyes flit to Luna, and a flicker of scorn crosses her pretty face. “More babysitting, sir?”

A growl rumbles in my throat, but I don’t push my dominance at her. I want her compliance out of respect, not because I force it. “Do as your Alpha

asks.”

“Understood,” she grits out. She follows me to the picnic tables, and she, Luna, and I sit. Adolpha hurries to place the first plate before me while her mate serves Luna and Ama. Then they go to fetch their own plates.

Luna looks excited for the first time today, a feral smile on her face as she eyes the deer and roasted vegetables. She lowers her head, grabs the meat between her teeth, starts gnawing like a dog with a bone. She hunches over her food, snarling and growling I reach over, ready to teach her some fucking manners. What the fuck? She grew up with a lone wolf, but this... This is beyond that. She’s like an animal even in human form.

Everyone stares with pitying looks on their faces or avoids eye contact when I glare at them. Beside me, Luna continues eating like a savage, meat juices dripping off her chin. Is she doing this to piss me off? Or does she just have so little shame she doesn’t mind completely humiliating herself in front of my entire pack? Fury builds inside me as I watch her scoop up a handful of vegetables with her bare hand and shovel them into her mouth.

This *feral child* can’t possibly be my mate. I wanted someone who knows what she’s doing, someone clever and powerful, an equal to me. I need someone to help me run the pack and hold back the encroaching vamps, not an infant without basic table manners.

Only Ama meets my eyes, a challenge in her gaze as if she’s silently saying *I told you so*. “You could always dissolve the bond and take someone of your choosing,” she reminds me.

My stomach hardens into a stone. “I didn’t know this is what Luna would be like,” I admit. “But I’m not doing that.”

“Suit yourself,” Ama says with a shrug, spearing a carrot on her fork and popping it into her mouth with an arched brow, her eyes cutting to Luna, who’s picking her teeth with a fingernail.

I’m so pissed I don’t even know who to direct my anger at—Ama for being a smug bitch, Luna for being a complete imbecile, or fate herself for cursing me with this mate, if that’s what she is. I find myself hoping this is a joke, that someone is fucking with me. Right now, it seems preferable to having a True Mate who doesn’t understand basic human decency.

We finish the meal in tense silence. Plenty of wolves are rough around the edges, and our manners probably leave something to be desired if we were dining in high society, but Luna is something else. She snatches more meat several times and eats like a wild dog, getting food on her face and

hands and wiping it on her clothes. When it's time to go, I'm beyond fucking ready, but Luna has other ideas and tries to take off into the woods. The whole shitty ordeal ends with me throwing her over my shoulder and carrying her kicking and screaming back to my truck.

And if I thought things couldn't get worse, I'm going to have to mate with this creature to secure our bond and get proof that we're True Mates.

Chapter Five

Axel

In the truck, I roll down the windows, letting the hot, damp air in. Luna pokes a finger out into the air rushing by, then sneaks a glance at me. When I don't reprimand her, she sticks a hand out, spreading her fingers and letting the wind stream between them. A shy smile spreads across her face, growing bigger as she hangs her arm out, swooping it up and down through the air currents. I offer her a smile, and she laughs, turning back to the window. She's like a little kid playing airplane with her hand.

Maybe I was too hard on her at the picnic. I should have eased her in more slowly, gotten to know her before I showed her off to the pack. I'll just have to teach her a few things before I take her out in public again. I can't have the pack thinking my mate is some kind of idiot.

By the time we get home, we've both calmed down.

"Where's Mama?" she asks, peering off into the late evening darkness.

"She's still at the healers," I say. "I'm sure she'll come right here when your mother wakes up. So this is the best place for you to stay until we hear back."

Luna looks hesitant, then nods. "If she's going to bring news here, I'll stay."

"We need to confirm that we're True Mates, anyway," I say. "Are you ready to do that?"

She nods. "I'm ready."

I'm a little surprised she's so willing, but it only makes my life easier, so I lead her inside and up to my bedroom. The room is sparsely furnished—just a king-sized bed, a dresser, two nightstands, and a closet—but it's big enough for the two of us to cohabitate nicely. While Luna washes up, I close the

curtains to give us privacy and light some of the candles I had Ama buy for the occasion. Now that we're alone, I'm more relaxed. If she's a defiant animal in front of the pack, it makes me look weak. If she's an animal in the bedroom, I won't even try to tame her.

Luna emerges from the bathroom and perches on the edge of the bed, gripping her hands together in front of her. "What do you need me to do?"

"We're going to mate," I say, coming to sit next to her with enough space between us, so she doesn't feel crowded. "That's how the True Mate bond forms. Once we have the mark, we'll know for sure that we're made for each other."

She nods, swallowing hard. "Where do we do this... This mating?"

I pat my bed. "Right here."

Her lungs rise and fall in a sigh. "What should I do?"

I'm not surprised she's a virgin, but I'm a bit surprised by how pleased my wolf is at the knowledge that she hasn't mated before. I usually like a woman who knows what she's doing, but Luna isn't any woman. She's my mate, and knowing that she'll only ever be mine makes my wolf swell with pride. She was made for us and us alone, and we will take what is ours and give her all the pleasure she's never had in return.

"All you have to do is lay back and enjoy it," I say. "It hurts for a minute the first time, but then it feels good." My cock begins to stiffen at the thought. I've heard stories about how amazing it is to fuck a True Mate, like nothing else on earth. We have plenty of time to learn each other, for her to learn what she's doing and for me to learn her body and how to give it pleasure. It can only get better from here.

"Mama told me about True Mates," Luna says. "I thought it was something you were, not something you did."

"It's both," I say. "Once you go into heat, I'll breed you, and you'll produce an heir to raise. Hopefully many heirs. Our leadership will be even stronger with many pups."

"Where do I find them? Do I have to search the swamps and saltmarshes?" Her brow furrows into a quizzical expression.

"No, my love," I say, taking her hand. "You'll give birth to them. They'll grow inside you."

She gazes down at her stomach, sweeping her head slowly from side to side. When she lifts her head to gaze at me, her lavender eyes stare at me in confusion. "Like I came from Mama's belly?"

“Exactly like that,” I say.

“So an heir is a baby?”

“Right,” I say. “*Our* baby.”

“Well, I don’t go into heat no more,” she says. “I did once, but I wanted to leave the swamp, and Mama said we couldn’t have that. So she got a spell put on me to suppress it from then on.”

“When was that?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” she says. “A long time back. I think I built the house around then.”

I nod. “We’ll get that spell reversed. An Alpha must breed his mate and give her heirs.”

My cock throbs at the thought of breeding her, filling her with my seed and my children. My wolf growls at me to take her and claim her now, to breed her full of our babies. But I know she hasn’t been seeking a True Mate like we have, and she deserves tenderness and care her first time, so I push back my wolf instinct and focus on my mate.

“How about a nice shower to relax?” My cock engorges even more at the thought of holding her in my arms beneath warm water.

“That’s when it rains from the ceiling?”

“Yes,” I say with a nod. “Would you like to do that?”

“Can I scrub all this shit from my face?” She taps her cheek.

“Yes, you can scrub all the shit from your face. I’ll even help.”

Her luscious lips part, and she nods shyly. “Okay.”

This time she doesn’t resist, taking my hand when I offer and letting me lead her to the ensuite bathroom. The walls are covered with black and white checkered subway tiles. The sink is slightly stained with rust from the pipes, and the white-tiled shower is small, but there’s room enough for two.

I lean into the shower stall and turn on the hot water. When I turn around, Luna has already stripped, and I suck in a breath at the sight of her stunning, petite little body. This time, I don’t have to keep it professional in front of Ama. I take my time, drinking in the sight of her perky little tits, the nipples a soft, rose-petal pink that makes me want to lick them. Her belly is flat, but I have a feeling that before a meal, it will be concave—until I fill it with my heir. Her ribs protrude more than they should, and her hips aren’t yet wide enough for childbirth, no doubt delayed in growth by malnutrition. I intend to fix that first thing, feeding her until she’s plump before her next heat, when it’s time for her to grow round with child.

When my eyes dip lower, to the tangle of pubic hair covering her mound, my mouth waters and my erection cries for release.

“What?” she asks, her voice an octave higher, a mixture of defensiveness and uncertainty.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” I say, scanning down her long, coltish legs, which are too thin but nicely muscled anyway. I imagine them wrapped around my waist as I send her into throes of ecstasy. Waiting for her to get skittish, I take a slow step forward, giving her time to protest. When she doesn’t, I lift a hand, then hesitate.

“Can I touch you?”

She nods mutely, and I cup her breast, gently stroking my thumb over her nipple. It’s so soft I can hardly feel it against my calloused skin, as if I’ve brushed wind instead of skin. Her lips part in a gasp, and my cock throbs harder, precum leaking from the tip already.

“You can get in the shower,” I say, stepping back to shed my clothes and toss them to the side.

“What’s that?” she says, pointing to my cock.

“This is my cock,” I say, running a hand down my thick shaft, teasing her a bit. I cup my swollen balls in one hand. “And this is where my seed is. I’ll put my cock inside you to mate, and it spills my seed into your womb.”

Again, I wait for skittishness, but instead, she wrinkles her nose as if it’s distasteful and picks her way past me. She steps into the shower, tips her head back, and closes her eyes.

Gorgeous. I clench and unclench my fingers, my wolf panting and eager to explore her naked body. I ease into the shower behind her.

Her head jerks up, and her muscles grow taut. “What are you doing in here?”

“Easy, love. I’m going to help wash you.” I squirt a dollop of the shampoo sitting on the ledge of the tiny, frosted window into my hand and proceed to massage her wet hair. “You’re doing great.”

She closes her eyes and lets her shoulders fall away from her ears. It’s progress. I’ll take it.

“You smell amazing to me,” I murmur as I lovingly rub my fingertips against her scalp. My rigid cock nudges her bare ass as I work, but she doesn’t protest.

She presses her palms on the tiled wall in front of her and lets her head fall back, which causes her perky little tits to rise.

Saliva fills my mouth. Damn, how I long to suck those perfect rosebud nipples, make her tremble and whimper for more.

I turn her, and the water streams over her closed eyes and face. Streaks of colorful make-up infused water stream down her body and are carried away in the drain beneath her feet. Gently, I run my fingers over her cheeks and her neck. And then I can't help myself—I lower my mouth to her neck. I nibble and suck my way down to her collarbone, murmuring her praises, stroking her wet nipples with my thumbs again until they stand as erect as my penis.

She tenses for a second, then relaxes, as if consumed by sensation.

“When we're mated, we'll form the True Mate bond, and we'll be bound together for life. I'll protect you always,” I breathe into the shell of her ear. “And your mother.”

A sweet smile forms on her lips, and I know I've said the right thing. She gazes up at me, hope dawning on her face. “Always?”

“Always, my mate,” I say, matching her smile with mine. “Trust me, and I'll make you feel good.”

She sways closer, and I pinch her nipples gently, then slide my hands down her slippery sides to her narrow hips. Crouching, I take one of her hard nipples into my mouth, sucking gently.

She lets out a little moan.

“Does that feel good?” I say, easing back.

“Yes,” she says through a gasp. “So good.”

“You taste so good.” I massage both breasts while I suck first one rosy nipple and then the other. My cock is about to explode with need, but I beat down my wolf and force myself to be a patient man. I've never wanted someone so badly, so ravenously. My wolf roars for me to consume her, to fuck her raw and hard, to dominate her until she breaks and then put her back together again with so much love and care that it shatters her all over again.

She is *mine*. Ours. And my wolf sure as fuck wants to claim her as such.

Instead, I hold myself back, kneeling in front of her like the goddess she is.

“What are you doing?” she asks, peering down at me with curiosity and suspicion.

“Now I'm going to taste all of you,” I say, my voice husky with desire. I push her gently back against the wall and spread her delicate lips to reveal the pink bud of her clit. My cock throbs more precum, but I ignore it, leaning in and inhaling her scent. Her smell is divine, like nectar to my soul. Overcome,

I let my mouth descend on her untouched, virgin flesh, lapping at her pearly clit and tasting the glistening pink slit of her cunt.

She lets out a whimper, her thighs quivering as the tip of my tongue finds her tiny opening and prods it, tasting inside. I've eaten plenty of pussy, but none have tasted like hers, like the sweetest dessert waiting for me to gorge myself like a glutton. I force my tongue into her virgin entrance, and she cries out in pleasure, gripping my head with both hands. I grab her legs and throw them over my shoulders, burying my face in her, sucking and licking and thrusting my tongue into her until her juices drip down my chin. Her cries echo through the bathroom as she comes, gripping my head and riding my face hard with no inhibition.

I can't wait another minute to be inside her tight little pussy. I reach behind her, turn off the water, and stand.

"Was that it?" she asks, looking dazed with lust. "Mating?"

"That was just the beginning," I say with a cocky grin. I dry her off with a soft towel and scoop her up, carrying her to the bedroom like a princess. I throw the covers off the bed and lay her down gently, standing over my tiny bride ready to be ravished by my wolf and my cock.

"Lie back," I command, spreading her knees and gazing down at her slick pink cunt. Her clit is swollen and a deeper pink now, her delicate folds glistening with readiness. She does as she's told, panting with eagerness, her eyes dazed by what just happened. My own head spins with a desire like nothing I've ever known, a hunger as insatiable as a vampire's as I inhale deeply of her perfect scent, made just for me.

"You're a masterpiece," I murmur.

Reaching down, I stretch her opening wide with one hand and work a finger into her tiny hole with the other. She gasps, tensing up. The clench of her walls around my finger makes my cock threaten to erupt cum all over her like a geyser.

I force myself to focus on her, sliding my finger deeper until I feel the barrier of her virginity. I long to thrust my finger through, but that honor belongs to my engorged cock. I lower myself between her legs, taking my cock in my hand and stroking the swollen head up and down her slick folds.

"This will hurt at first, but try to relax, and the pleasure is even more than what I just gave you."

Her eyes close, and she settles her head onto the pillow. She reaches up, her tiny hands gripping my broad shoulders. "I want more," she moans.

“That’s it, Luna love. Just let me pleasure you. You have no idea how happy I am that I’ve found you.” I practically purr as my heart floods with joy at having discovered my True Mate, the one made just for me and my wolf. My wolf roars with lust and joy inside me, frantic to take what’s ours. She raises her narrow hips, and I look down at her perfect little body, reminded again how small and fragile she is beneath my powerful body. All the more reason to treasure her and treat her like the precious creature she is. *Our mate.*

I rock my hips against hers, coating my cock with her fragrant juices as her knees open and she arches up, seeking our completion. I can feel her wolf calling to mine, the way mine is to hers. They want to be one, to join, to make the unbreakable bond that only True Mates can share.

I lower my mouth to hers and kiss her gently and thoroughly, holding myself back. As she responds to my kiss and finds her rhythm with mine, I fit the head of my erection to her tight, virgin entrance and press. Nothing happens for a moment, and I have to apply more force than I expected to breach her opening. When her flesh yields and my bare tip breaches the vicelike grip of her unopened pussy, her fingertips dig into my biceps and she cries out, the sound echoing into my very soul.

“It hurts,” she gasps.

I ease away from the kiss and bring my mouth to her ear. “It will only hurt for a bit,” I whisper. “Relax and I’ll make love to you until all you remember is pleasure.”

She nods, blinking a tiny teardrop from the corner of her eye. I wipe it away with my thumb, overcome by a swell of love and a primal need to possess my mate that can’t be stopped. With a groan, I force my cock deeper, opening her channel for the first time until I feel the barrier of her virginity stretch and then slowly tear around the head of my cock. She cries out again, and I bury my thick length all the way inside her tight little pussy, claiming every inch of her sacred depths for my own.

Her walls clamp down around me so tight I think I’ll erupt inside her instantly. I hold myself back, forcing myself not to fuck her hard and raw, pounding her into the bed until she screams my name. I can feel the head of my bare cock pressed up against her cervix, and all I want to do is breed her, seed her belly with my babies right here and now.

“You are *mine*,” I growl, my wolf surfacing. She nods, biting her lips together, tears pooling in her eyes. I kiss her gently, but my wolf will not be

held back any longer. He wants to release our seed deep inside her. A roar tears from my lips, and I drive into her tight flesh again and again, feeling a bond forming with each powerful, claiming thrust. She cries out each time, but she doesn't fight destiny. She spreads her knees wide and gives herself over to me completely, her tiny little body absorbing the brute force of my thrusts, submitting to my need to possess her delicate little body and wild soul. An overpowering sense of love and ownership and completeness fill my chest, a raw joy I never imagined possible.

She is my True Mate.

She is *ours*.

Apparently you don't have to cum to know. I can feel it in my blood, my bones, my wolf, my *soul*. I feel a burning ache at the base of my cock, and realize I'm starting to form a knot, something I thought was only legend, something that happens only with a True Mate. A shocking heat throbs in my arm, like a brand is searing into my skin.

Luna shrieks, grabbing her own arm. A glowing white crescent moon appears on her skin, branded by the power of the ritual, of our bond, of the rightness of our union.

I want to roar my pleasure and come and come and come, spurting my potent seed inside her until she's overflowing. But I know that once the knot forms fully, she'll have to come too before we can be separated, so I hold back, waiting for her.

"What's happening?" she cries. "What are you doing to me?" She shoves me away, her eyes full of panic that tells me neither of us will be coming.

Fighting back my wolf instinct to finish the claiming and breed her, I roll to the side. My erection, still pulsing and slick with her blood, slides from her wet core. "It's the True Mate bond forming, Luna. This is a good thing. It means we're bound together forever. I'll love and protect you for eternity." I reach to comfort her, but she jumps from the bed, her eyes wild as she reaches between her legs and pulls her hand away bloody.

"I don't want eternity," she screams. "Why do I feel this way? Did you cast a spell over me? Make it go away!" She digs at the glowing mark with her fingernails, drawing blood from her arm, too.

"Luna, no," I protest in horror. "What are you doing?" I make a grab from her, but she ducks aside and races from the room.

Fuck!

I've found my True Mate only to be rejected by her before we even

finished mating.

Chapter Six

Luna

The glowing moon on my arm burns as I race through Axel's house, and my core throbs with raw pain and unfilled need, like he put an empty spot inside me that only he can fill, and it will always be empty now, always crave him returning to fill it. Blood trickles down my legs along with my own wetness, but I ignore it and the call of my mate as I run for the door. It seems I've been branded, something mama once told me people called "cowboys" do to their cattle. When they're branded, the cowboy always knows which cows are his. I didn't know they had to mate them first.

Does that make me Axel's? Now that he's mated me and branded me, do I belong to him instead of myself and Mama and the swamp?

I hear his footsteps behind me, like he's coming to claim his property the way Mama and me claimed our little hillock in panther territory and chased off anyone who tried to crowd in. The house was big enough for only two, and the hillock only big enough for one house. But my body is not Axel's house, even if he was inside me. My body is my house, and there's only room for one.

I run outside, scent the air real quick and then take to my wolfskin. It's easy, since I'm not wearing a stitch of clothes. I run fast, racing back toward the woods and the swamps where I belong. This whole crazy day feels like a bad dream, the kind I had when I was a kid where I'd wake up shrieking like a panther because I was sure I was drowning, that the swamp had come alive and was sucking me under the mud and muck, where I couldn't breathe the way an ogre could.

This day is going to drown me. There's too much of it, too many things that happened too fast, without giving me a chance to breathe or think them

over. There was the attack on Mama, and the Ama wolf, and the pack, and Axel.

Axel.

A little ripple goes through me, making my fur stand on end as I run. He scares me, and he's so big, big as an ogre, but not as harmless. But my wolf craves him again already, craves his touch and his nearness, his scent, his wolf, his wildness, his possessiveness. My wolf wants all the things my human mind doesn't. I have to force her to keep running away from him, to not circle back and run to his house and slip onto his sheets and let him fill me with so much pleasure I think I'll break apart at the seams, the way the part he called a cock broke me apart between my legs, in the place I call my heat.

That's the part that ached and throbbed and felt so good and so bad at the same time when I went into heat the one time before Mama stopped the torture by giving me potion every time it started to come back. Only when Axel sank his cock deep, deep into the core of that heat did it wake up again. That's when I knew what I'd wanted and needed that time, when I was in heat. I'm not now, but I still want to feel it again, even though it hurt like a knife inside me and made me bleed. I crave him filling the aching need, the emptiness he filled me with even as my soul cleaved to his.

I'm almost through the woods and back to the swamp when a man slides from the trees like a midnight shadow.

His skin matches the dark sky overhead, and there's a faint red glow emanating from his onyx eyes. He must be one of Axel's packmates, though I don't remember him. I should have smelled him, but maybe I was too busy warring with the thoughts in my brain that are swarming like swamp rats in a flood.

I take a few sniffs, but he *has* no scent except for the faint whiff of ash. How is this possible?

Facing him, I bare my teeth and snarl.

He puts out his palms. "Easy," he says, his voice deep and smooth and accented with a strange tint of something different than anyone I met today. "I mean you no harm. I was just out hunting in the woods. Same as you, little wolfie."

I've never been outside the swamp, but I know this is no werewolf. At least, not one I've met. He doesn't smell familiar at all, and I wonder how I'd know if he was a friend or not. I decide to shift back to human and ask. When

I emerge into my human form, I shy back, baring my teeth still. “What are you?” I hiss. “How come you have no scent?”

“I have no idea. How is it you *have* a scent?” He smiles broadly, revealing two of the longest, pointiest canine teeth I’ve ever seen. They’re longer and sharper and thinner than wolves’ or even panthers’ teeth.

I ignore his question and cant my head to the side, studying him. “You’re not a wolf?” I ask, making a guess.

“Far from it,” he says easily.

“Well, I’m hiding from the wolves. So don’t tell them you saw me.”

“Good plan,” he says. “The wolves can’t be trusted.”

Instantly, I relax. This man speaks my language—the language Mama spoke. Hearing her words from him assures me that he can be trusted. He’s on my side, just like she was.

“They captured me,” I say. “But I escaped.”

“Is that so?” he asks. “And how long were you with them?”

“Only a day,” I answer. “But they want me back. They’re chasing me right now, so I’d better go.”

“Don’t go so soon,” he says. “And you can’t possibly escape a wolf pack on your own. Maybe I can help.”

“Their Alpha thinks I’m his True Mate,” I say, showing him the mark on my arm. “But I can’t be. I have to find my mama and go home. She’s at a healer’s at the edge of the swamp where we live, in panther territory.”

“You must mean Bogbeast Waters,” he says, arching one midnight-black eyebrow.

My eyes narrow as I regard him. He doesn’t seem hostile, though, and Mama only told me to watch out for wolves, not other things. Most other creatures don’t bother us—the panthers always left us alone until today, even though we claimed a tiny spot in their territory; ogres don’t bother with wolves; and catfish only sting because they want to live, same as any other creature.

“You know the place?” I ask. Just then, a howl sounds someway off, and a shiver clutches at my backbone like a cold hand rising from the swamp. My wolf threatens to erupt and drag me back, answering the call. It must be Axel and whatever spell he cast over me that gave me the mark on my arm. I almost choke with the need to go to him.

The tall man snaps his fingers, jerking me back. “Tell you what,” he says. “It’s late, and it seems you truly are being hunted, so why don’t we go

somewhere safe? I'll guard you against the wolves tonight and in the morning, I shall take you to the healer's place so you can check on your mother. Did the healer live in a dome-shaped, canvas yurt, painted with red symbols?"

"Yes," I say, relief washing through me. "That's the place."

"I know her well. Her name is Artuna. What do you say? Come and rest a while. In the morning, we'll be off. A young thing such as you shouldn't be out at night with all the predators around. And surely you're too small to be a danger to me, even if you *are* a wolf."

"Do you think I could go home instead?" I ask, my voice small. I'm tired and I just want to rest my head in the familiar, comfortable little house I've always known.

"Oh, I don't think so," he says. "Not tonight. If the wolves kidnapped you, they'll know where to find your house. They'll never think to check my place."

"Okay," I say reluctantly, glancing at the shroud of the swamp's darkness with longing. He's right. Ama was at my house, and she can tell Axel where to find it again.

"Good," the man says. "I'm Evan, by the way."

I wonder if he expects me to repeat the words Lewis taught me, or if I can sniff him and get more information that way. But he doesn't seem to require a handshake, and when I hear footsteps in the distance, I know there's no time for sniffing.

"Come then," Evan says, and before I can say a word, he scoops me up in his arms and shoots through the forest at breakneck speed, even faster than I can run as a wolf. Trees blur by like they did in Axel's truck, and only a moment later, he's stopping in front of a large dwelling near a running creek. I don't see how this can be a place to hide, as the house is huge and made of some kind of white stone. I can barely see the water in the night, but the trickling sound is like a balm to my ears, and the damp scent of moss fills my heart with comfort.

Pushing aside the massive steel door, he sets me inside and says, "Welcome to my lair."

Something about this lair-house makes me uneasy. Despite the hot night outside, the air inside feels chilly and dry and dead. I glance around, hugging my naked self. Timbers crisscross the high ceilings overhead, but everything else in the house feels unnatural and cold, from the shiny, white stone floors

to the silver legs to the chairs and glass tables beside the couches.

Suddenly, I miss the wooden house with peeling yellow coloring the outside walls that my mate lives in. It was big and fancy compared to mine, with things inside it that don't have names in my vocabulary. But compared to this, it was small and homey. A shiver crawls up my spine at the thought of living there, with a wolf who is apparently my True Mate. Longing fills my soul at the thought of Axel, but dread sits like a hulking beast alongside the desire.

I turn toward the door, only to see Evan staring at me expectantly.

“Can I offer you something to drink? Water, perhaps?”

“I can just drink from the creek,” I offer, gesturing with my thumb. In truth, I want out of this strange, clean house, want to run back into the familiar chaos of the bog.

“Nonsense. That wouldn't be civilized, would it?” Evan tsks and gives me a reproachful look.

I shrug, feeling as uncomfortable as when Axel dragged me in front of his pack and the whole lot of them stared at once. Never in my life had so many eyes been on me, and it set my teeth on edge. Now, just one man makes me feel as unnerved. Having never heard the word “civilized” before today, how should I know if it's civilized to drink water from a stream?

Evan studies me through one eye while stroking his jaw. He seems to be assessing me, sizing me up like I size up a catfish before reaching down into the mud for it. After a beat, he pivots and strides toward a spigot jutting from the wall. He fills a glass jar, steps in my direction, and hands it to me. “Please, sit.”

He points to a grand chair that might be a throne for the kings Mama read books about. It's long and made of silver arms and legs and a white mattress in a seated position. It could fit a whole slew of kings. I know of furniture, since I built a table for our house, and shelves for our things, but Mama and I live simply.

Evan lays a black blanket over the spot he wants me to sit, and I sink into the softness. I'm not used to furniture so large and so grand. I'm not even sure of the name for most of it. Mama and I own something much smaller that we found near the spring for a place to sit during the day. Mildew had begun to claim it, but we set it out in the sun for a few days until the smell had lessened. For sleep, we shift into wolves and curl up on the rag rugs we made out of clothing and other scraps we've found in the weeds. The clothes

were covering bones, so no sense in letting them go to waste, and sometimes things wash up or we cross them in our hunts. If we sleep in our wolfskins, we're much more alert to danger, so there's no sense in having a bed, though I know of them from the stories in a couple soft books Mama brought home one day.

I take the water from Evan's hand and sniff it. It has an odd, chemical smell that I'm not familiar with.

"Sorry about the slight taint," he says, smiling a bit. "The pipes are rusted. It's only... It's copper. Yes, yes, it's copper."

"Oh," I say, taking a sip. It sure as heck doesn't taste like the water in the swamp, or even the salt water that floods in during storms. Realizing I haven't drunk anything all day, though, I drain the glass, making a face at the bad taste coating my tongue. "I bet the stream tastes better."

Evan grins and takes the glass before returning to the spigot. "Here. Let me get you some more. And tell me, why do you need to hide from the other wolves? You are one, after all."

"I told you, they captured me," I say. My chest swells with pride as I recite the words Mama has said so many times. "But I'm a lone wolf. I don't need a pack."

Evan fills the glass and returns, handing it to me. "I certainly can understand that. I myself am most at peace surrounded by water, trees, and sky."

I'm starting to feel *very* relaxed—perhaps the day is catching up to me. I yawn, my eyelids falling as if chained to the floor. With effort, I manage to drag them open.

Evan gives me a sympathetic smile. "You seem tired. Are you tired? I can fix a bed for you."

"No, no," I say, suppressing another yawn. "I can just sleep here."

I fall back into the plush couch. I could get used to this kind of comfort.

"So, tell me more about this pack of wolves who captured you," Evan says. "How many were there?"

"Oh, yes," I murmur, my lids beginning to close again. "There were a lot of them."

"How many is a lot?"

"Enough to fill a dozen picnic tables," I say, blinking to force my eyes open.

"Gosh, that's quite a lot," Evan says. "Do you think they'll hurt me if

they find you here?”

“No,” I assure him. “Surely not. They only ever mentioned fighting vampires.”

“Vampires,” he exclaims. “You don’t say!”

I nod groggily. “Right. I’ve heard of those before. But I’ve never met a vampire. Have you?”

“Oh, no,” Evan says. “Wouldn’t that be terrifying? I wonder what the wolves have in mind for their attack?” He strokes his temple with his long fingers.

“I don’t know,” I say, trying to answer him since he’s been nice to me, though I just want to sleep. I let my eyes fall closed, but my mouth keeps going. “I only heard a bit about wooden bullets.”

“Oh, that sounds awful. Did they say when it would happen?”

“Full moon,” I mumble, then sink into the cushion behind my head. I can’t stay awake another second, I’m sure.

When two arms wrap me in the black blanket and slide underneath me to heft me into the air, I can barely respond.

“Don’t,” I think I mutter, but I’m not sure. And when those two arms gently lower me onto a soft bed and tuck warm covers around me, I still can’t budge, falling into a sleep as deep as the dead.

Chapter Seven

Luna

I wake to the sound of crashing that shakes the floors. I sit up, blinking in the blinding sunlight that makes my head pound. For a second, I can't remember where I am.

Then a familiar voice booms through the house, bringing the whole overwhelming day before back to me. It must be midday judging by the position of the sun, but I feel as groggy as if I barely slept. I can't remember ever having slept so late. I must be sick. That explains the headache and the oversleeping.

"Give me back my mate," a familiar voice thunders from another room. "Or you'll wish you could die, you bloodthirsty leech!"

A rush of joy floods my heart at the sound of Axel's voice, and the brand on my arm pierces me with fiery heat. But then I remember fleeing his house, hiding from him, the pain and confusion of the mating ritual he performed.

"I'm not keeping her from you," Evan says. "I'm merely offering her rest. She chose to come here and did so of her own volition."

Loud footsteps tromp in my direction. The door to my room flies open, and Axel looms over me, a frightening expression of fury marring his face.

I feel instantly, incredibly safe when surrounded by his arms—and because I know I'm not, it makes that feeling terrifying, as if my free will has fled like I did last night.

"Put me down," I cry.

"Like hell." Keeping a fierce grip on me, Axel throws me over his shoulder and carries me out into the bright sunshine, sliding into his truck and buckling me into the other side before powering on the vehicle and speeding away down the gravel drive through the woods.

“How did you find me?” I ask, staring at him, my heart galloping in my chest.

He says nothing, but pushes his foot down, making the truck leap forward and careen along the road even faster. I’m still not used to going so fast, and it’s exhilarating but scary, too. I grip the strap he bound across my chest, trying to catch my breath over the thrill of speed and sound roaring under us like a giant swamp monster.

“Where are you taking me?” I shout over the noise of the engine.

He still says nothing.

Only when he skids to a stop in front of his house and I lurch against the strap does he turn to me. I’m laughing at the sensation of flying, but it quickly dies when I see the blaze of fury in his eyes. “What did you do with the vampire?” he demands.

“What do you mean?” I ask, shrinking back against the door.

“Did you let him suck your blood?”

“N-no,” I say. “I didn’t know that’s what he was. He was nice to me, that’s all.”

His eyes narrow, his nostrils flaring. “Like I was nice to you last night?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did you let him fuck you?”

“What is *fuck*?” I ask, unsure why he’s so angry, but knowing he’s dangerous, like Mama always said. He’s twice my size at least, and unlike last night, when his size felt protective and powerful and *right* as he loomed over me on his bed, now it’s terrifying.

“Tell me exactly what happened,” he says, his voice going from hot as the summer sun to colder than seawater in winter.

“What did I do?” I say, scanning my mind for something, anything I might have done.

“You went to the vampires,” he says, his voice still cold, but sad, too, like when I had to tell Mama I didn’t get anything for dinner and we’d have to sleep hungry again. “Now, tell me what happened from the moment you met that bloodsucker to the moment you left.”

I take a breath and haltingly walk him through every moment, every word we spoke. “Then he gave me something to drink,” I finish. “I thought it was water, but he asked me questions, and then I couldn’t stay awake and I...” I realize I’m blubbering, but the intensity rolling off Axel scares me.

When I stop speaking, Axel just stares at me.

“So, you don’t even know if he drank your blood,” he says. “You were drugged. You could have said or did things you don’t even remember.”

“I didn’t!”

“You gave away our secrets to a vampire!” His words blast through me like the bite of an alligator. “Do you understand how serious this is?”

I bite my lip and shake my head.

“This is a crime that carries a sentence of death for a werewolf,” he says quietly. “Since you didn’t know better, I will ask—hell, I’ll probably have to fucking *beg*—the pack for clemency. They will spare your life, since you are the True Mate of their Alpha. But you will no longer be allowed to join the pack, as this is the deepest betrayal a wolf can fathom. My packmates will never allow a traitor such as you to join, and I cannot in good conscience be your mate and put all of them in danger for my own selfish desires. I will go to our shaman and have her dissolve the bond.”

He reaches out, stroking my hair behind my ear with tenderness that somehow hurts, when combined with the crushing sadness in his eyes. I don’t know what “dissolve the bond” means any more than I know what it means to be bonded. But from the ache in his gaze, I know it can’t mean good things for me. As I slump back in the seat, I realize it can only mean one thing for my mother, too—without his protection, she’s going to die.



Loud footsteps sound on the steps of Axel’s home, making me jerk from my position in a huddled ball on the front-room floor. I’ve been hunched in the corner here for an hour or more, ever since Axel brought me home from the vampire’s and then went off to deal with a crisis at another pack member’s house.

A sense of elation swells in my chest, telling me he’s home. The moon symbol throbs on my arm before he even opens the door. But a far worse brand, the accusation of betraying the wolf pack, hurts even more.

Axel enters, along with Ama and an elder as frail as leaves when they’ve lost their color and begin the process of decay in warm swamp water.

The elder moves slowly, progressing toward me with an unmistakable elegance, like a deer. A large nut-brown satchel rests on her shoulder,

swinging slightly as she moves. “Get up, child,” she says in a loud, clear voice that doesn’t match her wizened features.

I rise obediently as Axel and Ama stand back, eyeing me as the elder approaches.

My limbs begin to tremble. “What are you going to do to me?”

“I’m going to separate your soul from that of your True Mate,” the shaman says, setting her bag on the table in front of Axel’s sofa.

“I hear it hurts like a bitch,” Ama says, sidling closer to Axel and giving me a smug smile.

“Silence,” Axel growls through clenched teeth. “Don’t make it worse than it is.”

Ama drops her gaze to the floor.

Axel’s hands are squeezed into fists, but his eyes are soft as he stares at me with a look that says he regrets this more than I regret going to the vampires. I don’t know why, don’t understand what exactly it means, but the sadness in his eyes tells me that he does.

The elder retrieves a knife and a long, carved stick painted with symbols. Feathers dangle from the end of the carved wood. She retrieves another wooden wand with something like deer hooves affixed to the end. The dried hooves clatter and set my nerves on edge as she rests them on the table. Next, she pulls out two tiny jars of something that glows like the bioluminescence I’ve seen in the sea sometimes when I’ve been exploring with my mother.

When she’s laid out all her instruments, the shaman says, “Close all the curtains and lock the doors. We must seal the space.”

“Ama,” Axel snaps, and Ama rushes around the house, covering the windows and slamming the doors, turning a part of the knob that makes a snicking sound.

When Ama’s done, the elder turns to her and says, “You stand as a witness, Second. And you...” She points a bony finger at Axel. “Come and stand before your True Mate.”

Axel progresses toward me like he’s trudging through quicksand toward his death.

When he stands before me, I blurt out, “It doesn’t have to be this way. Whatever I did, I didn’t know. Maybe the vampire tricked me. Maybe he cast a spell in the water. Maybe he...”

Axel’s lips part as if he’s going to speak, but then they press close, and he shakes his head. “Please proceed, Elder Amexaryl.”

“Axel,” I breathe. “Please don’t do this.” My arms and legs shake hard like the land when a sinkhole is forming. Tears drip from my eyes as I look at him. I don’t know what’s happening, but I feel weak and helpless, like a dying animal.

He swallows, a funny little lump in his throat moving up and down, and directs his gaze elsewhere. “I have no choice. The needs of the pack outweigh the needs of the one.”

He repeats the words like it’s a well-used phrase. Even though he’s supposed to be the leader, he must be as helpless as I am, because I can feel the pain in his every word, that this is hurting him in ways it doesn’t hurt me.

Elder Amexaryl picks up the stick with the feathers. “Hold onto her, and don’t let go until I tell you to.”

Axel’s hands clench mine, and he gazes into my eyes.

We both stare at one another, and though tears only leak from my eyes, I know he’s crying inside. I can feel it, through some strange instinct that makes his pain my own.

The elder draws symbols in the air between us.

I begin to sob.

She picks up one of the jars, opens it, and dips her fingertip inside. She flicks the substance from her finger between us, and the symbols light up and twirl slowly in a circle. Then, she picks up the deer hoof stick and shakes it.

The moon on my arm bursts into flames, searing my skin. I try to wrench away from Axel, but his fingers hold on tight. “Axel, no!” I cry. “Please stop.”

“It’s almost over,” he whispers, his voice a hoarse rasp.

I clutch his wrists, clawing at him, writhing as unbearable pain shoots through my body and deeper than that, into my bones, my blood, the vibration of life inside me.

He, too, appears to be in the clutches of agony. His jaw is clenched, and he lets out a tortured groan, like an animal caught in a trap.

“Help,” I cry, not sure if I need help for me or for Axel or for both of us.

Ama stands with muscular arms folded, a victorious smile on her face, like this moment is special for her.

Hatred for her boils in my stomach.

The shaman keeps shaking the feet, rattling them together like a rattlesnake, until I want to scream, to tear my hands off if that’s the only escape. The moon mark on my arm sears into my soul, wrapping around

some deep seed inside me. I feel a ripping sensation in the core of my being, like someone is ripping my spine out of my body. I shriek, and Axel closes his eyes, gasping as if in pain. Elder Amexaryl mutters strange words as she shakes the wretched rattle. The symbols between us whirl faster and faster, making a high-pitched hum that shreds my ear drums. I scream again, trying to rip my hands from Axel, but he's holding onto me so hard I know he's going to leave marks.

The old woman's voice rises in pitch and intensity.

I've never felt anything so excruciating as the pain tearing through my soul.

"Release her, *now!*" the elder cries.

Axel's hands open. I spring away as he staggers backward, falling to his knees, clutching his head.

Ama rushes to soothe him, but he shoves her away. "Get away from me," he shouts.

Hurt crashes through me in waves. I don't understand how something I can't even see can wound me so deeply. If it were a cut, I would bandage it. If it were a crushed limb, I would tear it off with my wolf teeth just to be rid of it. But I can't do anything, can't escape the excruciating, incomprehensible *pain*. I turn and race from the room, sprint down the porch, and shift into wolf form without stopping to undress. I trip when I'm halfway shifted, thudding to the ground and rolling over and over. Then I run, hard and fast, without seeing a thing. I just run. I dash across the shimmering road, and a car screeches to a halt, a horrible sound rising from it and following me behind the next house.

I don't stop. I run for what seems like days but might be only minutes. I speed past the structures where Lewis cleansed and dressed me. Unbearable pain throbs from the place where the moon once marked me, but I don't care. Finally, I find myself at the yurt where the healer lives. I shift back to human form, stand before her yurt, and batter the door with my palms.

The door opens, and Artuna looks at me with one white eye and one blue one. "I'm sorry, my child."

"Where's my mama?" I scream.

"You're too late," she says. "Your mother is dying."

"No!" I cry, pushing past her. I race to the center of the yurt where my mother rests on a fur pelt, barely breathing.

"Luna," she wheezes. "Is that you?"

I kneel before her. “Open your eyes, Mama. Open your eyes, and let’s get you out of here.”

Mama’s head tips back, and she sniffs the air. Her eyelids flutter open. “You’ve been with the wolves,” she whispers. “Never trust the wolves.”

And then, as if that took every ounce of strength, her head collapses on the plush fur.

“Wake up!” I plead. “Open your eyes again, Mama. I was taken against my will. They promised to keep you safe and protect you if I did what I was told. Mama, don’t go, don’t leave me!”

Healer Artuna’s firm fingers wrap around my shoulders and urge me to stand.

I whirl to face her. “Do something,” I wail. “Bring her back to me! Please, I’ll do anything!”

Her eyes well with pity. “I’ve done all I can, my child. She’s lost too much blood. I’m afraid she’s gone. You were blessed to say goodbye. You can stay longer if you’d like to send off her soul.” Artuna tries to smooth my hair back from my face, but I can’t bear even an ounce more devastation that what’s already tearing me apart, turning my body inside out.

I wrench away from her, sobbing uncontrollably as I flee from her yurt. Without thought, I sprint through the woods, throwing myself deeper into the familiar shadows of the swamp, searching for a comfort that I will never find again. Not without Mama.

As I draw near to Bogbeast Waters, my bare foot snags on a vine, and I sail through the air and land with a splash in the warm, murky water.

I’m back in the marshes where I was raised, but there’s no comfort for me now. Everything I’ve loved is gone. There’s no reason to rise, to get back up, to keep living. There’s only pain in this world.

Chapter Eight

Callan

Ethan is my wingman as we hunt swamp rabbits today—he's on one side, I'm on the other. The helpless little bunny has nowhere to go. I lunge and snap, ending his life with one chomp of my canines. When my teeth connect, I shake the soul free from the rabbit. It flies from the prey's body. Dinner is fucking served.

It's a perfect day to hunt as my brother and I slink through the edge of the woods in Creebay Preserve. The temperature is warm enough but not too warm, and a breeze kisses the fur on our bodies, stroking it like a lover's caress.

We stay watchful for Jacksonville pack members—the pack that owns the land and that Axel, the biggest dick on the planet, commands. That bastard would kill us for taking one fucking rabbit. Thinking of Axel makes my hackles stiffen and bristle. I can't stand the guy, and ever since my brother Warrick challenged him for the Alpha position, the feeling is mutual.

As a result of that little scuffle, we were all banished from the pack.

Nah, who am I kidding? That's straight up bullshit.

Warrick broke from the pack as is customary when a challenger loses. Ethan and I were too loyal to let our triplet go it alone while we remained under pack rule. No fucking way. Lone wolves are all but doomed. So, we all broke from the Jacksonville assholes and went our own way. But we didn't go far. We've never lived anywhere else, and risking the wrath of some other pack is a lot less appealing than fucking with Axel.

We live outside pack territory, but we hunt in the territory that he claims as his pack's. We could hunt elsewhere or just go buy a fucking steak at the grocery store. But we like to chase prey here on the regular just to keep the

pack on their toes and give a middle finger to their fucking Alpha.

Living on our own isn't bad. Sure, we miss protection of the group. But we've got each other, a revolving carousel of pussy down at the shifter bar, and we're not exactly the kind of men people dare to fuck with. We protect ourselves just fucking fine.

As I pad through the boggy land, soft and cool to my paws, and out toward the swamp, I catch the scent of another werewolf. I yip to the others and trot toward it, even though it's off pack land and therefore not as fun as hunting. We bound along from one hillock to the next, avoiding the water when possible. You never know when a gator is down there just waiting to snap you in half.

At last, the smell of a she-wolf grows stronger, and I spot a tamped-down gap in some reeds. I leap into the reeds and stop when I spot the body. A waif of a young woman is lying in the weeds with her bottom half submerged in murky water. She'll be covered in leeches, but at least a gator hasn't found her. I snuffle around her body and sense life sluggishly trickling through her veins. Immediately, I shift into human form.

Warrick and Ethan, having caught up, do the same.

"What the fuck?" Warrick says as I shove my hands beneath the woman's armpits and tug her out of the saltmarsh.

"She's alive," I say. "If just barely."

"Leave her," Warrick snaps.

"She obviously needs help," I say. "She's a wolf. Maybe she's trying to escape the pack."

"You always do this, brother," he says with annoyance. "You bring back every bird with a broken wing, and we all have to live with their plaintive cries until they die."

"This isn't a bird. She's a human." Having freed her from the marsh, I reach out and push her messy, matted hair away from her face. Her skin is cool to the touch like she's barely hanging onto life.

Ethan tips his head back and sniffs. "She's a wolf, dipshit."

I bat Ethan's head. "I know she's a wolf. Do you think you're the only one with a nose?"

"Cut it out, you two," Warrick grumbles, and we both fall silent.

Warrick may not have bested Axel, but he's powerful, and he's the most dominant of us all. He needs to be someone's Alpha, and since he doesn't have a pack, he leads us.

“I’m surprised she made it this far,” Ethan muses. “A cute little female like that...”

A male lone wolf might make it a few years, but a female? She’s as much prey as the bunny.

“What, you want to fuck her?” I demand, suddenly protective of the female.

“I might,” Ethan says with a shrug. “If she’s close enough to legal and dumb enough to let me.”

Not that Ethan’s afraid of the law. Humans don’t govern supernaturals, and without a pack to keep us in line, we live like outlaws. Our bodies are hard from hard work. Our skin is inked all over and scarred from the many fights we’ve been in over the years. Locals fear us and hate us in equal measure, and the Jacksonville pack’s got orders to kill us if we’re ever caught in their territory. They’ve tried, and we’ve got the battle scars to prove it. But they just can’t shake us for good because Axel’s all about law and order, and he won’t break werewolf law and come attack us outside of his territory no matter how many times we cross him. Man’s got principles, whatever those are.

I give Ethan a shove. “Don’t fucking touch her.”

“Leave her and let’s go on home,” Warrick says. “Dinner’s waiting.”

“What?” I ask, twisting around to glare up at him. “We can’t just *leave* her. She needs help.”

“Who’s going to take care of her? *You?*” Warrick sneers at me.

“Why not me?” I demand. Warrick may be out Alpha, but we aren’t afraid of him. We’re each equally important, even if he’s most dominant.

“We could all use a little female company,” Ethan says. “Imagine how easy it would be if we didn’t have to go down to the bar to find a piece of ass every time our balls get full.”

“You mean every night?” I ask with a sour look at our most promiscuous brother.

He grabs his balls. “These bad boys need relief after a hard day’s work.”

“If she belongs to *them...*” Warrick jabs a thumb over his shoulder. “Those sons of bitches will be crawling all over our place if we take a she-wolf from the pack.”

“If she belongs to the J-ville crew, we get to mess with them a little,” Ethan says, with a sly grin that shows off one of his missing molars, courtesy of a bar fight with a fae.

“They already want us dead, asshole. You’re not banging her even if she is of mating age.” I start to slap the back of Ethan’s head again, but Warrick snags my hand.

“Enough. Let me consider this,” he says, scowling.

Ethan and I wait, silent, as our brother thinks. I might argue and make my case, but in the end, he has the final word. Always.

Which means this is my only chance to persuade his stubborn ass.

“She’ll die for sure if we leave her out here,” I say. “She’s barely alive now. She’s probably not from the Jacksonville pack. Look how skinny she is. She must be a runaway, and fuck only knows what she’s been through before she collapsed.”

“He’s right,” Ethan says, eyefucking her tender little body like he wants to put his dick in it right here and now. “If she doesn’t belong to the pack, they can’t miss her. A gift is what this is. And it just fell into our laps. Are we really going to toss it to the gators?”

“Maybe she was looking for the pack, and she almost made it before her strength gave out,” I continue. “Now, we have a defenseless little she-wolf on our hands. One of our own kind. Are we really going to leave a fellow lone wolf to die?”

“Or send her into the arms of our enemies?” Ethan asks.

At last, Warrick grunts before turning to leave.

I look at Ethan and smile.

Ethan doesn’t need any more pussy. Women love his outlaw charm. They see his tats and they want to ride him like a motorcycle. I’d be lying if I said we didn’t have a certain... Reputation around town. Sometime in the last ten or fifteen years, word got around that we’re always good for a few multiple orgasms.

I’m not much better, but sometimes I want more than I let on. Sometimes I’d rather one of those women stick around a little longer. But they always head home to the comfort of their stable lives after a wild weekend with us. As I toss the girl’s body over my shoulder and start back toward our cabin, I think maybe we’re due for one who sticks around a while.

Chapter Nine

Luna

A long, loud groan leaves my lips as I wake. I try to remember where I am, what happened. I'm in a bed that smells... Foreign. I take a few sniffs. The scent is musky and makes my body warm. I turn my head in the other direction and smell something sour like the way the clothes Mama and I found wrapped around the bones smelled before we washed them. It seems to be emanating from the sheets themselves, which feel a little greasy to the touch.

I think back, trying to remember coming here. An assault of pain, both emotional and physical, launches through me instead.

A bond I never wanted in the first place, torn from my soul.

Mama's eyes closing, never to open again.

With a gasp of shock, I sink into the excruciating aches and gaping holes that leave my body open, vulnerable, and bereft.

Why am I still here? Why didn't I die like I wanted?

Footsteps tromp about somewhere in the house. Men growl and laugh. I struggle to an upright position, finding myself in a small room with the door closed. I quickly scan the room. Clothes litter the floor. A small brown, square metal box sits next to the bed. Curious, I reach out my toe and pry open the door. Cool air wafts onto my foot from the blindingly white interior. The chilled air is a welcome change from the stuffy heat surrounding me.

The box is filled with brown bottles and shiny silver cans. I lean over and pick up one of the metal cans. Sometimes Mama and I found cans like this floating down a creek or inlet. The contents were always strange—some sweet, some bitter, but always thirst-quenching. Mama told me humans sometimes put beverages in the water to get chilled in the Florida heat, and

they washed away.

I'm thirsty, so I pry open the little metal gizmo on the can the way Mama taught me and take a long swallow.

It's the bitter kind. Blegh.

The door opens, and a male chuckle interrupts my train of thought. I yelp and drop the can. It lands on the floor, and pale, golden bubbly liquid seeps out onto the floor. I shriek and leap from the bed, searching for something to dab up the mess. Mama and I may not have had many things, but what we had we kept neat. I pick up a soiled t-shirt already getting soaked by the liquid and use it to sop up the mess.

The male laughs. "Don't worry about it. Won't be the last time we spill a beer."

"Who are you?" I say, backing into the wall. "Where am I?"

I'm dressed in a large, thick shirt, black with a gold skull emblazoned on the front. The sleeves are folded up several times over, and it falls to my knees.

"We found you in the swamp looking half-dead." Casually leaning against the door jam, he tucks one hand beneath his armpit.

"Why didn't you leave me there?" I ask, my voice accusatory. "I would have died."

"Is that what you were after?" he asks, cocking his head.

"It would have worked, if you hadn't brought me here," I point out, glaring at him.

"True enough," he says. "I been there. Done that." He lifts his hand to scratch the stubble of fur lining his face. He's the most muscular man I've ever seen—not that I've seen many. I've only seen a handful of men in my lifetime, and most of them in the last two days.

Dressed only in shorts, muscles ripple across his bare chest. Three howling wolves are drawn on the left side, directly over the heart. Bold, blocky letters beneath the wolves read, "Our bond is thicker than blood." Black, patterned bands adorn his upper arms. Flowy writing covers his left forearm, and I squint to make out the words. "We must live together as brothers or perish together as fools."

My gaze lifts to his face, framed by shaggy locks, the rich loam's color. His eyes are gold, like autumn leaves. He has the same musky scent as the sheets.

A smile forms on his face as he studies me. "So," he says, not moving

from the door. “My name’s Callan. What’s yours?”

Should I tell him my name? Mama said never to trust a wolf.

“Why do you want to know?” I ask, my eyes narrowing.

“Just making conversation,” he says. “If you don’t want to tell us your real name, pick something else. I’ll call you anything you like.”

“Luna,” I say. “You can call me Luna.”

He doesn’t have to know it’s my real name.

He steps across the room and crouches before me—not too close to crowd me, though.

“Nice. Like the moon.” He gives me an easy smile. “Tell me why you wanted to die.”

Tears prick my eyes. “My Mama died.”

“Sorry to hear that,” he says, reaching out to wipe a tear away with his big, calloused thumb. “Dinner’s ready. Why don’t you come out and eat with us? Maybe that will help you feel better.”

I yank my head away from his touch. A sob bursts from my throat before I can explain.

Callan studies me, a wary expression on his face like he has no clue what to do. He rises to stand, towering over me like a giant. I cower back against the wall.

“I’m, uh, real sorry,” he says, lifting his palms. “About your Mama, I mean.” He glances toward the door, and I can tell he wants to bolt. “Maybe I’ll just leave you be.”

“Okay,” I whisper, nodding and trying to keep my tears at bay. For some reason, I don’t want him to leave. I feel too alone already.

He blinks and takes a step backward. “If you change your mind... Food’s ready.”

My stomach lets out a loud grumble. *When was the last time I ate?*

A sunshiny expression like clouds parting after a storm covers Callan’s face. “See? You need to eat. Food fixes everything.” He extends his big hand to me.

I hesitate, torn between hunger and the desire to crawl back in bed and hope I don’t wake up.

“I don’t bite,” he says, his mouth serious but his eyes laughing as he draws an X shape over his chest with his finger. “Unless you beg me to.”

My brow crumples into a frown. “Why would anyone beg to get bitten?”

“It’s a joke,” he says, making an encouraging motion with the hand he’s

still holding out. “Come on. Let us feed you.”

I take his hand and let him pull me up. Then I touch the fur on his cheek. It’s bristly but soft, too. I give it a little tug, curious why anyone would have fur on their face.

“What are you doing?” Callan asks.

“Are you human?” I ask. “What creature has fur on its face?”

He lets out a booming laugh. “I do, that’s who,” he says. “Now we’d better hurry or the food will be gone when we get there.”

I want food, so I follow him out of the room, but my body is on alert and ready to bolt if I need to.

The house is big like Axel’s—more than one room—but all of this one rests on the ground instead of having stairs. The same brown bottles and silver cans I found in the bedroom are scattered everywhere, empty of their contents. The smell of their contents, heady and somehow *alive*, lingers faintly in the air. Through a doorway, I spot paper cups littering the counter, a slightly fishy, skunky scent wafting from them. Dirty dishes are stacked in the sink. A mattress covered with tangled bedding is shoved against the wall opposite the kitchen. Piles of dirty, sweaty clothes have been pushed aside, creating a path through which to walk.

“Did a hurricane blow through here?” I ask. “Big winds?”

Callan guffaws and pulls me into the kitchen. “Yeah, his name is Ethan.”

Two more enormous, hulking males fill the room with their presence.

“Fuck off,” says one of them to Callan, but he’s grinning. From the comment, I know he must be named Ethan. He sits at a table with more of the bottles pushed together in the center.

The third male stands back, eying me suspiciously. He’s got the countenance of Mama when she was angry and might snap and swat me for no reason I could tell. Something about his overwhelming presence reminds me of Axel, though, and makes me drop my eyes and lower my head.

“Luna,” Callan says. “Meet my brothers, Ethan and Warrick.”

I timidly raise my eyes to theirs and nod a quick acknowledgment.

“He’s the nice guy,” Ethan says, stabbing his thumb toward Callan. “I’m the sex god.”

The big, scary one named Warrick grunts.

Ethan smirks and gestures toward him. “Just do what he says.”

I bob my head, grateful he’s made it easy, so I don’t have to figure that out on my own. I’ve never met a soul but Mama before the last few days. I

wish Axel could have made things that plain for me, so I knew Ama was mean and he was...

I won't think about him.

Despite Ethan's helpful introduction, I still don't trust him or any of them. We all study each other like we're waiting to see who makes the first move. If I thought Callan was big, Warrick is even bigger. They're bigger than the few panthers I saw shift to their human forms before disappearing into the swamp, and even bigger than Axel. The top of my head only reached Axel's armpit, but Warrick's so tall my eyes are level with his bellybutton. Each of their bodies has been painted with color, the way I used to paint myself with mud while Mama washed the clothes when I was younger, before I took over the washing duties.

Ethan has an image of a winged woman on his chest, cradling three wolf pups. Maybe that's his Mama. Warrick has a bleeding heart with a knife through it concealing his chest. Both men sport the same unruly dark hair as their brother, Callan, only Warrick's hair is the shortest, curling around his ears and sticking out in every direction. The fact that he doesn't know about combs, either, makes me like him a little better. I didn't know until a few days ago.

"Why do you paint your bodies like that?" I say, lifting my hand to point at their bare torsos and arms.

"You've never seen tattoos?" Callan says, flexing his arm to make a snake writhe on his bicep.

"Not until..." I bite back the word "yesterday," remembering Mama's constant warning to not reveal too much. "Not much."

Axel, my former True Mate, had tattoos on his body, too. I remember them from when I saw his whole body without clothes, before he made me feel good and then hurt me. A sharp knife of pain stabs my heart as I think of him. I shove it away. He cast me away, breaking the bond he insisted we make the day before.

"These were inked into our skin," Callan explains. "Paint goes away. These last forever. It tickles a little to get it done, but it's worth the pain."

"Let's eat," Warrick says, his voice like thunder grumbling in the sky before a storm.

Callan takes my hand and leads me to the table.

"We caught some rabbits today," Ethan says, standing and putting his arm around me, drawing me away from Callan.

Callan scowls at him.

“But my fine brother, here...” Ethan flaps his hand at Callan. “He took a stab at actually preparing a meal for you.”

I wriggle away from his sweaty arm. The windows are open, allowing the damp breeze into the room, but he smells like he hasn't bathed in a while. It's not a bad smell, exactly, but overwhelming coming from a stranger. I don't mind my own smells or even Mama's, but I'm not used to the potency of his sweat scent.

The smell of cooked meat like I had with Axel's pack wafts from a pot in the center of the stove, drawing saliva into my mouth. The men stand awkwardly around the table, staring at me.

“Have a seat,” Callan says, clapping his hands together. “Let's eat.”

Once seated at the square, wooden table, Callan takes a big silver scoop and ladles some of the fragrant stew into my bowl. Next, he does the same for his brothers. Mama and I rarely cooked, preferring our meat raw. But this mixture of root vegetables and rabbit smells good. I pause, watching to see how they'll eat. The wolf Adolpha told me I was to eat with metal tools, not use my hands.

Ethan, Callan, and Warrick dive into their meals with enthusiasm, picking up metal tools and scooping liquid from their bowls and slurping it down. When he reaches the bottom, Ethan picks up chunks of meat from the bowl with his fingers and pops them in his mouth, chewing noisily.

Suddenly, I'm struck with the enormity of everything that's happened to me in the last few days. I went from a quiet, comfortable life in the swamp with Mama to... Not even knowing how to eat without being scolded. Tears ache behind my eyes when I think of Mama. What I wouldn't give to have her back, to have our life back, to know that I'm not doing every single thing wrong. I look at the strangers around the table, and somehow I feel lonelier than I felt in the swamp, even the last few years when I did most everything on my own. These men aren't companions. They're strangers, and if I know anything about strangers, it's that they intend to hurt me.

Chapter Ten

Luna

The tragic events of the last few days hit me like a sledgehammer. The disaster of the pack gathering, bonding with Axel, fleeing into the woods, meeting a vampire, and telling him “pack secrets,” and the subsequent dissolution of the True Mate bond all collide in my head. I sway in my seat across from the three ravenous males who sit noisily inhaling their meals.

Even though I’m starving, I suddenly can’t eat. Instead, I stare at the inked pictures of wolves that adorn the men’s bodies. “Are y’all *wolves*?”

I spit out the sentence like a poison seed.

Warrick looks up from his food. “You can smell as well as we can.”

Ethan smirks, picks up his bowl, and tips it to his lips, sucking the liquid into his mouth. When he’s done, he sits the bowl on the table with a *thunk* and gestures to Callan. “Fill ‘er up, brother.”

Callan frowns but says nothing as he ladles more rabbit stew into Ethan’s and Warrick’s bowls. “Not hungry?” he asks me, raising a brow and glancing at my bowl.

“Wolves are dangerous,” I say, reciting my own mantra, the one I’ve been told all my life, because it’s what Mama believed. “They lie, steal, and murder.”

“Some do,” Callan says. “Some are outlaws who have no pack.”

“Those are the best kind,” Ethan says.

I’m sitting with three of the most dangerous looking wolves I’ve ever seen. They make the pack look like puppies. Eyeing the open window, I push my chair away from the table and start to rise, intending to bolt.

“Going somewhere?” Warrick says.

I want to run out, but I feel his eyes boring into me, and more than that,

his will. The wolf inside me cowers at his dominating attention. I feel her shrink inside me, and I lower my head.

Warrick extends his hand, points at my chair, and snaps his fingers. "Sit."

Meekly, I sit. My heart is racing like a scared swamp rabbit in my chest, and my limbs are shaking. What just happened?

"He meant to say 'please,'" Ethan says with a grin. He's missing a tooth behind his canine, and one of his front teeth has a little chip at the corner. His face-fur is thicker than Callan's, and his hair hangs past his shoulders. He's obviously never heard of a comb, either. But looking at his smile calms me and makes my heart beat in a different, erratic way that I don't understand.

"No, I didn't," Warrick says. "I said what I intended."

My gaze drifts toward the open window. It's big enough for me to leap through and run.

"You ain't making her feel safe, brother," Callan says to Warrick, delivering his bowl.

"Not trying to," Warrick says, crunching down on some bones before snatching up the metal tool and scooping up more liquid.

"Come on, Warrick," Callan said, sounding both pleading and exasperated, like when I was a kid and Mama had to coax me to get up and go hunting early in the morning, before it got too hot outside.

Warrick just grunts and goes back to slurping down his food.

Callan gives me a smile that says he doesn't perform that act much, like he's trying on a smile for the first time. "What do you smell when you sniff us?" he asks.

My belly's bound so tight I'm not sure I can scent anything, but I tip back my head and take a few tentative sniffs. "You smell musky and sweaty," I say. "But not *bad*."

Ethan barks out a laugh and pounds the table with his fist, making the dishes and metal tools rattle. "Did you hear that, Warrick? She says we don't smell bad."

My face heats up like I'm sitting in the sun.

"That smell, darlin', is one-hundred-percent purebred werewolf," Ethan says, lifting his arm and sniffing his armpit. "Divine musk to a she-wolf such as yourself."

"Quit it, you man-whore," Callan says, smacking the back of Ethan's head with his palm.

"You're just jealous," Ethan says, punching his shoulder.

I study them, wondering why they're laughing if they're mad enough to hit each other and fight. When Mama got mad and hit me, I never laughed.

Warrick slices his palm in front of his neck, adding a grunt, and Callan and Ethan grow still. Then the scary one turns his eyes to me. "Where are you from? What brought you to the swamp?"

"Until a couple days ago, I lived in the swamp. Now, without my mother, I'm not sure where I live." I fight back the tears threatening to push free.

Ethan whistles. "No one lives in Bogbeast Waters except the panthers."

Unable to speak through the emotion clogging my throat, I nod.

"Have you lived there all your life?" Warrick demands.

Cowering, I nod again. He has the same forceful presence as Axel, but Axel never made me cower before him and answer questions like this. He acted like I was valuable. Inside, my wolf whines piteously at the mention of our mate. I remind her that Axel didn't value us. He didn't want us. He cast us out. And these wolves... They haven't yet.

"Did you have a community out there?" Warrick says. "Are there more wolves in the swamp?"

"No, only Mama," I whisper.

I glance at Callan, who picks a chunk of meat from his bowl. He pops it in his mouth and chews, giving me an encouraging smile with his cheeks full of food.

"Dang," Ethan says. "So, you've never met anyone like us? No wolves? Only humans?"

I shake my head. "No humans or wolves. Just me and Mama, though sometimes I'd see panther shifters fishing or hunting. We saw ogres sometimes, and there's a swamp monster that's pretty scary. And bog hags, but they run if you try to talk to them."

"You talk to the others?" Warrick asks.

I shake my head. "I'd never talked to anyone but Mama and myself until a couple of days ago, when I was summoned."

My stomach lets out another growl.

"Look, she hasn't eaten a thing," Callan says. "Please eat. We'll stop assaulting you with questions."

I look at each man and the tools they're using to consume the stew. I pick up mine, clutching it in my fist, and dip it into my bowl. I lift it to my mouth like they are, but the slippery food slides right off and splatters back into my bowl.

“Never used a spoon, either?” Ethan asks, laughing.

I shake my head.

“Don’t worry, you’ll fit right in here,” Callan says. “Spoons are entirely optional.” With a smile, he drops his spoon and picks up his bowl, lifting it to his mouth to slurp from the edge.

That’s what I did with Mama on the occasion we ate from bowls. I’m instantly relieved that they know the logical way to eat, and I’m so hungry I don’t want to pick up one tiny bite at a time with the spoon instrument. I pick up my bowl and let the food pour into my mouth. I chew, slurp and devour the meat and bones and broth.

Ethan laughs again, only this time it’s a wheezing belly laugh. “Would you look at that? She’s completely uncivilized.”

I pause, setting my bowl down and wiping my mouth on the back of my hand. I’m ready to bolt, but one look from Warrick has me sinking back to the seat, pinned by some force I can’t explain. My wolf whines inside me, but it’s not exactly fear she’s feeling. It’s as if I’m being silently forced to obey.

“Don’t worry, Luna,” Callan says. “We’re all uncivilized, too.”

“I didn’t mean it as an insult,” Ethan says to his brother. “It’s cute. I like her.”

“Of course you do,” Callan grumbles.

Ethan turns to me, setting his huge hand on mine. It covers my whole hand like a wolf paw would. “If we have a problem, we take care of it with fists, not words. Don’t take anything we say the wrong way, pup, and you’ll fit right in.”

Chapter Eleven

Ethan

As I edge away from the table, I crack my knuckles with my thumbs, keeping my gaze pinned on Warrick. I goofed around with Luna too much, and now Warrick is pissed. I hope to put off the ass-chewing that's sure to come my way for as long as I can.

"You must be tired, Luna," I say, my gaze flicking back and forth between Luna and my Alpha.

Warrick busies himself with rolling a cigarette, but I know he's tracking my every move.

"You want me to sleep here?" she says, wiping her mouth with her sleeve and setting down her empty bowl.

"Got somewhere better to go?" I ask.

"No. Now that Mama's gone..." Her voice trails off, and she sniffles.

"Head on into the bedroom, and I'll be there in a second," I say, trying to be helpful by clearing the dinner dishes.

Warrick strikes a match against the table and lights his smoke.

Luna stands, coughs at the tobacco, and shuffles out of the room, looking like a lost kitten. And if there's one thing I'm good at it, it's taking care of the kitty.

As I push aside the Java Jolt cups lining the counter, making space for the bowls and spoons, Callan comes up behind me.

"Don't you fucking touch her," he growls.

I elbow him away. "What, you think I'm that much of an asshole?"

"I don't just think it," Callan says. "I know it."

"Fuck you, dickhole."

"No, fuck *you* if you lay a hand on her," Callan says, bowing up like he's

going to fight me.

I fucking hate it when he does that, but when I glance at Warrick out of the corner of my eye, he's taking a drag on his cig, skewering me with his piercing gaze.

"I won't touch her," I say, grinding out the words.

"Good," Callan says.

"Good," I say. But the truth is, I'd do Luna in a hot second if she was up for it. But it's more than that. She's so naïve it's just about painful. The lost puppy vibe she's got going on makes me want to do more than fuck her. It makes me want to keep her safe from the hurts that put that guarded look in her eyes so young.

After I clear the table, I consider taking a stab at washing the dishes, then think better of it. If I don't get in there to look after Luna, one of my brothers will do it. I'm not the only dick around here.

I stride from the room, flipping Callan the bird, and head for the bedroom I've given up for Luna. I don't care one bit. I'll sleep on the floor next to Callan and be just fine.

"So," I say, wandering into my room. "Want me to show you where to get cleaned up?"

"What for?" Luna perches on the edge of the bed like she might take flight at any second.

"It's part of the 'going to bed' ritual," I say, standing before her. I rake my eyes up and down her slender body. She sure is a petite little thing.

"Why do we need a going to bed ritual?" she says, her eyebrows stitched together adorably.

Fucking hell. It's going to be hard not to touch her. "I dunno. So we can be all cleaned up and ready for getting up the next day."

Her lips part, and she scrunches up her nose. I stare at her pretty pink lips, trying not to imagine them wrapped around my thick cock.

"If you're a wolf, too, can't you just shift and curl up on a rug?"

"We could, but we don't got rugs," I say, gesturing to the rough wood floor of the house the three of us built after the Jacksonville pack banished us. "So you'll have to try a bed. What do you say?" I flash her my warmest smile—the one that's melted the panties off one too many women.

"Okay," she says, offering me a shy smile that makes my cock twitch again. She follows me into the bathroom, where I turn on the tap, so my brothers won't eavesdrop.

“First, we brush our teeth,” I say, seizing my blue and white toothbrush out of the chipped mug on the sink.

“Brush our teeth?” Her expression is one of complete puzzlement.

“Yeah.”

She bobs her head in a nod. “Can you show me how?”

Fuck yeah, baby. I can show you how to do lots of things...

I remind myself of something Callan said after I got my tooth punched out by a jealous goblin. Hey, it’s not my fault I fucked his wife better than he could. If she’d kept her trap shut, I’d have one more tooth in my head. I swear, women would be more trouble than they’re worth if it weren’t for the pussy.

“Not all women are meant for fucking,” Callan said to me that day. “You gotta learn to be more discerning, brother.”

Not all women are meant for fucking, I repeat in my head as my gaze slides down Luna’s bare legs peeking out from below the oversized sweatshirt Callan put on her after dragging her home. It just makes me want to grab her up and wrap her in a blanket and keep her warm.

Instead, I grab a toothpaste tube from the medicine cabinet, squeeze some onto the bristles, and then scrub my teeth before offering Luna a big, foamy grin.

She giggles, which softens her features from wary to something so sweet it hurts the roots of my teeth. It almost feels wrong to want to fuck her now.

But the cock wants what it wants. And right now, it’s starting to strain against my shorts uncomfortably. I might have to break my promise to Callan and touch her.

“Your turn,” I say, thrusting the toothbrush in her direction. “We don’t have extra, but you can use mine.” I used to keep a stash of toothbrushes around for the women who stayed over, but that shit got expensive. The women who want to ride my dick usually don’t stick around long in the morning, anyway. A quick fuck for the road, and they’re out of here before their boyfriends or parents can worry about where they’ve been all night.

I turn on the water and fill my hand with some of it. After slurping it into my mouth, I swirl and spit into the rust and soap-stained basin, then twist the spigot off. When I straighten, my eyes fall on Luna’s pretty lips wrapped around the handle of my toothbrush as she studiously and clumsily manhandles the brush against her teeth. A little frown of concentration pulls between her brows, and between that and the thought of my toothbrush, still

wet with my spit, inside her mouth, it's all I can do not to back her against the wall and show her a few more things I can do.

"Would you look at that," I say. "You're great at that. Keep on doing what you're doing." I stare at her mouth as a little trickle of saliva escapes and trickles down her chin. I swear my dick is going to shred my shorts at any second. I'm definitely going to need a good tug session tonight.

"I guess I need to learn how to do all this kind of stuff, don't I?" Luna asks.

"If you're going to live here," I say, tugging at my shorts. I'm sure my tip will be peeking out of the hem of my shorts if I don't get the situation adjusted soon.

"I'm not sure about that," she says through a mouthful of toothpaste.

"I'll teach you everything you need to know," I say, cranking up the water. "Here. Scoop, swish, and spit."

She does so, bending over the sink so her ass nearly touches my dick.

I can barely stand the tease. Is she fucking with me? I don't know the first thing about this chick. Maybe she fucked her way halfway across the country to get here. Maybe she saw my raging hard-on and wanted to bounce her skinny little ass on it.

"Thank you," she says, straightening and waving my toothbrush in my face. There's not an ounce of artifice in her innocent expression.

Yup, just me being horn dog.

I take the toothbrush and consider leaving it unrinsed and jerking off with it in my mouth later. Her sweet smile makes me feel like a fucking pervert, though, so I rinse the damn thing in the running water and plunk it back in the cup.

"There," I say. "Ritual complete."

"That's it?" she says, looking up at me with her soft, lavender eyes.

"That's it. There's not much to it. Sometimes we take a shower, but the shower head's broken, so..." I shrug.

"That's too bad," she says, lingering in the tiny closet-sized room with me, like she doesn't want to leave, either. "I like showers."

Fuck. I'm sure she's not trying to fuck with me, but that doesn't mean she's not doing a fine job if it by accident.

"Then we'll get it fixed," I say, making a mental note to head to the hardware store and steal a showerhead.

She bites her lower lip, batting her big eyes up at me. "Thank you."

“You’re welcome.”

The room is way too fucking small for the two of us, and if I don’t get out of it, I’m going to do something that will get my ass kicked, so I reach past Luna and push the door open.

“You’re ready for bed,” I say, my voice gruff.

She nods and steps out of the bathroom. I follow her to the bedroom and grab up a handful of dirty clothes. One of my shirts is sopping wet and stinks like hops. I scowl at the damp spot staining the wood. “What the fuck happened here?”

“Sorry. I dropped the can,” Luna says, and her cheeks flush.

“Don’t worry about it. If you like beer, help yourself,” I say, gathering up a few more dirty clothes from the floor. We’ve got to make this place look livable if we want her to stay. She’s not the kind of woman who deserves to be fucked in the filth of our place.

Luna peels off my black sweatshirt and slides under the covers, and fucking hell, but I think I’m going to explode at the sight of her pretty little body stretched out on my sheets, not a stitch of clothes on it. All that time, she didn’t even have panties under the shirt. Her skin is milky white, her body emaciated but with just enough curves to say she’s a woman, old enough to mate. Her mound is covered with a sleek pelt of hair, and her tight little tits are tipped with pink nipples just begging to be sucked. It’s all I can do not to dive between her skinny thighs and suck that sweet pink pussy until she screams like a banshee.

“Warrick doesn’t like me, does he?”

“Huh?” I yank my attention back to her mouth.

“Warrick. He doesn’t like me.” She tugs the covers over her luscious tits, hiding them from sight.

I blow out a lungful of air, trying to get the blood flowing from my little head back to the big one. “Don’t worry about Warrick,” I say. “He won’t hurt you. His bark is worse than his bite.”

She runs her hands over the bedspread, outlining her curves. “Why’s he so mad?”

“What?” I say, wondering where that idea came from. “He’s not mad. He looks scary because he *is* scary. He’s a badass motherfucker. When he’s on the back of his beast of a motorcycle, riding through town, people take one look at him and run for cover.”

“But you said he wouldn’t hurt me.”

“He won’t,” I say. “He wouldn’t hurt a defenseless pup like you.”

“Oh,” she says, settling back on the bed, seeming to relax at last.

“Do I scare you?” I ask, unable to help myself.

She pierces me with a beguiling gaze. “You did at first, but...” She shakes her head, and her long, silky hair musses against the pillowcase. “Not anymore. I like you.”

Did she just say she liked me? Lucifer help me, I’m screwed. I can’t recall a woman ever saying that to me. Women want to fuck me, and then they want to pretend they don’t know me. They want to ride my dick until they’ve had three or four come-to-Jesus orgasms. They want to throw it in their exes face that they moved on with a bigger, meaner, tougher guy with a bigger dick. They don’t *like* me.

Suddenly, it feels like I swallowed a fishhook and she’s reeling me in. It fucks with my head, so after one final sweep of her blanketed body and her innocent face, I flick off the light and leave her to sleep. I’ve never wanted more from a woman than they want from me. I sure as fuck never wanted one to *like* me. That would just lead to even more trouble. But damn if Luna’s words echoing in my head don’t sound good.

Chapter Twelve

Luna

The days pass in a blur as I get to know the three men who took me in while trying not to be a burden, be polite, and not bring them down with my grief. Sometimes, the pain of losing Mama hits me fresh, and I have to go curl up in the bed and hope I won't wake up. I remember what she said about not trusting wolves, and also what they said about being outlaws, which is better than a pack and more trustworthy. Maybe they're right. These men don't seem so scary once I know them a little, though Warrick's always grumpy and watches me with as much suspicion as I have of him.

Over the next few days, Callan tends to me when I'm sad and makes sure I eat, Ethan teaches me how to wash the sheets so I can have a clean bed, and Warrick just watches when he's around. They all go off to "a job," which Ethan says is just another way of saying digging ditches, during most of daylight hours for a couple days. When they're gone, I clean up the messy house some and wash the clothes that are scattered everywhere.

A few mornings later, I'm dragged from sleep by the sound of the brothers' shouts. Sliding from the sheets, I stealth-walk across the bedroom and crack the door.

"We can't take care of another stray," Warrick roars. "She's a puppy in a wolf's body."

"But—" Callan starts.

Warrick cuts him off. "We have no idea why she was in that swamp. If she really lived there, she was probably on the run from something, which means that something is still out there, still after her. Which means she'll bring trouble straight here." A loud pounding rattles the air like Warrick is hammering the table with his fist. "Why should we put ourselves in danger

for someone we don't even know?"

"We can protect her," Callan says. "If something's coming after her, she won't make it on her own. She can't defend herself. But we can."

"No, goddamn it," Warrick snarls. "She can't be trusted. She could be lying about everything. We have no proof that she even lost her mother. That could be just a story she told us to get sympathy."

The pain in my chest flares at the reminder of the constant ache of what I've lost. *Mama, gone. My home, abandoned.*

The scratch of the little stick Warrick uses to light the end of his roll of dried leaves crackles into the air. Then, the smell of the burning leaves tickles my nose.

"We can't keep her," Warrick says in a softer tone. "She's a liability to what we've made for ourselves here. For all we know, she's one of Axel's, come to catch us in the act."

I fling open the door and march out of the bedroom, my hands balled into fists by my side. They're in the kitchen sitting around the table. Three heads turn to stare at me as I march into the kitchen.

"Y'all think I'm lying about losing the only person in my life?" I demand.

With three sets of eyes glued to my body, I'm suddenly aware of how alone I am. They're each bigger than any one man ought to be, and they have the armor of ink on their skin and clothes on top of that. Most of all, they have each other, and being together makes them three times as strong as each man is alone.

I'm one little wolf, without even a set of clothes to call my own. I stand in the kitchen with all I have—my own body, which they're all three staring at like they'd like to gobble it down in one bite. I've never felt so small, so vulnerable, so much in need of someone on my side.

"You want me to go home, I'll go," I say. "I didn't ask you to bring me here. I never wanted to be a bother, but y'all told me to stay when I made to leave."

"You're not a bother," Callan says, standing and peeling off his t-shirt. His muscles ripple in waves under his skin as he hands me his shirt. I swallow, pulling my eyes away from the mesmerizing sight of all that strength and power in one body.

I pull on his shirt, grateful for the warmth and the comforting smell of my favorite brother surrounding me. I'm shaking, though I don't feel cold, and it helps soothe down my nerves.

“If you don’t believe me, ask Healer Artuna,” I say to Warrick. “Mama’s dead body is still at her place if she hasn’t fed it to the gators yet.”

Ethan pushes back from the table and declares, “I think she’s telling the truth.”

Warrick sucks on the end of his rolled leaves and exhales a plume of smoke. “If you expect us to trust you, you’d better get to talking,” he says. “You been here a week, and we don’t know the first thing about you. Who killed your mama? Why were you living in the swamp? What happened that left you lying in the swamp for dead? Who’s after you?”

“You’re upsetting her,” Callan says, guiding me to a chair. “Let me get you some food, Luna, and we’ll talk. We’re happy to share what we got, but we’d like to get to know you better.”

I nod, grateful for the moment to get my thoughts together. He delivers me a plate of meat and eggs, along with a cup of the bitter black water they drink. They call it coffee and drink it like it’s water, though I can only drink half a cup of it before I start shaking and feeling like I might explode.

“Go on then,” Ethan says, snagging the bag of leaves from Warrick. He starts making a little roll of them inside the paper they use while I talk.

“The only people I’ve ever met before you guys are the wolf pack,” I say. “And that was just a few days ago, I think two days before you found me. Mama got attacked by a panther in the swamp, and then this awful wolf found me. She promised to help Mama if I came back to the pack with her. I knew not to trust her, but I didn’t have a choice if I wanted to help Mama.”

Callan scoots over and lays a hand on my leg. It’s rough and hard on the palm, but his touch is gentle and sends warmth creeping up my thigh in a way that’s too distracting.

“Go on,” he says. “You’re doing great, Luna.”

I take a deep breath, gripping the fork to keep from shaking. “I went back with them, and this wolf named Axel said I’d be his True Mate. I sort of knew what it meant but not really, because it turns out it means he has to stab my heat with a meat stick called a cock, and then I got this mark.”

I pull up the oversized sleeve of Callan’s shirt and show them the mark, which glowed like a full moon the first night I got it. After it burst into flame, it was an angry blister, but after a quarter moon’s worth of days have passed, it’s only an angry red scar. The pain of the wound still hurts down deep in my soul when I look at it, though.

I drop the sleeve just in time to catch a look I don’t understand passing

between the men. Ethan's mouth is twitching. Callan is gazing at me with eyes that warm the cavity inside my chest but also make it ache. Warrick's brows are drawn together like he's even madder than usual. He sucks hard on his smoke stick, his eyes flashing with danger.

"And then what?" he asks, his voice a growl that makes me cringe instinctually.

"And then I didn't like that, so I ran away and met a vampire," I say. "But I guess that was the wrong thing to do because Axel was very mad when he found out I talked to him, and he said—" My voice catches, and my throat aches so bad I have to stop and hitch in a breath. "He said I was a traitor. That we couldn't be mates anymore."

A hot tear spills from my lashes and rolls down my cheek when I remember the shame and confusion of that moment. "And then," I choke out past the tears. "And then he brought a shaman to dissolve the bond, and her magic reached into my soul and ripped it out of my body, tearing me to shreds from the inside out."

I can't hold back the tears now, and they stream down my cheeks like angry brands, reminding me of the pain and shame of being rejected.

"Fucking hell," Ethan mutters, lighting the smoke stick he made. "This calls for more than breakfast. Get this chick a beer, and here, take my cigarette, Luna."

I shake my head, determined to get through this if only to walk away without letting Warrick think I'm a liar and a spy.

"The fates weren't done with me yet," I say, forcing back a sob. "I ran out of there and went to my mama, because even though I mostly take care of her, she still makes me feel cared for when I'm hurt, like she did when I was little. But when I got to the healer's, Mama died right there before my very eyes."

"Luna," Callan says, scooting closer. But I'm suddenly filled with anger at him, too. Not just Warrick, but Callan, who I know dragged me from the swamp.

I push away and jump to my feet, tearing off Callan's shirt and hurling it at his feet. "I just wanted to die," I say. "I didn't ask to be rescued. I don't *need* to be rescued. So you can go back to living your happy lives just like you were before, and you don't have to worry if you can trust me, because I won't be around to wonder about!"

By the time I finish, I'm sobbing and yelling at once. The pain of what

happened crashes over me like ocean waves now that I had to say it out loud for all of them to hear, and shame fills me until I can't contain it anymore. So I turn and run out of the house, away from them, away from everything.

Chapter Thirteen

Luna

I race through the trees around the triplet's house, my head spinning with confusion. I don't remember coming here, and I haven't left since waking in their bed. I don't know where I am or how to get home. Nothing smells familiar. Nowhere feels safe. My shredded heart can't take the pain of life anymore.

I hear a snap of a twig and spin around. A huge, dark shape rockets across the carpet of pine needles, straight for me. I scream and start to shift into a wolf, but the shape blurs into a man and catches me before I can. He wraps his arms around me, the shock of his huge, hot body against mine knocking the breath from me and replacing it with pure panic. I writhe in his arms, screams tearing from me.

"Luna, stop," he commands fiercely. "It's just me."

I stop screaming when his words cut through my haze of panic, and I realize it's just Callan.

"Let me go!" I shove at his chest to no effect. He's as strong as he looks, like a tree has imprisoned me in its unbreakable limbs.

"Are you going to run?" His golden eyes captivate me.

"Of course I'm going to run!" I bite his shoulder, kicking my legs.

"Fucking stop, Luna," he snaps, his arms still wrapped tightly around me. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"You've already hurt me," I snap back.

His grip loosens instantly, but he doesn't release me. "We didn't know, pet," he says quietly. "I just need you to listen to me for a second. If you don't like what I have to say, you can run."

There's a warmth emanating from his eyes that does strange things to my

insides, and being pressed up against him while neither of us are dressed makes a strange ache grow in my lower belly, like it did when Axel touched me in the shower.

I nod my head, and he releases his embrace and steps back, palms out, his feet making soft noises in the pine needles. He's huge like a giant, his thighs as powerful as top half of his body, and he has the same meat stick as Axel, but his hangs down instead of standing up. He's still close enough that his warmth touches me while the early morning sunlight filtering through the boughs softly lights his rugged features.

"Go on," I say, swallowing past a quivery feeling in my throat.

"We moved out here when the pack banished us, too," he says. "We got each other, and that's about it. Truth be told, we weren't looking to change that. But having you here for just a few days... Well, it shook us up, that's all."

I cross my arms across my chest, trying to hold back the tears that want to come again. "I don't want to cause problems. Not between the three of you. I know what it's like to have only one person you can count on. I wouldn't have liked anyone coming in and getting between me and Mama, either."

Callan shakes his head, his shaggy hair swaying in the breeze. "That won't happen," he says. "No one could ever come between us. Now Warrick, he don't trust easy, but I bet the two of you are more alike than either of you is willing to let on. He wasn't expecting you to turn our universe upside down, but that don't mean he doesn't need it the same as the rest of us."

"Need what?" I ask. "Shaking up?"

He gives me a crooked grin. "Yeah."

"What if I don't need it?" I ask.

"Well, pet, I think your world's already been shaken up," he says. "And we'd like to be the shelter from the storm for a while, if you'll have us. Thing is... We may not have realized it, but I think we needed someone like you to come along and remind us there's something in the world besides what we were used to getting."

"Like what?" I ask, utterly confused.

"Like you," he says softly, stepping closer.

My heart is suddenly doing its rabbit-run again. I swallow and lower my gaze to the bite mark I left on his shoulder, which seeps blood.

"But Warrick hates me," I whisper. "He doesn't want me here."

"He don't hate you," Callan says. "He needs you most."

I gulp, confused by all the funny sensations running through me, the thoughts and fears and hopes and desires in my head banging up against the way my body feels warm and languid when he's near, like I need to lie down and sun myself and have a dream I can't remember afterwards.

"You can't blame us for going a little nuts when you showed up," Callan says. "I mean...you're a fucking gorgeous woman. Of course it takes some adjusting to having you living under our roof, walking around like that..." His eyes roam over my body, and my nipples stiffen like they want some attention.

"What does that matter?" I say, inching toward him.

He places his palms on my shoulders and rubs them up and down. I want to lean into him, to have his strong arms around me again, holding me like he did before. This time, I wouldn't fight. I'd pay attention and really feel his huge body wrapped around my small one, all our skin pressed together.

"It doesn't matter what you look like," Callan says, and I see that funny lump on his neck bob up and down, like he's trying to swallow something that's stuck there. "Listen, Luna... We've had our share of hardships, but none of us can imagine what it's like to be severed from a True Mate. Most wolves don't have one, so we can't know. It's a rare and precious thing, and usually the only separation is if one of the pair dies. No one in his right mind would sever the bond intentionally."

My voice cracks when I speak. "Then why did Axel?"

Callan's hands curl into fists. "Because he's a fucking bastard, that's why."

No one has ever defended me before. Mama would've if she'd had the wits about her to do it, but she just didn't understand things the same way I did. If there was a storm coming or a gator on our hillock, I was the one who prepared our home or chased off the predators. I protected us and fought for survival for the both of us.

But this man standing in front of me seems to want to protect me, even though I don't understand why. Something flutters down in my belly like the wings of a swarm of bats catching skeeters over the swamp. I don't understand that, either.

"So, what do you say, pet?" Callan asks. "Let us take care of you for a while, at least? I already admitted we need it, and I think you need us, too."

I feel a smile tugging at my mouth, and I can't get it to go away even when I bite on the corner of my lip. "Okay," I say at last, nodding my head.

Callan lets out a whoop and dives at me, scooping me up over his shoulder and pumping a fist in the air. A giggle bursts from me, and I clap my hand over my mouth, feeling like I shouldn't laugh so soon after Mama died. But he took me by surprise, and he's laughing, too. He turns and runs back toward their house, carrying me over his shoulder. I must have made a good choice, because I feel just about as happy as he is about it.

Maybe there's hope after all. Maybe there can be life after Mama. When Axel banished me, I felt like I wasn't worth being his mate, but now I know I was wrong. And he was wrong. There are other people in the world who want me even if he doesn't.

Chapter Fourteen

Luna

The moon goes from full to new by the time I'm properly settled into the triplets' house. About half the days, they all go off to what they call a job, which Ethan explains is really just a way to make money, which is something everyone apparently needs, though I don't really understand why. I understand trading, but I can't quite grasp why everyone agrees that green paper is important and that everything else can be traded for it.

Nonetheless, I'm able to learn so much that every night, my brain feels like it will burst with all the new information and knowledge. I try to hold it all in, scared some of it will slip away and I'll make a mistake like I did with the vampire, and that the triplets will reject me, too.

One evening when Callan is in the middle of cooking, blasting the radio in the kitchen, and Warrick is hiding away in his room, I hear yelling outside. I jump up from the couch and run outside into the sultry evening air.

Ethan's on the ground on top of a guy, pummeling him with his fists.

My heart jumps. Is it Axel, my True Mate, coming back for me? Does the inside of his ribs still ache when he thinks about me, like mine do when I think of him?

Then, my belly tightens into knots. Of course it's not Axel. He didn't want me. He wouldn't come back for me.

I raise my head and sniff the air, but the only smells I catch are Ethan's potent, musky fragrance and a hint of ash that reminds me of the man in the woods with the very clean house, who gave me tainted water. *Evan.*

"Whatever you think I did, I didn't fuck your woman," Ethan hollers between blows. "I don't fuck dead things."

So, he is a vampire.

“Liar,” the other man screeches, his fists moving in a blur as he rains blows on my huge wolf friend. I can see it’s not Evan, though. His hair and skin are pale.

“Who you calling a liar, you slimy leech?” Ethan roars, hauling back and letting loose with another bone-cracking assault.

Blood spurts from the guy’s mouth, and he clocks Ethan in the forehead with his skull. Ethan’s hands fly to his head, which gives the vampire enough purchase to wrench his body out from underneath Ethan.

“Ethan!” I cry, sprinting toward him. I throw myself in front of him and throw out my arms, like I can block Ethan’s hulking form from attack.

Ethan stumbles to his feet, puts his arm around me, and grins. “See, you got the wrong guy,” he tells the vampire. “This here’s my lady. I was with her that night. Isn’t that right, darlin’?” He leans down and kisses the top of my head.

I know I should agree, so I nod. After all, Ethan’s been home every night I’ve lived here... Though sometimes not until I’m asleep. I know he’s home part of the night, though, because he’s at breakfast every morning. “That’s right,” I say to the vampire. “He was with me all day and all night.”

Ethan makes an odd purring rumble and pulls me closer. “Yep, we were together *all* night.”

The vampire, a tall man with no muscles and too-pale hair, lurches to his feet and studies us for a few seconds—first me, and then Ethan, and then back to me.

“You’re lying,” he snarls. He lunges for Ethan, who whisks me out of the way. But that only gives the vampire a direct shot, and the man leaps onto Ethan’s back and sinks long canines into the side of his neck. I want to jump in, but I don’t want to distract Ethan again and give the vampire more chances to hurt him.

I bolt into the house, screaming for his brothers.

Warrick emerges from his bedroom, a thunderous frown on his face. “What’s with all the caterwauling?” he demands. “Are Callan and Ethan squabbling like usual?”

“Come quick,” I cry. “A vampire’s biting Ethan!”

“What?” Warrick starts for the front door, bellowing as he goes. “Callan! Where the fuck are you?”

A second later, Callan rushes from the kitchen. “What is it?”

“Stay with Luna,” Warrick orders. “I gotta beat some skulls in.”

He charges out the door on his bare feet.

I rush toward the window, my heart flipping in my chest. All the loss and fear I've experienced floods through my bloodstream. My fingers curl around the windowsill, gaining a few splinters.

In the yard outside, grunts and groans erupt from the men as they assault one another with fists and feet.

"Is Ethan going to be okay?" I ask, not tearing my eyes from the three men outside.

Callan's warm palms land on my shoulders, and he pivots me toward him. "You don't need to worry about my big, bad brothers."

"What if they get hurt?" I demand, straining my neck to witness the violence happening outside.

"They won't." Callan forcefully guides me across the room, heading toward the sofa. He plunks me down and crouches before me, resting his hands on my knees. We've all chipped in and cleaned up around the house, and there are no longer clothes and beer bottles everywhere. Now, there's just a mattress on the floor where Ethan sleeps.

I start to get up, but Callan gently presses me back.

"We can take care of ourselves, pet," he assures me.

"He bit Ethan's neck," I say, the shock still sitting heavy in my belly.

Callan places a fingertip to my lips. "Shhh. Everything's going to be okay, pet. I promise."

"I just can't lose someone else," I say, trying to sound determined. The quaver in my voice gives away my fear, though.

Callan slides up onto the sofa beside me and slides a protective arm around me. "Tell me a story," he says, smiling down at me.

"What?" I look up at him, blinking.

"Tell me what you liked most about living in Bogbeast Waters."

"Oh..." My stupid eyes almost fill with tears as I recall what it was like living there with my Mama, but I hold them back and think of the good times. "I loved the moon shining over the honey locusts and tupelo trees," I start. Callan smiles and nods encouragingly, so I go on. "I loved chasing the swamp rabbits and catching them for supper. The sand cranes were kind of fun. I'd chase them in my wolf form, though I never caught them. Just watching them take to the sky was worth it, though."

The sounds of the struggle float through the window—there's a whack and a clang, followed by a soft thud. Then, swishing noises and grunts.

Callan squeezes my shoulder, pulling me closer. "What else?"

Wistful feelings swirl through my heart as I go back there in my mind. "There was a spring near our place. We'd head out there in the evening and soak a while. Sometimes when Mama's mind wandered off, I'd bring her out there to keep an eye on her, just letting her soak while I'd wash the clothes."

"Your mama wasn't right in the head?"

"I don't know," I say honestly. "I never knew different, just that we didn't think the same. I know her True Mate was murdered, and her soul snapped. Then she took me out there to protect me. I've been taking care of her ever since I was little, though. Protecting us both." Sniffling, I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand.

Callan stares at me, his eyes wide. Then he clears his throat and says, "That's real sad, Luna. I'm sorry you had to do that."

I shrug. "It was hard, but we all got hard times, right? That's what Mama always said if I complained."

"I guess so," Callan says. "Can't say we haven't run into our share, too."

"What were your hard times?" I ask, snuggling even closer, wanting to share his stories, too. His face hardens into lines and shadows, and I think I did something wrong. When I stiffen, ready to be scolded, though, he pulls me closer, setting me on his knee.

"The kind where your old man lives in a vial of goblin blood, and he beats the shit out of you just because you're still breathing," he says.

"Oh, no," I say, laying my fingers against his rugged cheek with the bristling of short, black fur. "Why would he do that?"

"Goblin blood is real addictive and makes a man real mean," he says. "He took out his rage on us and our poor Ma, too. We left as soon as we turned sixteen. Been on our own almost ever since."

"That makes us kindred spirits," I say, placing a hand on his shoulder and gazing into his green-flecked eyes.

Callan's throat-lump bobs up and down, and he looks like he might bolt if I wasn't on his lap. His gaze drops to my lips, and a little bat-wing thumps against my heart.

At the sound of pounding footsteps, Callan quickly pushes me off his knee and back onto the couch cushion.

"Told you it would all work out," he says with a grin.

Warrick and Ethan stroll through the front door, arms around one another's shoulders, laughing. I can feel the dominating maleness of their

energy, some rawness in their scent ramped up by the fight. I sniff the air, and Ethan grins.

“You like the smell of that testosterone, huh?” he asks with a wink. “I know a way we can make more of that.”

His face is bloody and bruised, and crimson drips down his neck from where the vampire bit him.

“How?” I ask.

Warrick throws a sharp jab into Ethan’s ribs, and the long-haired wolf groans. I know by now that they hit each other a lot, and that it doesn’t mean they’re mad or fighting. Callan says that’s how they play.

“Is the vampire gone?” I ask.

The two men side-eye each other and grin.

“Yeah. Sure. He’s gone,” Warrick says, followed by more chuckles. He’s got a swelling on his lip that’s leaking blood, along with scrapes and bruises on both cheeks.

My forehead furrows in a crease. “Why are you laughing?”

“You know what?” Callan says, pushing to stand. “I should help Ethan get cleaned up, make sure that vampire bite is clean. It may take a while.”

“There’s some yard work yet to do,” Warrick says, even though it’s almost dark out, and they usually come in from working by now.

I narrow my eyes when they all glance at one another, sharing some secret that I’m not a part of. They do this a lot—casting glances at one another, laughing at things I don’t understand, disappearing outside or suddenly leaving to take a shower. If anyone’s not to be trusted, it’s them.

“Do you want me to leave?” I ask, standing on stiff legs.

Ethan cups his hand around my jaw and tips my face up. “That’s the last thing we want, pup.”

His face looks awful. I reach out and gently stroke one of the bruises beneath his stubble. He rubs his face into my touch and closes his eyes, inhaling so deep his nostrils flare.

“I just got to get cleaned up,” he says, his voice gruff but gentle. “And then we got a few things to take care of.”

Staring into his golden-green gaze is like peering through the morning mist over the swamp when the sun hit it just right. My tension dissolves, and I nod my head.

“Tell you what,” Warrick says. “I’ve got to run into town and grab a few things. Luna, you’ll come with me. Might be good for you to get out of the

house and do something. If you're gonna stay on a while, you need your own things, anyway. Clothes and the like. Lady stuff." He looks away, rubbing his jaw, and the other two chuckle.

"You want to take me into town?" I ask, my heartbeat picking up speed. "Just us?"

Warrick barely talks to me, and we're never alone together. If the other two are out, he goes to his room and closes the door. The others teach me things, let me help them cook or clean up, and talk to me like I'm one of them when we all go out on the porch after supper and have a beer together. Warrick only watches. Though he never speaks directly to me unless he has to, sometimes I feel his gaze and turn to see him silently watching me with an unreadable expression. Despite Callan saying otherwise, I know Warrick doesn't like me or want me here.

But he hasn't hurt me when we were alone, and he hasn't told me to leave. If he meant to hurt me, he could have. And now he's inviting me to go to town with him, something Mama never let me do. Maybe this will be my chance to change his mind about me.

"Aww, the pup's scared of you," Ethan says, slugging Warrick's arm. "I told you to be nicer to her."

Warrick only grunts and turns to me, jerking his thumb toward the door. "Let's go."

Chapter Fifteen

Warrick

Luna trails behind me as I stride from the house, heading for my custom-designed motorcycle. The salt air is kissing it into a bucket of rust, but nothing to do about that in these parts. My brothers and I worked on my baby for a solid year, testing and perfecting each change until we hit the sweet spot. She's a vintage Harley, chopped low and mean like me. A chrome skull and crossbones leer from the handlebars, and the engine's a loud growl, warning shifters and humans alike to get the fuck out of the way, 'cause I'm going to blow through them, past them or over them. The frame's been converted to a rigid hardtail, we added eight inches to the frame tube, and the steering neck rake is set at an angle of forty-five degrees.

When I pull the motorcycle out of the garage and lean it on the kickstand, Luna climbs on the front. I bark out a laugh. Does she think I'm going to sit on the Queen seat?

"You driving, sweetheart?" I say, towering over her. "You're in the King's seat."

She gazes up at me with the eyes of a deer in a hunter's sight. "I thought this was the seat."

She chews on her lower lip, a picture of nervous innocence. I stare at her mouth, and a temporary insanity takes over because the next second I'm wondering what it would be like if *I* were to nibble on her lower lip... And work my way down to other places on her tight little body.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

I'll take a bang piece now and then, but it's a "needs met and see ya later" kind of arrangement, not a tasting party. When I think about it, it's been a while since I screwed a chick. Probably why my cock is twitching in my

jeans even though Luna's nothing like my regular rough-around-the-edges shifter-groupie type. I need a woman who knows what she's doing—and what she's getting. There are always human women lining up for a chance to ride a wolf cock, but they know they won't get more than that and they aren't looking for it. It's a certain type of woman who gets wet for men like us, and that type is the exact opposite of the little wolf pup straddling my bike.

Cleaning up Ethan's messes when his cock socks get clingy, or their men start fights with him for sleeping with their women, has taught me that pussy's usually more trouble than it's worth. Not even going to look at the one living under my roof. Luna's nothing but a PYT—way too young and inexperienced for the likes of me. I'd destroy her. I'm probably twice her age, not to mention that though her body might be prime and ready for fucking, her mental age leaves a few years to be desired.

With a grunt, I say, "Get off."

She obediently climbs from the black leather seat. I swing my leg over, place my boots on the ground and my hands on the handlebars. "Get behind me," I say, jerking my head backward to indicate her place. "That's the Queen's seat."

She climbs on. "Am I the Queen?"

"Hang on," I say, powering on the bike and revving the engine. "And put your feet there." I indicate the chrome footrests on either side.

She carefully positions each foot in the right place. "What do I hold onto?" she shouts over the roar.

"Whatever you can get your hands around," I say with a chuckle. Damn, she's going to freak the fuck out when I take off. Bastard that I am, I can't wait. I crank up the engine and release the brake. We rocket along the dirt road, fishtailing as I let the bike find its rhythm.

Luna screams and clutches my leather vest.

I laugh at her fear because I'm a dick like that, and then I increase the speed just to hear her shriek again. Instead, her screams turn into whoops and laughter that joins mine, and her arms slide around me, tightening their hold. The chick has some *cojones*.

We power through the trees, sending a gator waddling for the water to avoid getting beheaded by my front tire. I'm digging Luna's exuberance until she pushes her pussy into my lower back from her slightly raised position. And then she slides her hands between my legs, right next to my cock. She's impressed me that she's having fun instead of being scared, as I expected, but

I guarantee fun time is over if Daddy comes out to play.

I scoot her hands onto my thighs one at a time with my gloved hand and give each one a solid pat, indicating they stay put right where they are. But my cock has taken notice of the attention and starts stirring in my jeans again. I can feel her warm little paws on my thighs, so close to wrapping around my shaft and...

I shut down that line of thinking real quick, but I've got a massive hard-on until we reach the edge of town. Then I focus on what I'm doing instead of the skinny little body wrapped around mine. I slow things down and set the bike to cruise. I like to take it nice and slow when I hit Jacksonville and watch people scurry to get out of my way.

Some of the local shifters glare at me. One asshole even flips me off, which makes me chuckle. There's not a damn shifter or human in these parts who could get me to piss my pants in fear—they're the ones who would wet themselves if I even glance in their direction.

We pull up to Paradise Acres, and I park the bike on the cracked pavement. There are raised lines of paint where the parking spots used to be marked, but they're faded the same color as the rest of the lot, and no one uses them. We just park wherever the fuck we see space between sinkholes and potholes for whatever we're driving.

Luna simply sits there with her damn pussy pressed into my sweat-soaked back.

I exhale a sigh. "This is the part where you get off the bike."

"Oh," she says and withdraws her hands and pussy, scrambling off the motorcycle.

I climb off, remove the key and shove it in my pocket. I know my bike will be safely parked—no one dares to lay a fucking finger on my ride unless they have an upcoming funeral planned.

"I've been there," Luna says brightly, pointing to a weirdo shop for supernatural potions and beauty bullshit.

"I thought you lived in the woods and had never met a human before." I slow my gait so she can keep up with my long-legged stride. The sidewalk's radiating heat from the intense sun, and I'm ready to get inside the artificial cool of a store for a few minutes.

"It was only a few days ago," Luna mumbles. "When I was being prepped for Axel."

"Don't you worry about Axel, sweetheart," I say, ruffling the top of her

head. “His expiration date will come soon enough.”

Her hair’s a tangled mess from the wind, and a scowl bruises her pretty face.

I don’t have a clue what the frown’s about, but I shrug it off and steer her away from Lewis’s shop and toward *Better Buy Big Box* store. “That’s the store we want.”

When we get to the front door, it glides open, and we’re met with a blast of cool air. We trek inside with Luna looking this way and that like a pie-eyed child.

“Just get whatever you think you’ll need,” I say, sweeping my hand around the super-sized store. “And meet me at the register in fifteen.”

She shakes her head and wraps her arms around herself like the AC makes her cold instead of being a fucking blessing. “I don’t need anything.”

“Yes, you do,” I say, grabbing her wrist. I seize a metal cart and shove it at her. “If you can’t get your shit yourself, we’ll stick together. You push.”

Her brow furrows, and she examines the cart, the wheels, everything. “Well, ain’t this something?” she asks at last. “I wish I’d had one of these when I killed a gator. I could have pushed it home instead of dragging it by the tail.”

The thought of her dragging a five-hundred-pound alligator through the bog tickles my funny bone, and I can’t help but laugh. “Yeah, babe, you could have pushed him home through the swamp.”

Resting a hand on her shoulder, I turn her toward the women’s clothes. I have no idea what size she wears, but her shoulder feels delicate under my calloused paw. In the clothes section, I hold up a few things that look practical and the right size, letting her approve the ones she likes before I toss them in the cart.

When we’re done, I gesture to the personal care section. “Do you need your own shampoo and shit?”

“No,” she says. “I like yours. It makes me smell like you.”

Not going to touch that jerk-off grenade.

The next aisle is the toiletries aisle. A woman in that section takes one look at me, drops the basket she’s carrying, and scurries away.

Good. We can use the privacy. I scan the woman’s abandoned basket and note several items that Luna will need—a toothbrush, deodorant, razors and shaving cream, and tampons. I dump the contents of her abandoned basket into our cart and decide we’re done.

“What is all this stuff?” Luna asks, picking up the deodorant.

Christ. I forget she’s lived like a savage her whole life.

“That’s so you don’t stink.”

“I stink?” she asks, her eyes widening.

“You smell fine,” I grit out, resisting the urge to take in a lungful of her scent. It’s bad enough to have her always padding around the house on her cute little bare feet, leaving her womanly scent everywhere she curls up. I won’t let my brain follow that train of thought to the logical next station—what she might taste like.

She picks up the package of razors. “And this?”

“Some men like it when you shave the hair off your legs.” The devil whispers in my ear, so I add, “And when you shave the hair between them.”

Luna’s face twists into a frown. “You don’t like my hair?”

“Real men don’t mind real women,” I say. “Hair and all. But sometimes you might want to be smooth and soft for him. Just to change it up.”

She nods and reaches into the cart for the toothbrush. “I don’t need this. I share Ethan’s toothbrush.”

“You can have your own damn toothbrush,” I grit out, an irrational annoyance with my brother grinding into me. It’s not like he was sharing a dildo. And now I’m fucking thinking about whether Luna masturbates, and whether she needs a sex toy to keep her satisfied. The rest of us have been jerking off like teenagers since she moved in.

“Go,” I snap, and she obediently resumes pushing the cart. We wander up the aisle, heading for the checkout stand, and I spy some hairbrushes. I toss one at her, and she deftly catches it.

“I’ve used one of these,” she says. “You could use one, too. All of you. Can we share this kind of brush?”

“We don’t need a goddamn girl’s hairbrush,” I snap. I’m starting to not like this experience. I’m not afraid of anything or anyone, but this sweet little barely legal scrap of ass is getting me flustered.

“Oh, look!” She grabs a box of purple hair dye and holds it up so I can see the smiling woman pictured. “Ama said I can’t put color in my hair, but look how pretty this is.”

“Ama’s a bitch,” I say, pitching the box of dye into the cart. “You should do what you want and have some fun—if you even know what that is.”

“Thanks!” she says, and she flashes me a smile that threatens to make me hard all over again. The day when a smile can make my dick hard is the day I

really need to pound some pussy before I do something stupid.

I increase my pace.

She scampers after me, only to get in line behind the same woman who ran when she saw us coming. She glances nervously between me and Luna, a fretful stitch in her brow and her foot tapping nervously as the cashier scans her items. She probably thinks I've kidnapped Luna to turn her into a club whore.

"What about these?" Luna asks, reaching into the cart and fishing out the box of tampons.

"Not my place to tell you," I say. "You'll figure it out."

"How can I figure it out if you won't tell me?"

"Ask Callan," I say, flashing her an evil smile. Let him deal with her feminine problems. He's the one who dragged her home.

"Why does Callan know if you don't? Does he use these and not you?"

The woman in front of us yanks her bags from the cashier, shooting us looks of disgust and abject pity before stomping off.

"No, he doesn't use those," I say to Luna. "He's a *man*. You use tampons when it's your... Moon cycle." I'm starting to sweat in this frigid, ice-chilled store. I shoot her a meaningful look, trying to shut her up, and shove a handful of clothes onto the counter.

"My moon cycle?" Her brow stitches together. "Ohhh. You mean when I'm bleeding."

"Right. That."

The cashier is a young, pimply-faced kid, barely out of diapers if his whisker-free chin is any indication.

Luna's still clutching the damn box of tampons. "What do I do with them?"

"We pay for all this shit and leave," I say, batting the box onto the counter.

It's official. I've been unmanned by this pipsqueak of a girl, and I don't like it—not one bit. I don't know what I can do about it except to climb back on my motorcycle and resist the sensation of her hot pussy pressed against my lower back as I take our stray back home where I'll blow my load in the shower, picturing her skinny legs spread wide and my thick cock wrecking her tight little cunt.

Chapter Sixteen

Callan

It takes the better part of an hour to cleanse and tend Ethan's wounds. That vampire did a number on him, barely missing his carotid artery, or I'd be a twin now, instead of a triplet.

Bloody towels fill the kitchen sink, and crimson spatters cover the floor, but at least my brother is alive.

I had to break out our best liquor to stitch Ethan up good and proper. Now that he's shit-faced, I tie off the last thread on his neck and pat his shoulder. "Good as new."

Ethan opens his eyes—he's kept them squeezed shut with a grimace on his face while I've stitched his neck. "You fucking done?"

"Just about." I grab the can of spray antiseptic we keep for moments like this and spritz some onto his wound. "The scar'll leave you uglier than you already are. Want to see?"

Ethan takes another swig of whiskey and shakes his head. "Nah. I trust you."

"Then let's go deal with the body."

Pushing to his feet, he winces. "Damn. That fucking hurts." He lifts his hand and touches my artistry sewn into his flesh. A whistle leaves his lips. "Hoo, baby, I thought I was a goner there for a minute. But, damn, that was fun."

I place the medical supplies back in the canvas kit and shove it back in the cupboard where we keep it.

"We're going to have to wash all this shit," Ethan says, moving right past the mess. "After we deal with the dead guy."

"By 'we,' you mean 'me,' right?" I kick a red-streaked towel out of my

path as we head toward the back door.

Ethan grunts. "Someone's gotta do it."

"It's your blood," I remind him.

"You're better at it than me," he says, nudging the screen door with the toe of his shit-kickers. The door flies open and whacks against the wall. Ethan exits, and I catch the door before it pops me in the face.

"You know how to do your own fucking laundry."

Ethan turns to grin over his shoulder at me. "We could teach Luna to do it."

"Fuck you. She's not our maid," I say, following him toward the trees lining our property.

"She could be," he counters. "I wouldn't mind seeing her on her hands and knees."

"Your dick's going to get you killed one of these days."

"Hey, we all have jobs. Why not give her one? I mean, if you don't want her cleaning up after us, I can think of another job she could do on her hands and knees."

I ignore him and storm ahead, trying to erase the image he put in my brain. Being outside always calms me. I love where we live, though maybe not the mosquitoes and chiggers that bite the shit out of us. The land on the edge of the swamp is a magical place. I love the smell of the cypress trees, the wildflowers and herbs that grow around here, even the smell of the swamp itself. Humans think the swamp stinks, but unless you're mucking around in it, stirring up the gasses and decaying matter, it's got a scent all its own, like wild things live here. And they're right.

Wild things is exactly what we are.

"Where the fuck did you stash the body?" I ask as we tromp deeper into the brush. The sun has sunk below the trees, but it's still light enough to see. Just the time of night the mosquitos come swarming.

"Oh, we dragged him some way out. Didn't want Miss Luna to see the carnage."

"What did you do to the guy?" I ask, stepping over a fallen log.

"I didn't do shit to *him*." He side-eyes me and waggles his eyebrows. "But I did leave his woman in a satisfied state of mind."

I shake my head and pick my way through some muddy terrain. "When will you learn that sometimes it's better to keep it in your pants?"

"This cock is meant for pleasure. Why waste a good thing?" He grabs his

dick through his jeans and then pauses, pointing to a cluster of flies swirling around some bushes. “There he is.”

I wave the flies away before lifting the Fetterbush branches before us. The corpse lays in a mangled heap, barely recognizable.

“Fuck, he stinks.”

“Right?” Ethan says. “It’s a wonder Frank hasn’t found him. I thought we’d feed him to that old son of a bitch.”

“Good idea,” I say, grabbing the ankles of the body and hauling him out to where I can look at him. The dude’s chest is torn apart like a wolverine got to him. “Shit.”

Ethan chuckles. “You have to kill these motherfuckers with wood, so we used an old wooden spoon.”

“You know you don’t have to use wood if you just tear his head off, right?”

His chuckles turn into a raucous laugh. “Where’s the fun in that?”

I stare at the dude’s bashed-in skull. “You used a wooden spoon to bash in his head?”

“We used the shovel to bash in his head,” Ethan corrects me. “Once he was down, I grabbed the old spoon I saw in the shed the other day and carved open his chest cavity.”

“Where’s the heart?”

“Warrick ate it,” Ethan says, watching me heft the vampire’s remains over my shoulder.

“He gagged down the whole heart?” I ask as we trudge toward the water. The stench of dead vamp fills my nostrils, and I’m more than ready to dump the body and be done with it.

“You know vamp blood only makes us stronger,” Ethan says. When we get close to the swamp, he whistles. “Here, Frank, come get supper.”

A set of eyes sinks into the reddish water, and ripples stream in our direction. A few seconds later, the oldest, meanest alligator in these parts waddles onto the shore, looking at us speculatively.

“Here, boy...catch,” Ethan says.

I hurl the dead vamp, and it soars through the air and lands in a heap near Frank’s seventy or so sharp teeth. I blow out a lungful of air and wipe the sweat from my neck and face.

My brother and his goddamned conquests...

As Frank goes to town on the body, dragging it to wherever he’s going to

consume it, Ethan and I head back toward the house.

“You been keeping your mitts to yourself with Luna, right?” I ask, sporting for a fight after hauling another one of Ethan’s sexual messes through the woods.

“I can neither confirm nor deny,” Ethan says with a smirk. He lifts a branch and holds it for me to trek past.

I swat his hand aside. “She’s too young for you,” I snap. “And too sweet to deserve your twisted ass fucking her up.”

“Says who?” He gives me a shove.

“You do recall what we just did, right?” I shove him back, and he stumbles, nearly tripping over a branch in his drunken state.

“So?” he says hotly.

“So? That’s the best you can come up with?” I throw my hands up and stomp back toward the cabin.

He charges after me and grabs my arm. “You’re just pissed because *you* want her.”

I yank my arm from his grip. “What I want is not to have to dispose of any dead bodies after you’ve fucked her and fucked her up.”

“She doesn’t have a boyfriend. She’s fair game.” Ethan’s eyes are intense and heated, like he’s been struggling to stay away from her, same as me.

“If anyone gets her, it’s Warrick. He’s our Alpha.”

Ethan thunders after me again, but he doesn’t argue. We storm toward the house like a couple dickheads about to get into a brawl over a piece of ass, which is exactly what we are.

To my surprise, he pulls up short at the house. “You’re right,” he says. “She deserves better than what any of us have to offer. She’s way too young and innocent for the likes of us. We’d ruin her.”

“And after what she’s already been through with Axel,” I remind him. “She needs someone to look after her, not sniff around seeing what he can get out of her.”

He sighs, looking downright dejected. “Yeah, okay. I’ll try to think of her instead of my dick when she’s around.”

“There’s still a whole city full of women you can fuck,” I say, gesturing vaguely toward Jacksonville.

He sighs again. “Yeah, I reckon.”

“Then it’s settled,” I say, holding out a hand in a peace offering. “Neither of us stick our dicks in our houseguest. She’s too naïve to know what’s what.

She needs our protection. We can't take advantage of her like that."

I don't know what it is about her, but she brings out some primal instinct in me. Yeah, that one, too. Of course I want to fuck her. I'm not blind. But more than that, I want to protect her, to erase what that asshole Axel did to her. And if I can't do that, then at least I can work to make her see that not all wolves are the traitorous sort she believes us to be. I want to work to get the wariness out of her eyes and put happiness there instead. After the life she's led, she deserves it.

Ethan grumbles, but he shakes on it. We may not be upstanding citizens, but our word is good—at least to each other.

Luna is officially off-limits.

Chapter Seventeen

Luna

Warrick barely says a word to me after we leave Paradise Acres. He drives me to something called a drive-through and buys me food he says is fast. The burger tastes okay, but the meat would be better if it wasn't cooked. The best part is a chocolate milkshake, which is unlike anything I've ever had in the swamp, that's for sure.

After we eat, Warrick tosses all the paper wrappers and the waxy cups in a bin and heads for his motorcycle. I follow obediently and climb on behind him, careful to keep my hands to myself, unless he careens around a turn, laying the bike on edge. Then, I grab on.

When he first started driving, it scared me, but once I realized it was just like running as a wolf but faster and louder, exhilaration poured through me. On the way home, I keep my exuberance to myself, though, since Warrick seems to be in one of his grumpy moods. When Mama got like that, it was best to shut my trap and let her come out of it herself.

When we get back to their house, he jerks his head and says, "Get your shit out of my saddlebags."

I climb down and unbuckle the shiny clasps on the black leather bag. After pulling the bags from the store free, I give him a big smile, hoping to cheer him up. I want him to feel as happy as I do right now.

"Thank you," I say. "I had a great time."

"Welcome," he grumbles. "Tell the boys I'm off to hunt."

I perk up at that. I haven't hunted since I left the swamp.

"Want company?" I ask, but the question is drowned by the roar of his bike, and then he's gone in a cloud of dust.

Whatever Callan was cooking, I'm glad I wasn't around for it, because it

doesn't smell too good in the house. I can barely breathe over the chemical scent. The noise of the washing machine running echoes from the back room. Callan is on his knees, scrubbing the floor, which consists of big squares in black and white. A blue bucket full of water sits by his side, green plastic hand-shaped things cover his hands, and pinkish water pools around his knees.

He pauses when I enter, sitting up and dipping his scrubbing brush into the water. "Like my gloves?" he says, lifting the brush and wiggling the fingers of his free hand at me.

"Is that what those are?"

"Don't want to get dishpan hands," he says with a smile.

My brow furrows, and I ask the question I've said a hundred times a day since I arrived. "What is that?"

"When your skin gets all wrinkly from being in the water too long," he says. "How was your outing?"

I heft the bags in each hand. "We got a lot of stuff. What should I do with it?"

"Set it on the table. We'll figure out where to put it as soon as I'm done here." He gets back to cleaning, and I saunter over to the wooden table and drop the sacks on top. We've all been keeping the house a lot tidier than it was when I moved in, so there's room on the table now. The wood is shiny and smells like lemons after Callan showed me how to polish it the other day. But the lemon smell is overpowered by the horrible scent permeating the room.

"What's that awful smell?" I say, waving my hand in front of my nose.

"It sucks to have a sensitive wolf nose right about now," Callan says. "This is bleach. It's the only thing I could think of to get the bloodstains off the floor."

"Is Ethan okay?" I ask, sitting my backside on one of the chairs.

"Other than a bad hangover, he'll be fine by tomorrow." Callan grabs a pink-stained towel and wipes the water and bleach from the floor. Then, he hucks everything into the bucket and stands.

"What's a bad hangover?"

"That's what happens when you drink too much booze."

"Beer is booze," I say. "Ethan said it makes you happy."

"Right," Callan says. "But too much happiness from liquor can make you sick."

A thumping noise comes from the back of the house, the one that Callan says happens when you put too many clothes in the washing machine at once. I made the mistake a few times in my first few days, when we were trying to get the house in order.

“Shit,” Callan says. “I’ve got to adjust the towels in the washer. I’ll go empty this bucket, fix the towels, and be right back, okay?”

When he’s gone, I fish out the purple hair color. I can’t wait to try it out.

Callan strides back into the kitchen and grins at me. “What do you think?” he says, sweeping his arm in front of him. “Good as new?”

“Looks great,” I say, returning the grin. I like being around someone who isn’t always an explosion in the making. “Even cleaner than before we left. But I’d rather smell blood than that bleach.”

“It’s pretty bad,” Callan says. “Want to go out on the porch while we look at your haul?”

He must see my blank expression because he gestures to the bags to let me know what he means. He grabs them off the table, and I follow him onto the porch, where we sit down on the wooden swing. Callan ducks inside and emerges with two beers, which he pops open with his lighter before handing me one and settling beside me.

“What’d you get?” he asks, crossing his ankle over his knee and sitting back with his beer. My eyes move over his relaxed posture, his muddy boots and dirty jeans, the sleeveless shirt that shows the bulging muscles of his arms, his skin wrapped with tattoos. A funny flutter presses down low in my belly, the way it did when I was on Warrick’s bike. I wish I could press the feel-good place between my legs against him, like I did against Warrick’s back.

“Well?” Callan says. “You going to show me or just stare at me all night?”

I tap my ragged nails on the arm of the swing and look away. “Warrick’s pissed at me again.”

“Oh, pet, don’t take it personal,” he says. “He acts like a prick around most people. It’s just who he is.”

I nod, though it seems like that’s not a very happy way to live. I’ll have to think of something I can do to make him happier, especially after all they’ve done for me. I’ve already helped clean the house, but that’s only the start. If they’re going to take such good care of me, I should take care of them, too.

Callan takes a swig of his beer, and his gaze lands on the hair color in my

hands. “What’s that you got there?”

I let him take the box of hair color while I take a drink of the cold, bitter beer. At first, I didn’t like it much, but I’m starting to change my mind. It’s cool on the hot evenings, and it makes me feel like I belong when we all sit out here together with a bottle, even though I usually only have one while they each have four or five.

“That will make me look like her,” I say, leaning over Callan’s arm and pointing to the girl on the box. “Isn’t she pretty?”

“You want purple hair?” he asks, leaning back to peer down at my face.

“I’ve only ever had this color,” I say, picking up a lock of hair. “I didn’t know you could choose different colors. I guess Mama chose this one for me and forgot to tell me I could change it. But I think I might like to try every color before I pick one.”

“Every color, huh,” Callan says, taking another swig of beer and handing back the box. He has that shine in his eyes like he might laugh soon.

My neck and cheeks heat up. “I told Warrick that Ama said it was stupid, and he said, ‘Ama’s a bitch,’ and that I should do it if it makes me happy. So he bought it for me.”

The laugh comes bubbling out of Callan then, and I relax, feeling good that I made him happy, too. For weeks, I’ve been halfway in a daze of grief over Mama and Axel. It’s nice to finally feel like I can smile again without bursting into tears. And the thing that gives me these little nuggets of happiness is making them happy. Well, that, and the little things they do to make me happy.

Callan brings me a fresh herb or rabbit after a hunt. Ethan says I’m doing good even when I mix up the words for things he’s shown me or forget to put soap in the laundry. Warrick said I should be happy, and he gave me three new experiences today—being queen of a motorcycle, going to a cold store, and getting food fast. And they all eat the food I make for dinner even when I burn it, or it tastes strange because I don’t know what things go together.

“Let’s get ‘er done,” Callan says. “How about right now?”

“Okay,” I say, hopping up from the swing.

“This might get messy,” he warns.

“Have you done it before?”

He throws his head back and laughs, then downs the rest of his beer and belches. “No, pet. This is *au naturale*.” He runs his hand dramatically through his shaggy brown hair.

“I think we can figure it out,” I say. “Can you help?”

“Sure. Might as well get some more use out of these.” He snags the gloves from where he dropped them at his feet on the porch, and we head inside. He opens the box and pulls out a big piece of paper. Staring intently at it, he mouths the words. At last, he points to the sink.

“Over there.”

I like the way all these men tell me exactly what they want instead of making me guess things and get them wrong, like I did with Axel.

I go to the sink in the kitchen. Callan fishes a couple of plastic bottles from the box. He opens them and pours creamy white goo into the dark purple liquid. Shaking the bottle, he says, “Bend over the sink and let your hair hang into the basin.

I do as I’m told.

He gets behind me and squirts the goo into my hair, all over, until it’s completely covered. “Now I’m going to massage this in, and then we wait for it to set.”

I sniff the odd scent of the purple dye while Callan leans over my back and rubs his fingertips into my scalp until I want to purr. I remember Axel’s fingers in my hair, doing the same thing with shampoo, and an ache pierces straight into my heart. I gasp for breath, reeling with the sudden onslaught of pain that comes in bursts every time I remember something from our short time together.

Closing my eyes, I try to come back to the moment. This isn’t Axel, who expected me to know everything and didn’t tell me anything. It’s Callan, who patiently answers the thousand little questions I have every day, and though sometimes he and the others laugh at me, they always let me know that it’s okay if I don’t know, that they’re delighted by my lack of understanding. And then they teach me what I didn’t know, so I can laugh with them.

“How you doin’ down there?” Callan asks, his voice lower and gruffer than usual. I can feel something rigid pressed into my butt from the front of his hips, just like I felt from Axel when we were in the shower.

“Is that your cock?” I ask, remembering what Axel called it. I reach behind me to feel, and Callan lets out a groan.

I pull my hand back. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No, pet. You didn’t do a thing except for being you,” he says, easing back a little. “There. We’re done.”

I don’t want to be done. Frustration rumbles in my throat as a growl. All

these sensations and feelings are overwhelming, the way they come popping up like bubbles from the swamp, each one filled with something new—desire, confusion, grief, joy, pain—so many things every day that I don't know how to feel from one moment to the next. I hang my head in the sink for a moment, letting my sorrows drip down the drain with the droplets of color.

“So, show me what else you got,” Callan says, fitting a plastic hat from the box over my head. He twists the dial on a small white thing on the counter, then we both head for the table.

One by one, I pull out the clothes Warrick purchased for me.

“Trust Warrick to make you look like a bag lady,” Callan says, holding up an oversized T-shirt. “Of course he wouldn't want to show you off.”

“Show me off?” I ask.

Callan drops the purple shirt he's holding onto the table. “If Ethan bought you clothes, we wouldn't be able to take you anywhere,” he says. “Not without starting a riot.”

“What's that?”

“A fight,” he says.

“Why would Ethan pick clothes that would start a fight?”

His eyes make me feel warm and melty, like someone has reached inside my chest and rubbed my heart the way he massaged the goo into my scalp. “Because every guy in town would want to fuck you, plain and simple,” he says. “Ethan and I vowed to protect you, so we'll happily tear out the throats of anyone who even makes eye contact with you. Got it?”

A shiver coils up my spine at his words, but I'm not afraid. While I don't want any more throat tearing, it feels like a full belly after a long hunt that the triplets vowed to protect me.

We finish going through the clothes, then pull out the hairbrush, the deodorant, the razors, the shampoo, and the tampons. Holding the box of tampons, I say, “Warrick didn't know how to use these. Do you?”

Callan's cheeks go bright red under his scruff. “Is that what he said?”

I nod, and he swallows, making the lump in his throat bob.

“I suppose I could show you,” he says, his voice sounding choked.

A single ding vibrates in the air.

Callan rises from the chair at the table. “First, we get this dye off your hair. Come on back to the sink and lean over it.”

He flips on the water, adjusts the water temperature, and trains it over my

hair when I lean over the sink again. Purple water drains down the sink. When it turns mostly clear, he squirts some shampoo on my head and massages it into my scalp. His fingers are like magic, turning me into steamy heat, like dipping in the hot springs. Tingles of pleasure dance through my body, settling into the heat between my legs where Axel pierced me with his cock. But this feels only good, not painful. I sigh and push back against Callan.

His fingers still for a second, but then he pushes forward in response. The hot, rigid bulge of his cock pushes into my behind and sends a throb right into my center. I gasp and push back harder. Callan's breathing deep, too. Slowly, he begins to rhythmically rock his hips into me. Pleasurable sensations flood my body. I step my feet further apart, wishing he was between my legs like Warrick was on the bike today. I need more.

He flips off the water and rests one hand on the sink on either side of me, pushing me against the edge so hard it bites into my belly. He's breathing so hard I want to ask if he's okay, but my throat feels all trembly. Before I can gather my thoughts, his hands slide inside my t-shirt, up my sides, urging my arms up over my head. He tugs my shirt over my head, giving my hair a quick rub-down with the shirt to soak up some of the water. When I throw my hair back afterwards, it hits his shoulder, and he groans again.

"Ah, fuck, Luna," he murmurs, dipping his nose to the top of my head. His calloused hands run up and down my waistline, stroking his way to the front where he cups my breasts. His cock jerks against my backside, and he sucks in a breath.

The feel of his rough hands gliding across my soft skin fills me with confusing sensations. He pinches my nipples between his fingers, and a quick shock of need yanks tight inside me. Tingles and thrills pulse inside my lower belly. I close my eyes and fall into the pleasure coursing through my bloodstream. My mind goes all dream-like, like gazing at the water bugs as they skitter across the surface of the swamp, or when I'm belly up in my wolfskin in the hot sun.

Without a word, Callan pivots me around. I stand there, gripping the sink to stay upright, feeling dizzy suddenly. He didn't dry my hair well enough, and my dripping wet locks stick to my shoulders. Cool droplets stream down my face, neck, and torso. Callan is staring at me with eyes that make me want to melt into his arms.

"Oh fuck it," he says. "A man can only be so strong." He steps forward,

grabbing me roughly and crushing his lips mine. I make a sound of surprise, but he swallows it whole. His slick tongue slides into my mouth, thrusting against mine. I'm too startled to move for a second. But then he reaches for my hand, lifting it and pulling it behind his neck. I raise the other one the same way, clinging to his shoulders while his tongue slides in and out against mine, and the thrilling sensations in my body increase until I'm ready to burst with excitement.

Suddenly, he wrenches his lips away.

"I can't..."

His forehead drops to mine, and we both breathe hard and heavy. The place between my legs still feels good, but now it aches, too.

"What happened?" I manage.

"That," Callan says. "Was a kiss." He reaches behind me, and his hand returns with the deodorant.

I lift my hands high, the way Warrick demonstrated. Callan gazes at me intently for a few seconds, slowly shaking his head while his nostrils flare. His tongue darts across his full lips, back and forth, like he's waiting for a juicy meal. He takes the top off the deodorant and pushes it up and down my armpits, one at a time.

"This is how you apply deodorant," he says, his voice a soft rumble.

I nod, unable to look away from his beautiful eyes. The creamy sensation of the deodorant stroking my skin feels lovely.

"After you shower, when we're heading into town, you can put this on," he says. "When you're around here, don't use it. I want to smell your natural essence. Your scent turns me on, Luna. I can smell you right now, how wet you are." He brushes his nose against mine. "It makes me fucking insane."

I reach for the shirt, meaning to dry myself more, but he catches my hand and presses it flat on the counter. "I want to smell you, not deodorant. But so-called civilized people like you to mask your scent."

"Why do they want me to mask my scent?" I say, my breath shallow against his cheek.

"So they don't get as turned on as I am right now." He lowers his lips to mine again, and his hands find my nipples.

Twirling and tweaking them sends shooting stars through my limbs, and the heat between my legs builds and aches with a starving kind of need. My lips part, and I'm panting now, unsure what to do with all the heat coursing through me but not wanting it to stop.

“Callan,” I gasp. “I need—”

I don’t know what I need. I feel a hurricane build inside me. When hurricanes came, Mama and I would hide, but this is the kind of storm that would make me race into the woods, dance naked in the wind, water and leaves plastering themselves to my body, throwing themselves against its indestructible power. That’s what I feel inside as Callan’s cock grinds into my belly. He slips a hand between my legs, where my pants are wet and hot. I moan, my head dropping back at the exquisite sensation of his fingers pressing against my swollen flesh.

“Oh, god, Luna... I’m about to...”

I don’t know what he’s about to do, but if it’s the same thing pulsing through me, I’m about to do it, too. Suddenly, he yanks back. “Fuck,” he says loudly, almost a yell.

“What?” I ask, torn between the pleasure and the fear that he’s going to hurt me like Axel.

“I promised Ethan...” He points to the table. “Take that hairbrush and brush out your hair.”

With that, he storms down the hall and into the bathroom, slamming the door behind him and leaving me confused and bewildered.

Chapter Eighteen

Luna

The triplets go off to a new job installing wires the next day after a quiet breakfast. I make dinner, but hardly anyone speaks through the meal. For some reason, I find myself thinking of this one time when I caught my foot in Virginia Creeper vines while a gator was eyeing me for its supper. Mama was having one of her funny feelings that day, so she was hiding in the house, sure that wolves were going to come for us. But we had to eat, so I went out anyway. I knew there were no wolves in the swamp, even if she didn't.

I shifted and raced into the woods, hoping for a lucky day and a fast catch. But then I got caught in the vines. I shifted back in a flash, used my fingers to free myself, and ran before the gator could grab me. That night, I headed home empty-handed to find Mama with a knife in her hand, ready to slit my throat because she thought I was one of the wolves, come to murder her.

Tonight feels almost as tense.

I cooked the swamp rabbits that were in Callan's traps today, but I just cooked it a little, leaving the meat nice and bloody. Still, the triplets are quiet, focused on eating, not even making conversation with one another.

"Did I cook the dinner wrong again?" I ask at last.

"It's great," Ethan says, wiping pink juice from his chin.

"Are you mad that I checked the traps without you?"

"It would be safer if you stayed with one of us when you go into the woods," Warrick says, scowling at me. "The Jacksonville pack doesn't take kindly to us using their hunting grounds."

"Besides, they might not like that you're living with us," Callan says.

"Why not?" I ask. "They didn't want me living with them. They can't

pick where I do live.”

Callan gives me a tight smile. “They might not like how it looks, you being Axel’s former mate and all.”

“How what looks?” I ask, glancing around in confusion.

“A pretty little lady like you, living with three ugly old dogs like us,” Ethan says.

“What does it look like?” I ask. “Like you took me in and accepted me when they didn’t?”

Warrick gives a rare grin, just one corner of his mouth pulling up. “That, too,” he says with a chuckle.

“We’ll show you where to hunt on your own, in case you get a hankering while we’re out,” Callan says, patting my hand. Then he pulls back real quick and casts a guilty look at Ethan. I remember what he said last night when he ran out of the kitchen, and I wonder what he promised his brother.

“I can take you out any time,” Ethan says with a grin, covering my other hand with his. “I wouldn’t mind seeing you shift.”

Callan’s foot shoots across the small space under the square table and clobbers Ethan’s shin. Ethan curses and rubs at the bruise.

“Cut it out, you two,” Warrick growls, and I feel that dominant energy pressing down on the table, forcing me to drop my gaze. The other two drop their heads and grumble.

There’s more awkward silence.

“If it’s not the dinner, or that I checked the traps alone, then is it my hair?” I guess, running my fingers through the beautiful purple strands, the color of spiderwort flowers. “Because even if you don’t, I still love it, and I’m keeping it.”

I peer up at Warrick from under my lashes, hoping he won’t say otherwise because if he does, I think I’ll have to change it back. He told me to do it, though, so I hope that’s not it. Living with these men is so confusing. In the swamp, all I cared about was whether we had food to eat and if Mama was in a stable mood, which was seldom, or worked up, which was not. But even that is simple compared to trying to figure out what’s wrong with the three grumpy, silent oafs sitting before me.

After dinner, Callan and Ethan start to clean the kitchen while Warrick disappears outside like he does whenever he’s in a mood.

“Can I help?” I say, picking up my bowl and taking it to the sink.

“Nope,” Callan says, plucking it from my hand and placing it in the sink.

The two men move around me like I'm a tree growing in the kitchen.

"I'm going out to have a beer on the front porch," I pronounce, the same way they usually do after dinner. "Come out if you want to join me."

No conversation ensues once I'm outside. Unlike most nights, they don't squabble or bicker, joke or play loud music. I wonder if it's because of what happened last night—whatever I did wrong that made Callan dash away to the shower like he was on fire. Maybe he told his brothers what I did wrong, and now they're all upset. Even though I don't *know* what I did, I know this new strangeness is because of me. When I arrived, everything was messy, but they were happy.

I brought this tension into their home. Worse, I don't understand how I did it or what to do about it.

I'm still thinking about it when I finish my beer and head inside, since no one came to join me. Callan is in the shower again. Since getting the showerhead fixed, these men are making up for lost time with the showers. I have to take one during the day when they're out because it seems like one of them is always in the shower lately.

I crawl into bed, and in the uneasy stillness of the typically raucous household, I close my eyes and will them to be happy again.

In the morning, I wake to the roar of motorcycle engines. I roll from the rumpled sheets, my heart hammering, afraid there will be another vampire fight. But when I run to the window, it's just Callan and Warrick on their bikes, ready to head off somewhere.

Callan's head swivels toward me, and for a second, our eyes lock. The same warm shivers I felt when he dyed my hair churn in my belly, but before I can even raise a hand to wave, they're gone in a cloud of dust and gravel.

My heart falters with the stinging ants of loneliness. A lump of emotion chokes my throat, blocking my breath. I pull on one of the new shirts Warrick bought me and pad to the kitchen on bare feet.

"Good morning," I say to Ethan, who sits at the table with a cup of coffee. I stop in the doorway to yawn and stretch my arms above my head. When I recover, Ethan's eyes are lingering on my body, and another fluttery feeling rolls through me.

"Morning, pup," he says in his growly before-breakfast voice.

"How's your neck healing up?"

"What? This?" He points to the stitched-up gash on his neck. "Nothing whiskey and painkillers won't cure."

I head to the cold box they call a fridge and snag a piece of rabbit sitting in last night's congealed sauce. I pluck the juicy meat out with my fingers and pop it in my mouth. Ethan watches my mouth with hunger evident in his gaze.

"You want some?" I ask, plucking up another piece and holding it up.

"Hell yeah, I want some of that." He angles his chair away from the table, extends one of his long legs, and pats his jeans-clad thigh. His torso is bare, as usual. "Bring that bowl of rabbit over here, and we'll eat it together."

"You're not mad at me anymore?"

"We weren't mad at you, pup." His lips roll between his teeth as he pats his thigh again. "It's just an adjustment, having a sexy little thing like you under the same roof as us."

I'm about to ask what that means, but when I reach the table, he grabs my hips, pivots me sideways, and pulls me onto his legs.

A yelp of surprise escapes my lips, but I melt a little when my arm connects with his warm skin.

He takes the bowl, sets it on the table, and picks up a morsel of rabbit. Instead of eating it, he holds it out for me. He pops the meat inside my mouth, leaving his fingers for a second so I have to curl my tongue around the meat and tug it free.

He lets out a little growl and then opens his mouth. I fish a piece from the bowl and slip it between his lips, my heart hammering hard for some reason. His teeth close around my fingers, and a wicked-looking smile appears.

"Oh!" I say in surprise, tugging at my hand. He seizes my wrist to hold it in place, and a look of mischief flashes on his face as he sucks on my fingers.

I close my eyes at the sensation of his hot, slippery tongue curling around my fingers. He lets out a low moan, and the vibration rolls through my fingers, up my arm, and down my body, settling in that achy pressure in my low belly. Something hard stirs under my bottom the same way it did when Callan was behind me. I slowly slide my finger free of Ethan's mouth and open my eyes. A smile curves my lips as I regard him. Maybe he won't run away like Callan did.

"Now that we're alone, I gotta ask," he says. "What did you and Callan do after I passed out the other night? Because whatever it was, it's got him all tied up in knots."

I like that he's thinking about the same thing as me. "He dyed my hair."

"Yeah? I like the purple. It's sexy. Makes you look less like a kid."

“I’m not a kid,” I say, lifting my gaze toward a couple flies lazily circling the kitchen in the summer heat.. “I been taking care of myself since I was little, and my mama, too.”

“I know,” he says. “And you did a fine job of it. And now you look every inch the woman you are.”

A surge of pleasure fills my heart, and I stroke my sleek hair.

“So,” he says, shifting me on his lap so his cock is pushed right up against the softness of my bottom. “Then what did you do? You and Callan?”

Is this some kind of test? Am I going to get Callan in trouble? He said he’d promised something to Ethan. My lips part, but no words emerge.

“It’s okay, you can tell me,” Ethan says. His breathing quickens like he’s hot on the trail of prey. My own breathing feels shallow, and I can’t seem to think straight because it feels so good being near him like this.

“Well,” I say, recalling the pleasure I felt when Callan kissed me. “He showed me how to use deodorant.”

“Yeah?” He plucks out another piece of rabbit and feeds it to me. “Suck on my fingers.”

I suck.

“Ah, fuck,” he says, his eyes going back in his head. “And then what happened?”

A flush of heat ignites my cheeks and neck. “And then he kissed me—the way Axel did, not the way Mama did.”

Ethan’s eyes narrow as the hardness beneath my bottom pushes up like it’s trying to escape being trapped between us. “Did he do anything else?”

I lift my hands to my breasts and touch each nipple through my shirt. “And then he touched me here.”

He shifts his hips beneath me. “Did it feel good?”

“Yeah,” I say, a little breathless.

“Did he show you how to use the other things Warrick bought you?” His voice sounds husky and strained.

I shake my head. “No. He left.”

A few heartbeats of silence pass between us as Ethan studies me with a heated gaze.

“Get up,” he says with a lift of his chin. “It’s *my* turn.”

“Your turn for what?” I ask, swallowing hard.

“You’ll see,” he says with a wicked grin, lifting me off his lap. My gaze lands on the significant bulge in his pants. He smirks when he catches me

looking, then tugs at his jeans and stands. His fingers find the bulge, and he slowly strokes his fingers from the base to the top.

“See what you do to me?” he asks, a growl in his voice even as a teasing smile plays on his lips.

My pulse flutters in my throat, and I tear my eyes away to meet his gaze. “I did that?”

“Yes, Luna. You did that.” He takes my hand and pulls me closer.

“Is that a good thing?”

“Want to feel?”

I nod mutely, letting him take my hand and press it to the thick ridge in his jeans. I curl my fingers around it as well as I can through the thick denim, staring down at it.

Suddenly, he pulls my hand away and drags me through the house to the bathroom. “Where’s that bag of shit you got?” he asks.

I open the cabinet and pull out the sack with the stuff Warrick bought. Ethan rifles through it before pulling out the razors and shaving cream with a triumphant grin. “I’d better teach you to use these,” he says. “Wouldn’t want you to cut yourself, after all.”

He crouches, retrieves the package the razor came in and rips it open. Running his thumb over the blade, he hisses when it slices his skin and a drop of blood appears.

“Oh, no,” I cry. “Are you okay?”

He chuckles and sucks his thumb into his mouth.

“Does it hurt?” I ask. “What if you cut me, too?”

“Not a chance, pup,” he says, pointing to the tub. “Take off your clothes and get in.”

I slide the soft cotton from my torso as he turns on the hot water. Water streams from the spigot, but he doesn’t pull out the metal device that makes it shoot out the showerhead. Instead, he inserts something in the drain, and water fills the tub.

His gaze rakes my entire body, and he groans like he’s in pain.

“Are you okay?” I ask. “Is it your thumb?”

“Get in,” he orders.

I step past him, brushing against his warm skin, and lower myself into the porcelain tub. Water crawls up my legs and hips, filling the basin. It’s like the hot springs but without the trees and the birds and the smells of earth.

Razor and shaving cream in hand, Ethan climbs in opposite me, cranking

off the water before settling into the tub.

I draw my legs up to my chest to make room for him.

“Leg, please.” He extends his hand, and I stretch out one of my legs and rest it on his muscular thigh.

He pops the top off the shaving cream and presses a button, sending a bubble of white cream into his palm. With soft, sure strokes, he spreads it on my leg. His hands on my skin feel warm and good. Staring at me intently, the slightest smile curving his lips, Ethan draws the razor down my leg.

“See, no blood,” he says, flashing me a grin and wiggling the razor at me. “It only makes you nice and smooth.”

Suddenly, I remember Warrick saying I might want to be smooth between my legs for a real man, and that part of me burns hotter, making me squirm. Ethan watches me with a knowing smirk, then scoops water into his palm, rinsing my skin. He runs his palm up and down my calf. It feels so good I want to drop my head back and moan.

Ethan continues squirting the foamy white cream into his palm, spreading it over my skin and drawing the razor over it until my legs are hairless. His breath moves quickly from his heaving lungs, and I can see the big bulge of his cock still straining against his wet jeans.

When he’s done with my calves, he parts my knees and moves closer to my body in the water, looking down between them. “Now comes the fun part,” he says with a grin.

“What’s the fun part?” I whisper.

“Your pussy,” he growls in a voice so deep I barely recognize it.

“My what?”

“Spread your legs and rest them on my thighs and scoot closer.” His tongue darts across his lips.

Swirls of tingly feelings shoot through my lower belly as I do as I’m told. Water no longer touches the place between my legs that feels so good and aches so bad.

He squirts another cloud of shaving cream in his hand and touches it between my legs. I gasp with pleasure, my hips rising on their own. Ethan moans and spreads the cream into my hair, massaging me until I’m whimpering like my wolf when she’s injured. He just chuckles and holds up the razor, slowly stroking it down the side of my hair. He works slowly, and each stroke is torture. Not because he’s cutting me or making me bleed, but because I want his touch again, and when I get a bit of it, it’s not enough.

“You like that, pup?” he asks, though the shine in his eyes and the upward slant of his mouth says he knows the answer already.

“Yes,” I say, my voice somewhere between a whisper and a moan.

He chuckles and spreads open the outer layer of my heat, gazing down at the secret within like he’s never seen something so wondrous. I raise my hips slowly, and he slides a finger across the swollen bud between those lips. I give a little mewling cry.

“Goddamn, Luna,” he growls. “I want to fuck you so hard your head explodes.”

“What?” I ask, drawing away slightly. “Don’t do that!”

Ethan only grins and shakes his head, laying a hand on my knee and pulling me back again. “Don’t worry, pup. I won’t. Now let me finish before I explode.”

Don’t trust the wolves.

Mama’s last words echo through my mind, but they seem far away now. I squeeze my eyes shut and hold my breath, feeling each scrape and drag of the sharp metal against my skin. My breath comes in little pants as the swirling in my belly increases. The soft clatter of plastic against porcelain and the small thwack of metal on the rim of the tub lets me know Ethan’s set the razor and shaving cream to the side.

I lay still, barely breathing, my heart feather light as it tiptoes in my chest. I have the same ache I had with Callan in the kitchen, the one I had in the shower with Axel before he tasted me and made the world open before me. I don’t know what to do with all this feeling, but I know I don’t want Ethan to leave like Callan did, and I don’t want him to hurt me like Axel did.

“Want to feel?” Ethan asks, one of his fingers stroking up and down my newly bare skin.

My eyes flutter open, meeting his intense gaze. I bite my lip and give a slight nod. He takes my hand and lowers it between my legs. It feels so smooth that I let out a little sigh of pleasure, exploring the soft, silky skin he touched. For a minute, Ethan only watches, his breath coming in quick little huffs when I move inside the outer layer, like he did. With a growl, he knocks my hand aside and pushes one of his thick fingers inside my slick hole.

I let out a cry of surprise and pleasure even though there’s a pinch of pain inside me, too.

He lets out a guttural groan, his eyes going back in his head. “Holy High

Priestess,” he says, his voice a moan of anguish. “You’re so fucking tight.”

“Are you okay?” I ask, trying to clear my head.

His gaze snaps to mine, and he grins. “Oh, pup, I’m more than okay,” he says, slowly drawing his finger out and pushing it back in even deeper. “A tight pussy is a very good thing.”

I moan, my thighs quaking as his finger slides in and out again and again.

“You like that, little pup?” he croons.

“Yes,” I breathe.

His thumb makes little circles around the swollen bud, and my whole body arches this time. “I’m going to try to get another finger in there,” he says, his voice rough. “Stretch you out a little, in case you ever want one of our cocks inside you. You want that, Luna? You want one of our cocks inside this tight little hole?”

“Yes,” I moan, feeling a delicious stretch that’s almost painful as he works another finger inside me. My walls clench tight around them.

He groans and closes his eyes, his nostrils flaring as he takes a few deep breaths. “Does that hurt?” he asks.

“A little,” I admit.

“Did Axel put his cock inside you?”

“For a minute,” I say, hoping he’ll stop talking about Axel. I don’t want that to happen again—the pleasure to be replaced by pain, and the searing burn on my arm, and the feeling like my wolf was ripped out of my body and devoured by his.

But my wolf is only happy inside me, urging me on in a playful way that doesn’t scare me. When I relax, Ethan starts to slide his fingers in and out again, the way Axel’s cock did. This doesn’t feel like Axel, though. There’s no pain after he starts moving, and he’s circling his thumb around the place that makes me feel like my head really might explode. His eyes are clouded and halfway closed, his lips slightly parted as he watches his fingers pump into me. His gaze is soft and warm, though, with no determination or command like Axel’s.

I close my eyes and let myself trust him. The desperate sensations inside me builds, and my hips rise and fall on their own, seeking some kind of relief I can’t find, the kind that Axel gave me with his mouth. I’ve never felt so good as that moment, better than a hot summer day lazing I the sun or watching dragonflies dart around the cattails, better than howling at the full moon in autumn, or racing through the fallen leaves at a gallop.

“Ethan,” I gasp, grasping the edge of the tub as I feel something about to break inside me.

“Yeah, puppy?” His smile fills my chest with joy, and he increases the pressure and slows his thumb, dragging it across my slippery nub. “What do you want?”

“I want—” I can’t answer, though. Words escape me as pleasure explodes through my body, releasing the tension and need aching inside me. My vision blurs, and my head drops back as my hips rise, my knees opening wide as I cry out in helpless bliss. An overwhelming stream of color and sensation flows through my body, my mind. It’s stunning, and there’s no painful burn in my arm, no confusion in my soul. I am home, and I never want it to end.

Chapter Nineteen

Ethan

I've fucked hundreds of women, but shaving Luna's pussy is the most truly erotic moment I've ever experienced. When she orgasmed, she looked fucking transcendent. I'd never admit it, but I'm shaken by the intensity of what happened. Hell, I couldn't explain it if I tried, how fingering her pussy made me feel things that fucking twenty women couldn't.

I'm not the man with the words, so afterwards, we lie in silence on her bed, with her cuddled in the crook of my arm. For once, I'm not thinking about when I can get up and go, or even whether it's time for a sandwich. Having her body next to mine feels fucking fantastic. It scares the hell out of me, but I don't want to stop. This feels too good to fuck it up by fucking her. And that scares me even more. Since when do I not want to fuck a gorgeous, willing woman?

Since never, that's when. The fact that my cock definitely feels different about that reassures me that I'm not turning into a pussy. I've had the world's longest, hardest hard-on for an hour straight, and every time I think about the stranglehold of her hot, wet cunt on my fingers, I just about come my pants like a teenager.

Her breathing is deep, and I think she's fallen asleep until she speaks. "Tell me a story," she says, her voice edged with sleepiness.

"A story?" I ask, trying not to sound incredulous. "I'm not the bedtime story type of guy."

"Good thing it's not bedtime," she says, squirming onto her back in my arms. "Tell me what it was like growing up out here, away from the swamp."

I push her long, purple hair away from her face. "Where's this coming from?"

“I don’t know,” she says. “I want to know more about you—all of you boys.”

I sigh and roll onto my back, my arm still pillowing her head. “That’s not something I do, pup. Think about the past. That shit is dead and gone.”

“Then it’ll be easy to talk about.” Her lips curve in the sweetest smile, one that blow-torches my walls into ash.

I continue to finger strands of her silken hair, steeling myself to dredge up memories of our childhood. Any other woman asked me this, I’d tell her to fuck off and mind her business. But Luna’s not any woman. “What do you want to know, pup?”

“Whatever you see fit to share,” she says. Her head nestles into my chest, and I swear I’ve died and gone to the place in the sky that men like me don’t ever go.

“Well, our daddy was a real son of a bitch. How’s that?”

She curls her small fingers into my little patch of chest hairs and tugs. “More.”

“Ouch,” I say, laughing and grabbing her hand. “I’m already injured, and I might die of blue balls this very night. I don’t need my chest hairs pulled out, too.”

“I’m sorry,” she coos, stroking her small hand over my pecs. “What’s blue balls?”

“Never you mind, pup,” I say. “But keep plucking my nipple like that and you’re going to find out how it feels when I empty them.”

“Oh!” she says, pulling her hand away, her cheeks turning a shade of pink that makes me want to simultaneously wrap her up in a protective hug and fuck her pretty little mouth until tears run down her cheeks from gagging on my cock until she can’t breathe. My head is so fucking confused, I don’t know what’s what.

She lays her gentle hand on the center of my chest. “Is this okay?”

God, my fucking chest aches with her sweetness. “Yeah,” I say, covering her hand with mine. “It’s more than okay.”

“Will you tell me?” she asks. “I’ve told all y’all about life in the swamp with Mama.”

I take a few seconds to conjure up something to say about dear old dad. It’s the last thing I want to talk about, but pleasing her wins out over not wanting to rehash this old shit. “He really was a rotten son of a bitch,” I say after a minute. “Mean as a snake. He fixed rich people’s pools and did

upkeep on them... Same kind of thing we do, but more steady, less odd jobs. According to his drunk ass, it was all our fault that he wasn't living in one of them fancy houses with a pool."

"Why?"

I shrug and caress her silky skin to keep myself busy while I get this out of the way. "He got meaner the deeper into goblin juice he got. We all had our way of dealing with him. Warrick, he got real quiet, same way he does now when he's simmering on something. Callan always tried to be the perfect son to keep him from having something to go after us for, picking up our room and helping our mama and shit like that. And me..." I let out a bitter chuckle. "I tried to lighten the mood, maybe tell a joke and get him laughing."

"Why'd you need to joke?" she says, tracing circles along my belly that have my cock dancing in the wet jeans I'm still wearing after our bath.

"Dad was always pissed when he came home drunk because he couldn't find goblin blood and tried to kill the craving with booze. Those times were the worst." My forehead furrows, and a few emotional rocks land on my chest as I imagine Dad's foul temper. "I learned early there was one way to cool his temper, and that was to get him laughing. Otherwise, he'd take out his anger on us with a two-by-four—that'+s a piece of wood, in case you wondered. It was best to get him laughing before that happened."

My whole body tenses with the memory, and I stop moving my hand against her arm. Skipping down memory lane is twisting my insides into knots.

"Ethan," she says, her voice choked. "That sounds awful."

"That's why I hate talking about this shit," I say. "But don't go feeling sorry for me. It was nothing compared to what you went through out there with just your mama. And it wasn't all bad. I felt real proud when I could get Dad to laugh before he walloped us. I protected all four of us if I got him laughing. That's when I knew I did good, that we'd all be alright. Warrick and Mama and Callan all looked at me like I was their fuckin' savior, I tell you. That's about the best feeling in the world."

The distant whine and snarl of motorcycle engines drifts through the open window.

"Shit, Luna. Get up and get dressed. We've got five minutes, tops."

She scrambles from the bed. "Why? What's happening?"

"My brothers are happening." Shame nooses my insides at taking

advantage of Luna.

“Callan said he promised you,” she says, pulling on a new shirt from the pile Warrick bought her. “What did he promise?”

“You can’t tell anyone what we did today, got it?” I say, rolling out of bed and dragging off my wet jeans. My brothers would fucking murder me if they knew I’d been fingering up our little pet, the one who’s off limits to all of us.

Luna digs through the bag of clothes and pulls out pair of shorts. “Why do we have to keep everything a secret?”

“Because people tend to get jealous when everyone wants to fuck the same girl, and only one person does it.”

“What’s fuck?” she says.

“What we just did in the tub,” I say, throwing my long hair back and yanking on a fresh pair of jeans. “That’s finger-fucking.”

She nods, looking thoughtful and going way too fucking slow with dressing. Obviously she doesn’t get the urgency of the situation.

“What’s jealous?” she says, grabbing her hairbrush and brushing out her long tresses.

“Competitive. They want what you want, and they might fight you for it.”
More like tear out my stitches and leave me to bleed out.

“Like when the gators fight over fresh kill?”

“Exactly like that,” I say.

The motorcycles are getting closer, and we need to get out of the bedroom.

“Come on,” I say, grabbing her shoulders, pivoting her around, and urging her out of the bedroom. “You get into the kitchen, and I’ll put some music on in the front room. Pretend we’ve just been here learning more manners today.”

“What kind of manners? What should I say?” she says, trotting after me.

I rush into the living room and pick up a *Pixie Dust* album from Callan’s record collection. I fit it on the turntable and move the arm to gently place the needle on the vinyl. “Just say you learned how to act civilized in town. Don’t call it manners.”

Heavy metal blasts through the speakers, filling the room. I pull her close for a last quick embrace. “I promise, Luna,” I murmur into her hair. “If you keep this a secret, next time we’re alone, I’ll make you feel as good as you felt in the tub today. Deal?”

I release her as Warrick and Callan power up the driveway and park their beasts.

“Deal,” she says with a sexy little smile that makes my cock hard all over again and leaves me wondering if I’ve just made a deal with the devil. But, damn, if I have to piss off my brothers to get some more of Luna’s sweet little pussy, that’s a risk I’m willing to take. Now that I’ve gotten a glimpse of her pleasure, nothing can stop me from going back for more.

Chapter Twenty

Luna

I hurry around the kitchen trying to get something together that looks like I was making dinner before Callan and Warrick got home. They tromp into the house in their heavy work boots and grab beers from the fridge. My spine is stiff as I throw some wild lettuce and meat in a frying pan. I don't like keeping things from them, but I don't want Ethan to get in trouble, and I definitely want more of whatever he gave me today in the tub.

Callan and Warrick plunk their beers down on the table, the legs of their chairs scraping the floor as they drag them back and drop into them. Ethan strolls in like there's not a secret in the world, grabs a beer, and joins them at the table.

"Would you look at us," he says, popping the tab on his beer so it lets out a hiss. "Taking a load off while a fine woman makes us dinner. Never thought I'd see the day."

"I've made dinner before," I say.

"I feel downright domesticated," Warrick says. I catch him watching me funny, and I quickly turn my back.

"What'd you get up to today, Luna?" Callan asks. He sounds casual, not mad, so that's good.

"Just learning some manners," I say, then remember Ethan said not to tell them that. This whole lying business is going to take practice. A tendril of smoke curls up from the pan, and I cuss, realizing I forgot to put in oil before the other stuff. I scrape frantically to get the lettuce off the bottom of the pan and throw a scoop of bacon grease under it.

When I turn away from the stove, Ethan is laughing silently. I glare at him.

Callan has his head raised, sniffing the air. Maybe he doesn't like the burning smell.

"What kind of manners?" he says at last, sharing a look with Warrick that makes my heart jump.

"You know... Stuff to make me act civilized in town."

"That's good," he says. "Learning how to co-mingle in society can't hurt."

"Uh-huh," I say.

"You're burning the meat," Warrick says.

I spin back around. "Shit!"

They're all laughing now, and I'm fuming mad but also grateful that things aren't as tense as they were this morning. But by the time I'm done cooking, the air over the table is silent and brittle as a sun-bleached bird's nest, a delicate twig that will snap at any moment. Ethan keeps his head down and doesn't talk or joke around like usual or bicker with Callan. Warrick is silent and frowning, but he doesn't press us down with what Callan explained is his wolf's dominance. He doesn't have to dominate us tonight. We are all subdued already.

I don't want to sit on the porch alone again tonight, hoping one of them will join me, so I go to the bedroom across from Warrick's. I sit on the bed, all my good feelings from earlier gone. This isn't my room. It's Ethan and Callan's room, and because of me, they're both sleeping on the floor in the other room. Only Warrick and I have rooms. If I was gone, they could have their bed back, and they wouldn't be mad at each other every day.

I'm the cause of this mess. I don't know how they know, but I'm sure they do. They know what Ethan did to me, and they don't like it. Maybe they don't want me to feel good or have some fun, as Warrick said, after all. Just like Axel, they say this is my home and that they'll protect me, but in the end, if I don't do it the way they want, then they don't want me around.

I turn off the light and try to sleep. The full moon is just rising, and my wolf is restless inside me, wanting to run and hunt. I toss and turn, sweating in the sultry night. Even when I strip off my clothes and throw off the sheet, it's too hot, and I can't make my thoughts be quiet and go to sleep so that my body can follow. The moon rises up my window until I can barely see it, and I'm halfway asleep when the yelling starts.

"What the fuck, Ethan?" Callan roars, dragging me from my frustrating attempt at sleep.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Ethan yells back. “Get off me!”

I hold my breath, tensed and listening.

“You fucked her, didn’t you?” Callan yells. “You fucking asshole, you can’t keep your dick in your pants for two fucking weeks?”

“I didn’t fuck her,” Ethan hollers back. “Want to check my dick?”

There’s a thud, and I jump up and tiptoe to the door to listen.

“She came,” Callan growls. “I can smell it on her.”

Scuffling noises follow. “Maybe she pleased herself,” Ethan says, sounding out of breath and strained. “Chicks do that, you know.”

Callan sounds more pissed. “We had a deal, *brother*, or does a pact between brothers mean nothing to you when there’s pussy involved?”

“You broke it first!” Ethan yells back.

I look down, sliding a hand between my legs to feel the smooth skin Ethan touched earlier. “This is your fault, then,” I whisper.

As I suspected, their fight *is* about me. Tears prick the corners of my eyes. I never wanted to make anyone angry or upset. I thought I could be one of them since they were so accepting of me. They never make me use silverware when my hands are better, never bind my soul to theirs and then rip it out with barely a warning. They’re good to me, and I want to be good to them. Bringing anger and fights to their house is not being good to them.

Warrick chimes in at last. “Cut this shit out,” he growls, and the other two fall silent. “This is just what I didn’t want to fucking happen, but you two dicks-for-brains swore there’d be no conflict. Now look at the pair of you, sneaking around trying to get it any way it comes. That little whisp of ass couldn’t withstand one good pounding from any of us.”

I can feel the shame all the way from here, the way Warrick’s wolf dominance makes me hang my head the same as his brothers.

He sighs. “You can’t live under the same roof with a woman like that and expect anything else.”

A woman like me. What does that mean? I don’t even know what kind of woman I am, so how can he know?

“This stops right now,” Warrick growls when no one answers him. “We’re *brothers*. We walk to the depths of hell to protect each other. Nothing and no one comes between us. Have I made myself clear?”

Silence so fragile it could shatter shrouds the front room.

Once again, it’s come down to this—it’s *my* presence that stirs conflict. I

know what I have to do. Tears track down my cheeks as I pad to the back door on silent, bare feet. I can hear Ethan accusing Callan of “doing it first” again as I ease open the screen door and slip outside. I don’t let the screen door thwack shut. I guide it closed, so it doesn’t make a sound.

Outside, I take a shaky breath and sink to the ground, ignoring the mosquitoes that swarm in for a taste of my blood. It’s been a month since I shifted, a month that I’ve been here. A month to learn human manners and grow to love these big, stubborn, strong, grumpy men. But now it’s time to leave them.

I shift into my wolf form, relieved that the pain in my chest dulls when I’m a wolf. Wolves love, but they don’t feel the other complicated emotions humans do. Things are simpler this way. The moon guides me as I shift and run. I race for the creek that splits the property and wade into the knee-deep water. Then, I head downstream so they won’t be able to track my scent. When I’ve gone far enough, I scramble onto the opposite bank and run.

I don’t think about where I’m going. My wolf knows where home is. She leads me to Bogbeast Waters, the full moon lighting our way.

The glowing orb is lowering toward the horizon, and the first birds of morning have begun to call by the time I reach our old place. I scent my way there, pulling myself from the water and onto the dry land and shaking off. Even with my wolf eyes I can tell something is wrong. Our tiny house, the one I built when I was turning from a child to a woman and patched a hundred times... It’s gone.

I know I’m in the right place. My nose wouldn’t lie, and even if it did, I can see the remnants of our home scattered around our little island. Twisted tin and splintered wood poke up from the ground. The scent of molding cloth under the pile tells me they didn’t take anything. They just tore it all down, destroyed the only home I have left.

Pain strikes through my wolf heart, and I tip back my head and howl. It’s a mournful howl encompassing everything I’ve lost, from Mama to Axel to the triplets to my home, my heart, my roots.

An answering howl issues forth from the woods to my right, startling me back to reality.

I crouch, ready to slink in the opposite direction and fade into the night. The last thing I expected was another wolf out here in the Waters, risking gators and ogres and bog beasts.

I lift my nose, scenting the air and catching something familiar. Did one

of the triplets follow me without my noticing?

Suddenly, a large wolf leaps onto my island and shakes, water spraying from his pelt. I bare my teeth, growling as my hackles rise. I'll fight to the death to protect this tiny hillock of land, all I have left, even if there's nothing else left of my home.

The wolf shifts with majestic grace, and Axel stands before me in all his naked glory.

My wolf cowers to her belly, a low whine escaping my throat as pain spirals into my chest. I never thought I'd see him again, never wanted to. Seeing him, it all rushes back—the wonderful part before the mating, the painful mating, the bond and the breaking, and worst of all, watching Mama die after everything. When it all bursts to the surface like a gator snatching prey, I want to die all over again.

“Easy, Luna,” Axel says, palms outstretched.

I throw back my head and howl again, this time for the echoes of the True Mate bond that linger in my bones. I want him out of me forever, but he's still in there, clinging to my bones.

He seems to know what this plaintive cry means, or maybe he feels it, too. He sways on his feet, then goes to his knees in front of me so he's on my level.

“Luna, stop,” he says in a choked voice. “I came to make amends, and when I saw your house had been torn apart... I've been out here every night looking for you, hoping that I could warn you if you came back. Whoever was here... They might be hunting you. You're in danger, Luna. You need to come with me. Come back to the pack. We can protect you.”

I back away from him, snarling.

“I understand you hate me. I don't blame you. What I did to you...” Axel shakes his head. “What I did to you was as painful for me as it was for you. So I know how much I hurt you.”

More low growls rumble in my throat. He can't begin to know the pain I've felt. It's not possible. He would die. A loud splash comes from the nearby swamp, but my eyes remain glued to Axel's.

“You have every right to be angry,” he says, still holding out a hand. I could bite that hand off, and he knows it. But he's letting me know he trusts me, even if I can't do the same. “I made a mistake. I realize that now. But your life is in danger, and that's more important than my pride—or yours. Come with me.”

Callan explained wolf dominance to me, how a stronger wolf can enforce their will the way Warrick does. He uses it to keep order in his household. I've felt it many times since moving in. But Axel has never commanded me that way, never forced his will on me. I could feel he had it, but he never made me behave, even when I was acting wild in front of the pack. And even now, as I tense, waiting for the push of his wolf's dominance, I feel only his pleading eyes on me. After a long moment, he shifts back into his wolf. The sight of it sends another spear of agony through my wolf's heart. She loves this wolf.

He gives me one last searing gaze, then turns and pads away. When he reaches the edge of my tiny island, he stops and pivots his head to look at me. His wolf eyes catch the moonlight and reflect the calming silvery glow at me. He won't force me to go. He's showing me that. This is my choice.

I stand pinned to the boggy marsh ground, caught in a web of indecision and regret, past hurts and future fears. I tear my gaze from his and back to my destroyed home. Another splash erupts from the swamp, only it's closer now. There's nothing for me here, no safety. I'll be exposed, food for gators and swamp monsters.

I turn back to Axel.

Come.

I startle at the clarity of his intention, as if I heard him speak aloud. But he's still not using his dominance to force me. I can be stubborn and stay here to be attacked, or I can go with him, to a pack that's already cast me out and done worse than attack me. All I have is his word, and I know how little that counts.

There's no chance of survival out here by myself, though. I no longer want to die. No matter how sad I am about leaving the triplets' house, it didn't crush me the way Mama's death did. There is still reason to live.

And there's a chance that can happen with Axel. So, when he turns away and bounds onto the next hillock, I hesitate for only a moment more, and then I follow.

Chapter Twenty-One

Luna

The familiar sight of Axel's house sends another shock of pain through me. I wonder when the waves of hurt will stop crashing over me, taking me by surprise. On his porch, Axel shifts back to a man. He seemed so big when I first saw him, but after a month with the triplets, he no longer looks like a giant. He's strong and muscular and tall, but he's also lean and tight where they are bulging walls of muscle.

I stay in my wolf form. I don't trust him—or myself. My wolf soul still cries for him to be ours, even after what he did.

He sighs and opens the door, gesturing for me to enter. I pad inside and scent the floor and the air. His house is so much cleaner than the triplets,' even now that we clean it every few days. But I prefer the smell of dirt and forest that we track into the dirty cabin over the clean, old smell of Axel's house. I also don't care for the scent of Ama that lingers.

"It's late," Axel says with a sigh. "You can make yourself comfortable in the guest room. Unless..."

He gives me a searching look, then shakes his head and turns, heading up the stairs without waiting for an answer. I pad after him on my wolf paws. He swings open the door to one of the bedrooms and gestures for me to enter.

"You're safe here, Luna," he says quietly. "No one will bother you. That includes me."

He waits, like he expects me to answer. When I don't, he turns and trudges off down the hall to his room, the room where—

I block the thought before it can get started. This house is haunted with memories that are worse than ghosts. I know my human can't handle them tonight, that my wolf has to take care of her. I hop onto the bed and curl up at

the foot, still in my wolfskin, and fall asleep.

That's my first night at Axel's house. The next day, he goes to work before I wake and comes home at dark looking tired. We eat dinner in silence. He watches me, but he doesn't mention the True Mate bond again. The second night, he gives me a toothbrush and stands in the bathroom door while I brush. He asks if I'm going to sleep in the guest room. There's something he's not saying, but I don't know what. I think he's afraid I'll run again. He doesn't know what happened in the month we were apart, but he must know I have nowhere else to go.

I tell him yes, and I go to bed. I lie awake, turned to the window where the past-full moon shines through the thin white curtains. Are the guys out on their porch, drinking beer right now? Did they forgive Ethan for what we did? Is everything back to good between them now that I'm gone? I hope I did the right thing, that they're happy and getting along again. I smile and close my eyes, wondering how it's possible to feel happy and sad at the same time.

The next day is the same. I wander around Axel's small house, wondering what to do with myself. The house is clean, so I can't help him there. I'm under strict instructions not to leave the house while he's gone, so I can't go wander and look for edible plants like I could outside the triplets' house. And when I think about making food, I remember the way the pack looked at me when I ate in front of them. I shudder and decide not to even attempt to cook.

Axel hasn't commented on my hair even though I came out of my wolfskin on my first day here. He gives me clothes to wear that are too small for him—stretchy little pants, a tight shirt that barely covers my nipples, a very small skirt, and other random items he has on hand.

That night, he comes to the door of my bedroom when I'm getting under the blankets. It's raining outside, fat droplets slapping the windows and making the screens bow in and out. Axel stands there watching me, an expression on his face that I can't read. But I can feel sadness sitting heavy around him like a dense fog over the water that doesn't lift even when the sun shines.

"Goodnight," I say, not sure what to say to this quiet man. He's not grumpy like Mama or Warrick, where you can feel something brewing under the mood. He's weighed down by his own sadness, one that goes far deeper than any mood. If he's sad about me, it's his own doing.

He sighs and runs a hand through his hair, then steps into the room. His

lips are tight, and he pauses, like he might turn and leave. Instead, he comes to the bed and sits down on the edge. Lightning flashes outside, and thunder makes me wince. I wonder if the water will rise up to claim what remains of the little house I built so long ago.

“Luna,” Axel starts, clearing his throat before going on. “I want you to know, I’m sorry. I’m—I’m just so fucking sorry.”

He looks at me with pleading, miserable eyes.

I know what I’m supposed to say. I snuggle down under the blankets, a shiver going through me when the wind brings a fine mist of rain through the window. “I forgive you.”

He pulls back, surprise making his brows lift. “You do?”

“Yes,” I say. “You were right. We don’t belong together.”

“That’s not... Luna, I’m sorry because I was *wrong*.”

“Maybe you were wrong when you did it,” I agree. “We were meant to be together then. You said we weren’t, but my wolf always knows. But by doing what you did, you made your words come true.”

His blue eyes search mine for a long minute. “Is that really how you feel?”

I nod, feeling as sad as he looks to admit this truth. “Because you separated us, we’re no longer meant to be together. Fate wouldn’t mean for me to be with someone who would hurt me that way. I didn’t understand then, but I do now.”

“Your wolf doesn’t feel anything?”

My wolf feels lots of things. She’s crying inside me, even as my human eyes remain dry. I know that I’m right. We can never be meant to be together after what he did. That was the whole point. And it worked. Being here now, I see how wrong we are, no matter how much my wolf longs to bond with him again, to crawl into his warm arms and let him hold us tight through the storm, put back together all the parts that were ripped away by severing the bond.

That’s not possible, though. It’s like unbreathing a breath you already took.

“You severed the bond between us,” I say, my fingertips absently stroking the crescent moon scar on my arm. “It’s not there anymore, no matter how much you regret it.”

Without another word, Axel rises and leaves the room, closing the door quietly behind him. A long roll of thunder barrels toward us, so loud it rattles

the house when it passes. I curl onto my side, my chest aching with loneliness.

When I wake, the sun shines in the window, beating down on my face and arms as it makes its morning ascent in the sky. I stumble out of bed, get ready for the day, and then head downstairs. The very air in the house feels heavy and sad. I grab a piece of bread and look for things to put inside it. Ethan taught me about sandwiches. The thought of him makes me smile as I layer on a cock-like piece of meat, some tiny orange slices floating in their juices, and some salty green fruits with a little red center in each one. I wrap it all up and take it onto the porch to eat, knowing by the sweet juice already running down my wrist that it'll be a messy one.

I sit on the steps and take a bite, trying to decide what to do. I don't know where I belong, but it sure isn't here. I can't go back to the brothers and destroy their peace, and I can't go home to the swamp. If there's anything left in the debris of our house, it's probably not useable, and I don't know how to get more tin and nails.

A motorcycle rounds the corner and captures my attention. My heart leaps in my chest and then races as if to greet the rider. Water sprays from beneath the tires as it speeds in my direction. I squint at it as it approaches, my frozen heart beginning to thaw. I can't let myself hope, and yet, I do.

There can only be one man riding with no shirt, hair flying back, and the tattoo of a wolf family on his broad chest.

Callan.

I want to leap up and run to him, throw myself into his arms. But then I remember leaving, and why I left. Has he come to warn Axel about the conflict I'll bring?

My wolf woofs happily inside me, insisting he's come for a different reason, that he's come for *us*.

Callan rolls right up the sidewalk and parks in the sparse grass in front of Axel's home. He kicks the stand down and swings his long leg over the frame of the bike.

"How'd you find me?" I say, folding my arms over my chest and trying to hide my smile as he stalks over.

"I'm a wolf." His arms cross, too, as he faces me, studying me with a somber expression. "I scented until I found you."

"Really?" I ask, uncrossing my arms when my sandwich dribbles juice down my leg. I shove it in my mouth, so I won't say something else, like

begging him to take me back and promising I won't do any more shaving with Ethan, no matter how good it feels.

"Come home, Luna."

I swallow down the sandwich even though it sticks in my aching throat. "I don't have a home."

"You're wrong," he says. "You left before we could tell you."

"You were fighting," I say, my eyes aching as hard as my throat. "I made you fight."

He scratches his beard. "We're a bunch of stubborn men," he says. "We find things to fight about whether you're there or not. But you know what happens then?"

I shake my head.

"We work things out," he says. "If you stuck around, you'd have known that. We came to a decision. Warrick, too. We all agree, your home is with us—if that's where you want to be."

I nod, a tear leaking down my cheek.

Callan lets his arms fall by his side. "I saw your shack. It's been destroyed."

"I know," I whisper.

Footsteps storm through the house, heading for the front door. Instinctively, my arms squeeze tighter on my chest, and I back away from Callan. Callan may have worked things out with his brothers, but now I'm causing a fight between him and Axel.

"You're trespassing," Axel roars as the screen door swings open, banging against the wall. "You have two minutes to get your mangy ass off my property before the whole pack arrives and tears every organ from your ugly corpse." His hair's all wet like he just got out of the shower, and he's shirtless like Callan.

His muscles are taugth, water droplets clinging to his shoulders, and I can't help but gulp when I gaze at his beautiful form, his smooth golden skin and the small tattoos on his shoulders and forearm. But then I turn to Callan, his own muscles bunched with rippling power, his skin inked and scarred in a dozen places. He's just... *More*. Bigger, wilder, stronger; with more tattoos, more scars, more hair, more beard. And there's three of him and only one of Axel.

"Oh, yeah?" Callan asks, puffing his chest up even bigger. "You think I'm scared of the kind of dumbass who would sever a True Mate bond with

this sweet little lady?”

Axel’s eyes narrow, and for the first time, I feel the edge of his dominance shimmering in the air between us like heat rising off the still pools of water on the most scorching summer days. The intensity of it makes me shiver and gasp, even though I can feel that it’s only beginning.

“Get off my property, mutt,” he says to Callan. “She’s mine.”

He steps forward, resting a gentle hand on the back of my neck, and a wave of soothing comfort washes over me. I stare up at him, my mouth dropping open. He has some kind of... Magic. That’s the only way to describe how he can calm me with a single touch of his hand, how I can know instantly that he means me no harm. My wolf settles inside me, content.

But it’s not right. He *hurt* us. I’m not safe here, and his magic only makes me more sure of it. I duck away from him, and before he can touch me again, Callan is up in his face.

“Sorry, dude. You gave up your rights to her. She belongs with us now.” Callan circles Axel like he’s getting ready to attack.

Axel doesn’t back down. Instead, he circles to face Callan as the bigger man moves around him. “A bunch of outlaw punks?” Axel asks, spitting the words at his enemy with a scoff. “No way does she belong with the likes of *you*.”

“You had your chance with her,” Callan retorts with a shrug. “Not our fault you threw her out. She was a lone, banished wolf when we found her. She wasn’t on pack land. By every werewolf law, she’s fair game. And what tasty game she is...”

“You motherfucking mongrel,” Axel snarls, leaping for Callan.

I jump forward before he can hit my savior. I wedge myself between them, slamming my palms on their chests as hard as I can. Startled, they each take a step back and stare at me.

“Please stop!” I yell, stomping my foot. “I’m tired of all you males making decisions for me.”

They both blink at me, and then they both start talking at once. I hold up a hand and bark at them to listen to what I have to say for once.

First, I turn to Axel. “You willfully severed our bond,” I remind him. “You told me I had to leave the pack. Callan and his brothers found me in the swamp, ready to die. They *saved* me.”

Axel’s Adam’s apple—Callan explained that one to me—bobs up and

down as he digests my words.

“Like I said,” Callan starts, but I send him a glare that silences him.

“They took care of me,” I say, turning back to Axel. “Not you. You rejected me, and not just me, but my wolf. You didn’t want me as a mate, the other half of your soul. You can’t just tell me to come back like it didn’t happen. It happened. Our bond is *gone*.” I point to the dull scar on my arm, the one that no longer glows with the power of the moon and our bond. “No matter how sorry you are, it will never return.”

I swipe angrily at a tear, and Axel reaches for me. “Luna, I...”

I bat his hand away. “Whatever you have to say, I don’t want to hear it. I’m no longer a part of your pack. That was *your* decision.”

I turn to Callan and offer a tearful smile. “But if you’ll have me, I’m a part of yours. That’s *my* decision.”

A victorious grin spreads across his face, and he grabs me up in a crushing hug that knocks all the breath out of me. He smashes his mouth down on mine and then pulls back, grinning. “Hell fuckin’ yeah,” he says. “There’s not a single wolf in the world we’d rather have.”

I smile up at him, my belly and chest filling with pride. No one forced me to join their pack or forced me to leave. Axel may not have used his wolf dominance on me, but these men never made me join them to begin with, and they never cast me out. Callan and Ethan welcomed me from the start. Warrick may have grudgingly taken me in, and he’s grumpy and stubborn, but like the others, he let me be exactly who I am. He never once tried to make me something else, even when he used his dominance to keep peace. And most of all, he never hurt me.

Callan sets me back on my feet and swaggers toward his bike, his huge paw engulfing my small hand, his enormous frame dwarfing mine. I feel light and free, like I might burst into laughter at any moment. I don’t have to be told where to sit this time. I climb on the Queen seat behind Callan, and spare one last glance in Axel’s direction before we take off, spitting gravel.

He’s already gone.

The smile slips from my face, just a little, and a twist of pain burrows into my heart. I wonder if the rejection ever stops hurting.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Luna

A sense of deep contentment rolls through me as I sit with my arms wrapped around Callan, zipping over the wet, cracked roads and streets of civilized Jacksonville. The sensation changes to ecstasy as we head up the long sand and dirt driveway to their—*our*—house.

He said it was my home, too.

Callan keeps one arm pressed to mine, driving with only one hand as if he's afraid of losing me again. Once parked, I climb off the Queen's seat and wait for Callan to climb off. When he does, he throws his arm around me and guides me to the house. I'm so happy I think I'll float off into the mosquito filled air like a piece of thistledown.

Inside the house, Warrick and Ethan stand from their seats at the kitchen table when we walk in.

"Luna," Ethan says, a big smile cracking over his face and showing off that adorable gap where he's missing a tooth. "You came home."

He holds out his arms, and my feet come untethered from the floor, and I leap into his arms. He kisses me hard on the mouth and then sets me on my feet. I turn to Warrick, flutters building in my belly. I'm too nervous to throw myself in his arms, especially when they're not held out to welcome me.

"Warrick," I say quietly. We stare at each other a long minute, his dark, gold-flecked eyes taking me in. For once, he doesn't frown, and his gaze is inviting rather than dominating.

"I got something to say to you—to *all* of you." My heart is positively trembling now. I glance at Callan and Ethan before returning my gaze to Warrick. I take a deep breath and go on. "I never wanted to come between you. I respect your bonds with one another. I'm sorry to have brought so

much conflict into this fine home. Please don't fight over me because I can't bear that burden on my shoulders. Don't make me choose between you from one day to the next. I like all of you, and I don't want to pick one over the other and stir up jealousy. If you let me stay with your pack, I won't cause any more trouble, I promise." I crouch before Warrick and place my palms on his boots, showing him that I'll defer to his dominance just as his brothers do. He is my Alpha.

Warrick growls. "Get your ass up, girl. Don't display your submission to me. That's not what I want right now and not what any of us want. We don't want a little bitch to bow at our feet. You're equal to any of us, Luna—and then some."

His warm hands hook beneath my arms, and he urges me to rise. I do, my head spinning. Even though Warrick's the Alpha here and the only one to openly use a dominance display to put us in line, if I stare into the eyes of his brothers too long, I know they're more dominant, too. I don't know how I could be any of their equal, let alone more.

I lift my gaze as Warrick sweeps his hand toward the chair opposite him. "Sit," he says to me. "Boys, sit."

After we've all assumed our places around the tiny square table, we all direct our attention to Warrick.

He drums his fingers on the wood surface. Then, he retrieves his pouch of tobacco and rolling papers from his pocket, spreads out a piece of paper, and sprinkles tobacco leaves on top.

As he rolls his cigarette—something he explained to me when I asked—none of us speak. Warrick lights it and takes a long drag, releasing the plume of blueish smoke over his head. "Get me an ashtray, will you, Callan?"

Callan rises, heads to the cupboard, and retrieves a small, chipped bowl. He sets it before Warrick, pours coffee into the three cups on the table, and then adds one in front of me before resuming his seat. My heart swells with the warm feeling of home. I get the same coffee, the same kind of random mug, the same as any of them.

Warrick taps the ash from the end of his smoke before balancing the cigarette on the ashtray's rim. "It's true you brought conflict between my brothers."

He directs his dark gaze at me before picking up his cigarette and taking another pull on the smoke. As he exhales, he goes on. "We've always lived together, just the three of us, since we've been old enough to call ourselves

men. And I'm man enough to admit we were pretty damn lousy at dealing with the addition of a woman."

I take a tiny sip of my coffee, peeking at him over the rim.

"When you left the other night, my brothers were pissed," Warrick goes on. "I admit I was a little relieved. I don't like the chaos. It's my home, and I want to be able to kick back and relax. But as they pointed out, just because I'm the Alpha, that doesn't mean it's only *my* home. It's their home, too. And sometime in the last month, it became yours, too. So I told Callan if he could track your ass down, you could come on home and stay."

I sit at the edge of my seat, waiting for him to speak again. When he nods at me and takes another drag on his cigarette, I smile. "Thank you. I appreciate the chance to prove myself. No more chaos. I promise."

His eyes meet the eyes of each of his brothers before coming back to me. "And we agreed that none of us will touch you again of our own choosing. If anyone breaks this rule, they'll be out on their ass. It's up to Luna and Luna alone if she wants to go to one of you. Understood?"

Callan and Ethan nod solemnly. Ethan raises both hands and mutters, "Hands off."

Warrick turns back to me, his gaze penetrating mine. "If you want one of my brothers, it has to be your decision and your move, Luna. There won't be argument or conflict about it. No sneaking around behind each other's backs. The decision will be final, and we'll all respect it."

I nod, too. "I understand."

Warrick stands, picks up his smoke between his fingers, gives us a final nod, and takes his coffee to the front porch.

I sit in silence with the others, overwhelmed by the impossible choice in front of me. Both men are wonderful, but they're not the same. I want what they both offer.

Callan is kind and patient, takes me into the woods and gathers plants and set traps with me, stops and looks when I point out dragonflies circling the water. He taught me to cook and always gives me a reassuring smile and says it's delicious even when it tastes all wrong. He makes a deep, aching warmth grow in my belly when he takes my hand and gives it a gentle squeeze for no reason.

Ethan laughs while he teaches me, letting me know it's okay to mess up, that it's okay to laugh when I make a mistake. He winks at me when his brothers aren't looking, like we're in on a little secret. One rough touch of his

calloused hand on my elbow or hip makes me know everything is okay. And he gave me that bliss in the bathtub like nothing I've ever felt except from Axel, and that time was followed by pain. With Ethan, there's no pain.

How can I ever make a decision when I want both of these men equally?

Chapter Twenty-Three

Luna

The guys are between jobs, so we all stay home for the rest of the day. Things are relaxed but subdued and quiet. I wonder if they're all waiting for me to choose. It sits funny in my belly, having the power in this dynamic, the power of this choice. It's up to me. No one is making choices for me anymore, saying I'll be their mate and part of their pack, or that I'm no longer their mate or part of their pack. It's up to me.

I don't like the weight of it on me. I don't want to draw it out, make them worry and wonder and want. I don't want to make either of them jealous of the other. After lying awake for an hour going back and forth about what to do, I know I'm never going to sleep with the decision hanging over my head. I have to make it now.

So, I do.

In the dark of night, I slip from beneath my covers, ease out the door of the bedroom and tiptoe across the hall. I've never been inside Warrick's lair—I was always too scared before. But tonight, I step past the threshold of his door and head for his slumbering form. Quietly, I crawl beneath his covers and press my naked body to his massive back.

He startles, then relaxes and stays quiet for a few minutes.

Did I make the wrong choice? Warrick said I could choose, but maybe he didn't mean him. He told me to choose between his brothers. Maybe I'm not supposed to choose the Alpha. Maybe an Alpha makes his own choice, dominates his mate into submission.

After a few minutes, he sighs and rolls onto his back. "What are you doing here, baby girl?"

"Do you want me to leave?" I ask, biting at my lip.

His large hand lands on my thigh, his calloused palm covering my soft skin. “No.”

I cuddle closer to his body, and a soft growl rumbles through his giant form.

“I’ve always admired you, Warrick,” I say, caressing the soft hairs that cover his powerful chest. “You’re everything an Alpha should be. You’re so strong, and you only want what’s right for your brothers. You put them in their place when they need it, but you set aside your own needs and wants if it serves the pack.”

“What needs and wants?” he says, rolling to face me.

His enormous cock lands on my leg, hard and hot against my cool, bare skin. My core trembles, and I swallow hard.

In the dim moonlight, I trace the outline of his shoulders, as wide as an ogre’s and twice as strong, running my fingers down the scars on them to his broad, muscular chest. “I think you want me,” I whisper, my voice barely audible.

He only grunts, but his cock throbs against my thigh in response.

“Don’t you?” I ask, my heart racing like a swamp rabbit. Did I get it all wrong?

“Luna...”

I lay my small, soft hand on the rough stubble of his cheek. “You’re the kind of man who would never step on the toes of your brothers to take what you want. So, I’m giving it to you. If...” I break off, swallowing the trembling, liquid ache in my throat. “If you’ll have me.”

“I haven’t even been nice to you,” he points out. “Why would you want me?”

“You say that, and maybe you’d like me to believe it, but we both know I’m here because you allow it. You took me to town and let me pick my own clothes, my own hair. You don’t try to teach me things to make me like you. You just let me be exactly what I want to be. You treat me like a part of your pack. You might not talk as much as the others, but I see you, Warrick. You put my needs before yours, too. You had every right to claim me as Alpha and end the discussion, but you didn’t. You let me make the choice. And I choose to give you what you need, to put you first for once.”

“Oh, fuck, baby girl,” he says, adding a wry chuckle. “You’re everything I need and everything I don’t need all rolled into one fuckable little piece of ass. You’re damn sure the one thing that’s going to get me killed.”

I suck in a breath. “Killed?”

“Yeah, baby-girl. Killed.” His thick arm circles my waist, bringing me flush against him as he nuzzles my neck. “But is that going to stop me?”

I clutch his mountainous shoulders, my insides trembling with fear and heat as he pushes his hips against mine, the iron ridge of his cock crushing into the soft place between my legs that Ethan shaved. Is he going to do what Axel did? Will it hurt that much?

“If I were a decent man, I’d let you find someone your own age who isn’t a criminal,” he murmurs, pulling my leg over his hip.

“I don’t want a decent man.” This new sense of power coursing through me is a heady elixir, but also a bit terrifying. “I want *you*.”

“The devil help us, then. I’m going to wreck you, baby girl.”

“If that’s what you want,” I breathe. “I’m yours. Do what you want to me.”

I rock my hips against him, letting him feel how wet I am. He lets out a low, deep rumble of pleasure, so I do it again. My core throbs, aching to be filled. I can feel the power thrumming through his veins, but he doesn’t move. He lets me move, sliding along his length until I reach the thick, rounded end that’s as wet as me. He smells of musk and pure male wolf. I whimper with desire.

In one swift move, he rolls me on top of him. His cock stands rigidly between us, swollen, lined with thick, throbbing veins. In rhythm with his next sigh, he strokes his calloused hands along my sides and traces my waist and my hips. Then, he palms the front of my thighs all the way from my knees to my bare skin that Ethan called a pussy. He tugs the lips open with his thumbs, spreading them further open against his shaft.

His hands are sure and firm as he caresses me, keeping his gaze pinned to me as he leisurely explores my body and then returns to the swollen bud that Ethan took so much time on, the one that made me explode. I moan and rock against his erection, taking pleasure in his hard cock against my slick, wet core.

This elicits a low chuckle from him, which vibrates through me. He seizes my hips and slows down my grinding movements. “Easy, baby girl. It’s been a while for this old man.”

A breathy laugh escapes me. “You’re not old, Warrick.”

“I feel old,” he says, releasing my hips and spreading his hands over my tiny breasts. “Fuck, please tell me you’re eighteen.”

“I’m eighteen,” I agree.

“I’m twice your age,” he growls. “I feel like a fucking pervert wanting to fuck you as raw and hard as I’m about to.”

He pinches my nipples, and both sharp pain and searing pleasure flood my core. I let my head fall back and moan.

“Sweet fucking Jesus, woman.” His fingers keep tweaking my hard buds, followed by soft caresses. Then, more pain, and again, more sweet pleasure. I didn’t know pain could feel good, but when he gives it, it’s so mixed up with the pleasure I can’t tell them apart. I grind myself helplessly along his hard length, needing relief so badly I think I’ll burst.

At last Warrick grabs my hips, and I feel his will crush down on me, pinning me in place. “Stop,” he orders. “I don’t want to come yet.”

I worry my bottom lip with my teeth, cowering as I stop my frantic movement. I want the experience I had with Ethan, but with Warrick. But I must have done something wrong.

“Don’t you want to bury your cock inside me?” I whisper.

Warrick’s cock throbs, and a drop of whitish liquid oozes out onto his wall of abs. He moves his thumb against that bud that makes me feel like I’ll burst like a comet overhead, and it’s all I can do not to move against him and find relief.

“Please,” I whisper, panting for it.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he says.

“How do you know if it will hurt me?”

“Have you seen me?” he says with a chuckle. “I haven’t found a woman who could take me in too fucking long. This is going to hurt, baby girl, no doubt about it.”

I lean forward, resting my hands on his mountainous muscles. My lilac hair drapes across his torso, and he closes his eyes and draws a long breath. I drag my hair down his inked skin before tossing it back and looking straight into his eyes. “Mate me, Warrick. I don’t care if it hurts.”

“Fuck,” he growls, rolling over on top of me and knocking my knees apart with his. He pushes the slippery head of his cock to my slick flesh. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Warn me?”

“I’m going to fuck you so hard you can’t breathe, baby girl. You’re *mine*. I’m going to fucking breed you. And you’re going to love it.”

I nod eagerly, wincing when I feel the strain of his huge size trying to fit

inside my tiny opening. He holds himself up on his hands, his body suspended over mine, with just our hips pressed together. His shoulders are twice as wide as mine, and I have to look up to find his face, since my eyes are only up to his chest. My body feels tiny and helpless as I lay under his looming hugeness. His eyes pin mine, and I can feel his dominance rolling over me, almost pinning me to the bed. I want to please him so bad it hurts, to do exactly what he commands. It's a desperate feeling, but also one that I know will make me feel more rewarded than anything I've ever done.

"Spread yourself open for your Alpha," he growls.

I spread my legs as wide as they'll go and reach down, pulling my pussy open with both hands. Warrick looks down at what I'm doing and groans, his hips thrusting forward with a quick jerk. I cry out as he breaches my entrance and the sting of being stretched burns through me.

"Holy mother of the devil himself, you're so fucking tight," he growls. "You still feel like a virgin."

"Keep going," I say through panting breaths. "Please, Warrick. I need you. I need to give myself to you. Take me. Claim me. Show my body it's yours." From my mating with Axel, I know the worst pain is yet to come. But the ache in my core urges me to go on, anyway.

"Oh, I'm going to keep going," he assures me, his body coiled with power. "That was just the head. You got a long way to go, baby girl. And Daddy's going to give it all to you, because you're damn right. Your body is mine, and I'm going to show you just how good that feels."

He unleashes some of that power, driving in another few inches. My breath catches, and I blink away tears. I feel like he's going to rip me open, but when I lift my head to look down, he's only halfway in. I drop my head back, gasping for breath.

"You're doing great, baby girl," he says. "Just relax and let Daddy in."

Warmth spreads through me at his words, and I feel safe and cared for as he waits for me to adjust, not moving a muscle while my walls unclench from his massive cock. When I nod, he rolls his hips forward, stretching me wider than even Axel did. A tear slips from the corner of my eye, and my knees curl up. "Oh, god," I gasp. "I'm not sure..."

"You can take it," he says, gently swiping his tongue over my cheek, wiping my tear away. "Daddy wants to see every inch of his cock buried in his baby girl. Don't you want to see that?"

I bob my head, biting my lip. He waits until I relax, then kisses my

forehead gently. “This is the last one. You want to watch?”

When I nod, he folds the second pillow and lifts my shoulders, putting it under me so I can watch without craning my neck. Then he pushes the rest of the way inside me. I whimper, another tear escaping. I’m stretched so far I think my flesh might tear, and deep inside me aches where he’s pushed up against my insides. But it’s not just painful. The pleasure of it builds, almost overwhelming me.

“You ready for Daddy to fuck you senseless, baby girl?” I nod, but he grabs my chin, forcing my gaze to his. “Say it.”

“I’m ready.”

“Tell me,” he commands. “All of it.”

“Fuck me senseless, Daddy.”

Warrick begins to move then, stroking my hair as he pulls back and pushes back in, his thrusts hard and deep until I can’t stop the helpless whimpers from spilling from my lips. I’m so full I think I’ll burst, and I can’t tell where pain stops and pleasure begins. I only know I want him inside me forever.

His eyes lock on mine, and I feel his power over me looming like his body. “Not a sound out of you,” he growls. “I own this orgasm—it’s mine.”

I nod frantically, biting my lips together.

“Get on your hands and knees.”

My brow furrows in confusion, but I comply, aching for him to fill me again the moment he pulls out, covered in our fragrant juices. He crouches behind me, easing his cock inside me from behind. “Daddy wants his baby girl to finger her pussy while her fucks her from behind,” he says, guiding one of my hands between my legs, to the place Ethan stroked before.

“What do I do?” I ask.

“Rub your clit until you come on my cock.”

I do as I’m told, matching his rhythm as Warrick pumps inside of me. Pleasure builds until I can’t hold it back. I open my lips to cry out, then suck the sound back in. Somehow, holding it in magnifies the sensations in my body, and the ache deep in my core can’t take it. It explodes inside me like an earthquake ripping me apart, and I cry out helplessly. Warrick’s hand reaches around and clamps over my mouth, and he bites down on my neck, thrusting faster and harder, until it happens again.

He growls and gives one final, brutal thrust, and I feel a stab of pain as he stretches me wider, and then hot liquid gushes into my core. I explode again,

even though I'm so wrung out I'm sobbing and shaking with the intensity. I bite his fingers to keep from making a sound as wave after wave of ecstatic pleasure courses through my limbs a third time. I'm trembling so hard I can't hold myself up any longer. At last I collapse, pressing the side of my head into his musky pillow as Warrick holds me pinned, his cock throbbing and jerking inside me as he squeezes more liquid into my heat. At last, he withdraws from me and rolls by my side.

"Good girl," he whispers, wrapping his huge body protectively around me, stroking my hair and kissing my head as I drift into the ethers, floating on a sea of satisfaction I never dreamed was possible.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Warrick

I can't fucking sleep. Luna's curled up next to me like a little pup, and I just had the best damn sex of my life, but sleep won't come for me tonight. Yeah, she chose me, and I'm fucking flattered, but I took something both Ethan and Callan wanted—after I ripped into them for touching her. I figured if I kept my distance and gave her my surly side, she'd want nothing to do with me. But here she came, a naked little waif in the night, slipping between my sheets and saying things to me in her wide-eyed innocence that no man could resist. Hell, she probably didn't even know how half of that sounded to my ears.

I drag my hand through my hair and kick the covers off. I imagine what that asshole Axel would do if he knew I took his sloppy seconds and made her a queen. Ten years ago, I challenged him for dominance and lost, but tonight, I got my vindication. Tonight, I didn't just touch his mate like my brothers did. I fucked her raw and deep, shaping her cunt to *my* measure.

I fucking *claimed* every inch of her. Instead of pulling out at the last minute and coming all over her back, like I usually do, I shot my seed inside her while seizing her neck between my teeth. She submitted to my claim, and I rewarded her by making her come over and over, lifting her up where he cut her down. I run my fingers across the scar on her skin, and she shivers in her sleep and cuddles closer.

"Luna," I say, nudging her with my elbow.

"Mm-hmm?" she says in a sleepy sounding voice.

"Baby girl, you can't stay here. Go on back to your room now."

"Why?" she says, rubbing her eyes with her fists. She looks so goddamned sweet my cock starts to twitch, eager for another round inside

that slippery little vice between her thighs.

“I gotta work out some things with Callan and Ethan,” I tell her. “It wouldn’t look right if they found you here.”

“I thought you said it was my choice.”

“It is,” I say, sweeping a strand of her colorful hair back. “I just never considered you might choose me. After I called them off, they’d be pissed that I went ahead and took you for myself.”

Her nose scrunches up, and she looks at me like I’ve sprouted wings. “Why wouldn’t I come to you? I like you. *All of you.*”

“I know, baby girl,” I say, stroking her cheek. “But it’ll look like I chose, like I pulled the Alpha card to get you on your back. Like it wasn’t your choice.”

“It *was* my choice,” she says, laying her small hand on my rough cheek.

And I should be on my knees thanking the devil himself for that, because hearing her call me Daddy and then fucking the tightest pussy I’ve ever felt in my life was just about the best thing I’ve ever done. My gaze drops to her mouth, and fuck if I don’t want to taste it, and fuck it, and...

“Okay, I’ll go,” she says, sitting up and stretching when I don’t answer. The sheet falls down around her waist, and her little tits rise in the moonlight. I’m so fucking hard I’d tell her I changed my mind if I didn’t see her wincing when she sat up. As tight as she was, she’s going to be walking bowlegged for days after taking that pounding.

On silent feet, she pads to the door, then turns back to look at me over her shoulder. I just about blow my load all over again, but she gives me a shy little wave and disappears before I can order her back to the bed and see if that mouth feels as good as it looks.

When she’s gone, I have to jerk off just to get the image out of my head. Then I lie awake, staring out the window and thinking how fucking long it’s been since I lay awake thinking about a woman. Since I left home and didn’t have to worry about our mama, that’s how long.

A sound outside my window startles me—a soft rustling followed by a dull thwack. Even though there are plenty of swamp critters, I’m on guard when I don’t smell any kind of animal. I drop off the bed and head outside to check the perimeter.

In the dim light of dawn, I catch a faint glimmer of metal and a white square affixed to a tree at the edge of the yard. I scent the air, but no one is nearby, so I hurry over to investigate. I keep my ears pricked and my nose on

alert, though, in case this is an attempt at an ambush.

A fighting knife still quivers in the bark of the old hickory. I yank down the paper and read the scrawled letters.

Give the bitch up tonight, or you'll all die.

My blood turns to ice, and a big grin spreads across my face. Oh, I like the sound of that challenge. Whoever issued this threat has a death wish.

I scent the air again, and then I head inside to put the coffee on. I don't bother with clothes. I won't be fighting in human form, and busting out of them when I shift is a pain in the ass. Then I sit on the porch and roll a cigarette, watching dawn creep into the sky. I'm almost done with my smoke when I catch the first scent. I can smell both vampires and wolves.

I toss my cigarette and rub my hands together—this is going to be good.

Tipping back my head, I issue a few wolf yips. A minute later, Callan and Ethan stumble out onto the porch.

“What is it?” Callan says. “You're up early.”

I hand them the paper that was pinned to the tree.

“Fuck,” Ethan says, punching a fist into his palm. “We just got her back. Who tracked us?”

“No one had to track us,” I say. “We're not hiding her. We welcomed her, and she accepted.”

“They can come through the three of us if they want her,” Callan says, an edge of ferocity in his voice.

I can't wait to exact blood for this threat on Luna's life, but I keep my cool.

“Nothing to do now but have our coffee and wait for the bastards to show their faces.”

When we step inside, Luna comes padding into the kitchen on bare feet, her hair sticking out in five different directions, looking hot as hell itself in a baggy t-shirt and bare legs.

“What's going on?” she asks, rubbing her eyes. “I heard y'all talking outside.”

“There's been a threat on your life.”

She eyes the paper and frowns.

I want to eat the heart of the man who caused her pain. If this came from Axel, I'll be all too happy to tell him I filled his True Mate's womb with my seed—right before I rip his head off.

“Come here, baby girl,” I say, patting my thigh.

She minces across the room and sits on my knee, casting a beguiling gaze at each of us with those big eyes. “I brought more conflict,” she whispers.

“None of that,” I say, squeezing her hip. “You’re part of the pack. We fight for our own. You’re ours now, and we’re not letting you go.”

Tears well up in her lavender eyes. “Thank you.”

I turn to my brothers. They deserve the truth, and they deserve it coming from my mouth.

“Luna came to my room last night,” I say. “I fucked her good and hard.”

Callan nods. “As you should.”

Ethan smiles and takes a drink of coffee. “That’s our Alpha. Taking what’s yours.”

“Alright then,” I say, standing. I can smell the ashy dead smell of vamps coming closer. I’m ready to fight side by side with my brothers to save the woman who changed us all in the short time we’ve known her. “Let’s win this fight. For Luna.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Luna

Fog hangs heavy and expectant in the woods surrounding the triplet's house. There's an eeriness to the sounds of crickets and frogs singing their dawn songs that sends chills rippling across my skin. A bird adds its piercing cry at random intervals. It stirs a sense of foreboding I can't kick from my bloodstream. Someone wants me dead. But who? Why?

"Get on back in the house, Luna," Warrick commands me, giving my bottom a little squeeze. We're sitting on the porch swing while Callan stands on one of the support posts and Ethan sits on the step. "We're going to kill whatever assholes posted this warning, but you need to be inside, out of harm's way."

I lean back on his knee, arms folded over my chest. "You said we were a pack. If you fight, I fight. It's as simple as that."

The triplets look back and forth between each other, sending their secret messages that I don't understand, not having grown up with them.

"You listen here," I say, not appreciating being kept out of a decision about myself. I've had enough of that to last a lifetime. "I'm not a puppy. I'm a full-grown wolf, same as y'all. They said you had to give me up, which means this is my fight. If you want to fight by my side, I'm honored to have each and every one of you, but you can't cut me out. I'm going to fight to stay here, and if you fight to keep me here, too, then I'll just love y'all all the more for it."

I chose Warrick tonight, but that doesn't mean he's the only one I love. I realized that when I lay thinking on it last night, trying to decide. I'm fighting to stay not just with Warrick but with all of them. And just because I chose him last night, that doesn't mean I'll choose him every night. But that's a

conversation for another time, when the smell of vampire isn't drifting into the clearing in front of the house.

A branch snaps nearby, and Warrick straightens, already on alert. He makes a gesture with his hand, and Callan and Ethan nod.

Another crack snaps into the air.

Warrick slides me off his lap and stands, popping his knuckles and grinning. "It's been too quiet lately, boys. Let's go smash some skulls." He heads down the steps, the others close on his heel. I follow, feeling more scared than brave, though I'm not about to let it show.

Outside, as dawn washes the darkness from the sky, several men emerge from the woods, carrying bats and metal bars.

Warrick grins wider. "Vampires," he confirms in a low growl, since he probably thinks I don't know the scent yet. "You know what to do, boys."

"Go for the heart or the head," Ethan says. "Get some blood to make us stronger as we fight." He spits on the ground and then punches his fist into his other palm.

"Baby girl," Warrick says, glancing over his shoulder. "You stay behind me if you need to. I'll be your cover. Whatever you do, stay safe."

"I got this," I say, puffing out my chest.

"Yeah, you do," Callan says, chuckling and affectionately ruffling my hair. "We'll get 'em, pet."

"Let's move," Warrick says.

As one, my three men shift into wolves and race toward the vampires. I shift, too, but I pause for a moment, studying their attack. I'm not skilled in fighting anything but catfish and an occasional gator, and I don't want to get myself killed or act without strategy and get the men killed. They fight as one, though their attack seems simple enough. They avoid the bats and bars, lunge for the male's necks, and tear their heads off with their sharp teeth and powerful jaws.

Callan shifts back to human, seizes one of the bats, and swings it overhead, bringing it down on an injured male's ribcage. "Here you go, Warrick. Eat your fill!"

The ribcage splits open with a sickening crunch. Blood spews from the opening. For every vampire they take down, a handful more appear. They leap onto Warrick's back, moving so fast they're a blur as they slash and bite, barrel into the wolves, and beat them with their metal weapons. One of them charges into Ethan and sends him tumbling across the clearing when he goes

for the dead vampire's heart. Seeming unfazed, Callan proceeds to the next downed vampire. Grabbing one of the metal bars from the ground, he plunges it straight through the guy's heart with such force that blood and organ bits shoot into the air.

"This one's mine," he roars, thrusting his hand into the chest cavity and seizing the bloody heart. He tears it apart with his teeth. Another vampire rushes toward Callan, the bat in his hands at the ready.

I want to scream, "Look out!" but I'm in wolf form, so only a woof comes out. Callan spins my way and sees the guy coming in for an attack. In a blur, he shifts back to wolf and leaps at the vampire, knocking him to the ground.

I'm half their size as a wolf as well as a human, but I'm still bigger than the vampires. I lunge for one and clamp my teeth down on his throat, the way I see Warrick doing. I brace my paws against him, shake my head and rip out chunks his neck until he goes limp. He falls to the ground, and a sense of pride fills my chest. It feels good to be a part of this fight.

A force like a tree flying in a hurricane slams into my side, sending me sprawling. I howl and jump to my feet, swiping at the vampire. She grins and ducks aside when I charge her again. Then she leaps onto my back, her arms wrapping around my neck in a stranglehold. I howl, and a second later, Ethan lands beside us in a single bound and rips her from my back, sending her head rolling and her body sailing into the trees. I send him a silent thanks and dive for another vampire, ripping into her middle to take her out of the fight before killing her.

When I bite into her neck, I can feel her cold, dead blood run over my tongue. I want to spit it out, but I remember what the guys said. I swallow it instead, and a few minutes later, I feel the strength they promised. It's like coffee. It takes terrible, but it comes with an excited, shaky, charged feeling that runs through my blood like it did the first time I had coffee, when the guys laughed at me when I freaked out after drinking a full cup. But they were nice, too, and Callan took me for a run in the woods to help get the energy out.

Now, the way to get energy out is to kill. Mama taught me that you should only kill to survive. In the swamp, that meant killing something to eat. Even when we killed one of the poisonous snakes that would slither under the walls, we always ate it. Out here, it's no different. I kill so that I can live, and if I eat a little of the kill, it's all the more justified.

There are so many of them, but we're winning. They keep coming out of the woods, but the stream of reinforcements has died to a trickle. I've killed a handful of vamps, and many more bodies litter the clearing. Ethan is feasting on a screaming woman while Warrick tears the head off another vampire while two more cling to his back. Callan has gone into the woods a bit, but I hear the snarling and see pieces of vampires flying through the air as he tears them apart. There's blood everywhere. It bathes the stones and the sand and spatters across the tree trunks. It coats the bushes and the leaves which lay scattered across the ground.

I'm pumped with adrenaline and vampire blood, ready to take down my next victim. I start for a short male, but he sprints into the woods when he sees me coming. I give chase. I'm just behind the house, diving for the man under a sprawling oak, when something heavy falls over my body. I stumble, caught in folds of rope, trying to figure out what happened. It's a net! Wrestling and snarling, I struggle to get free. I shift into my human form and claw at the netting, searching for a knot to untie so I can climb free.

Strong arms wrap around me from behind and lift me in the air. A male laughs quietly as I squirm and kick in his embrace. "You're a feisty one, aren't you?" he says in a familiar voice.

It's Evan, the bastard who tricked me into thinking he was a friend and then stole wolf secrets from me while I was drugged. The man responsible for the ache in my heart and the shame in my blood that never goes away. He's the reason I was banished from Axel's pack, the reason he severed our bond.

I start to scream, but he slaps his palm over my mouth. I try to bite him through the net, but the webbing prevents me from connecting with his flesh. I start to shift back into a wolf, but before I can, something sharp and quick bites into my hip. It's small but deep, like a honey locust thorn I got lodged in my calf one time. Evan chuckles, the sound oily and sinister in my ear.

"Don't go wolfing out on me," he says. "That's no way to have a conversation. Plus, you smell so much better as a human than a mangy, wet dog."

Two other vampires rush from the woods in our direction, calling in whispers to each other. I struggle and kick, whatever I can to get free, but it's useless. I feel groggy like I did after drinking his water, my limbs uncoordinated. I call to my wolf to help, but she's even more disoriented than I am, and I can't seem to remember how to pull her forward to take over.

A female vamp cuts the net free, and Evan tosses me over his shoulder. We start moving, so fast it makes me almost vomit the coffee I had this morning. The wind blows into my nose so hard I can't breathe, like when I was on Warrick's bike and stuck my head around him to see. Trees and marshes blur by so fast I can hardly make them out. Suddenly, we skid to a halt beside an orange van.

My heart sinks into the ground like an anvil.

The vampires bind the netting around my ankles and gag me with a foul-smelling cloth that makes my eyes burn and water. I'm deposited on the hard floor of the van and guarded by the largest of the three vampires, a scary looking male with no hair on his head, eyeglasses, and the longest fangs I've ever seen.

Evan disappears and reappears in the driver's seat.

The van tears out of the swamp and along a dirt road. Only when we turn onto a smooth road does the scary guy yank off my gag. I wiggle my jaw back and forth, trying to get some feeling back in my face. "What do you want from me?" I demand, though my voice sounds shaky and scared. "I don't taste good to vampires, and my blood does nothing for y'all."

"And yet, you partook in ours so greedily," Evan purrs from the front seat.

Scary Guy laughs. In the dim light in the back of the van, his face is lined with shadows, making him look even more sinister. "We don't want to eat you, mutt."

"Yes," says the woman. "We require your services for other reasons."

"What kind of reasons? You got a problem with the triplets?" I tug against the restraints binding my arms and legs.

"Those outlaws?" Evan scoffs. "They have no power, so they're of no use to us. They were simply an inconvenience that had to be dealt with, sweet Luna. You, though..."

"I have no power!" I blurt out. "Please let me go. I'm just one lone wolf. What can you want with me?"

Evan chuckles again, that sound that slithers down my back like a snake hanging from the ceiling. "You're a bargaining chip. We can use you for leverage with the Jacksonville pack."

A bitter laugh escapes my lips. "Good luck with that. I ain't Axel's mate no more. He don't want nothing to do with me. He's the one who threw me away, made me a lone wolf. That's why I found other lone wolves like me."

“Hmm,” Evan says, sounding amused. “You really are innocent, aren’t you, Luna?”

“He severed the True Mate bond!” I insist. I twist around to show the scary vampire the pale pink scar on my arm. “Look, the mark don’t lie. We’re not mates. He’ll never negotiate to get me back.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that.” Scary-guy grins. Every tooth is pointed and sharp, as if he’s ground them into tiny daggers.

“You’re never going to get anywhere with the Jacksonville pack if all you have to bargain with is me.”

Scary-guy’s expression darkens, and he stares at me through slits.

“You honestly don’t know, do you?”

Evan makes that horrid laugh again. “Oh, sweet Luna. Who do you think destroyed your little shack in Bogbeast Waters?”

“I—I don’t know,” I say. “Are you saying you did that?”

This time, the woman throws her head back and laughs. Then she twists around in the front seat to look at me, her eyes shining with amusement. “No, honey. Axel destroyed it, so you’d have nowhere to go. He was counting on you running back to him.”

His words land like an arrow in my heart. Axel destroyed my home? I blink rapidly, fighting back the tears. It can’t be true. It’s bad enough that he tore my soul to shreds. Wanting me to come back to him after that seems even more cruel. It can’t be true. I close my eyes and try not to feel the sickening speed of the van or think about the vampires’ cruel words and laughter.

They’re lying. Axel doesn’t want me. If he wanted me, he would have showed it when he had me.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Luna

The van screeches to a stop, and I tumble against the driver's seat, still bound by ropes and a net.

"How do you know that?" I mumble once I've managed to right myself somewhat. "How do you know Axel destroyed my home and still wants me? He severed our bond..."

"It's easy," Evan says, throwing open his door. He comes around to the back of the van and drags me out by my feet. The uneven, corrugated metal floor collides with my backside. Throwing me over his shoulder as effortlessly as if I'm a dead swamp rabbit, he continues to talk as he strides away from the vehicle. "The True Mate bond isn't something a wolf takes lightly. Axel might have gone through the motions of breaking the bond, but there's no way he could sever the connection completely. It's impossible."

The sweet scent of a creek fills my nostrils, and I recognize Evan's place even while upside down.

"I swear to you—we're *not* True Mates anymore," I say, bouncing along his back. But even as I say the words, I know they're not true. The bond was broken, but it can't change what we are. I can still sense the energetic bindings, which were once as tight as the ropes cinching me. Now they're cut loose, like two ends of a rope blowing in the wind. Only now the ropes represent rage and betrayal instead of love and safety. That's why my wolf cries every time we even think of him. Whatever bound us was severed, but it's never truly gone, like ugly scar tissue where healthy flesh once lived.

"We'll see," Evan says, sounding unconcerned.

Evan's footsteps are accompanied by the other vampires who accosted me. He steps through a doorway and tosses me onto a plush rug. "Untie her,"

he commands to one of the other vampires.

The woman approaches me and pulls a sharp knife from a leather holder on her belt. I wince, hoping the knife doesn't carve me to pieces. Once freed, I rub my chafed arms and legs. "Are you letting me go?"

"Ha! Good one," Evan says. "No, darling, we're going to put you somewhere safe." He inclines his head toward the scary one and then saunters away.

The woman seizes my wrist with her leather-gloved hand and drags me back outside.

"Where are you taking me?" I say, tugging my wrist against her formidable grip. I'm still a little woozy from whatever they stuck me with, but if I can break free, I can hide and wait it out until I can shift.

"To your kennel." She grins, revealing beautiful white teeth bordered by fangs.

I struggle as we approach a gleaming new cage set in the center of the yard, but my human form is no match for a vampire. She shoves me inside and slams the door shut. Then she fishes a key out of her pocket and fits it inside a sturdy lock, securing the cage. Without another word, she wiggles her fingers in a teasing little wave, pivots, and heads back toward the front door.

My fingers curl around the metal bars, but I yank them back when my skin burns upon contact. I let out a yelp and shake my blistered hands, staring down at my palms. I didn't feel any heat coming from the bars at all, but my skin is burned and searing with pain.

She-Vamp pauses at the door. "Oh. Did I forget to tell you your kennel is made of silver? I hear that's like an electric fence to a wolf. Am I right?"

"Asshole," I mutter before sucking on the blisters.

She laughs and disappears inside the house.

I sink down on the floor of the cage but immediately leap up when the bars burn my bottom. I can stand between the bars so I don't touch the silver, but I can't sit. I'm drowsy and wired at the same time. Every movement is slow and makes me sway dizzily, but I'm wide awake and still wired from the vampire blood. I wait for them to come back, but no one emerges from the house.

All day, I wait. I don't dare approach the bars that surround me as I'm still licking my blistered skin. I watch dragonflies and butterflies flit outside my cage, landing briefly on the foliage and then flying away. I study the trees

that stretch their leafy arms into the sky. I even regard the sky itself with its endless blue, sometimes punctuated by drifting clouds. The heat makes me drowsy, but I can't sit. I shift from one foot to the other, then crouch, then kneel, gaining a blister on the inside of my knee when I get too close to the silver.

Occasionally a car, truck, or motorcycle drives up and parks. Each time, I jump to my feet, hoping one of the triplets will appear. They'd never give up on me.

If they're alive...

I won't think of that. It's always another vampire coming to see Evan. I now know their scent well now, like bitter ash and death. They stride to the front door of the Evan's lair and disappear inside its sparkling white facade. Sometimes they point and laugh at me, but most ignore me.

By nightfall, I'm famished, thirsty, and fatigued, as my growling stomach can attest. Where are the triplets? They must be searching for me. I won't entertain other possibilities. They don't know where I am, but they'll find me. I just have to wait.

The front door opens, and a slice of light cuts through the darkness. A horde of vampires exits the house, laughing and talking.

Evan looks over at me and grins. "Nice to see you've settled in so well. You look right at home in a cage, little doggie."

If I were free, I'd tear his heart from his chest and eat it like the men do.

"Good hunting tonight, everyone!" a boar-like man says.

Another vampire says, "I hope your plan works, Drake."

The one I called Scary Guy, who must be Drake, responds. "Oh, it'll work. I've sensed him lurking about."

The hair on my neck prickles with excitement. Which of my men has come for me? Surely it's Warrick this time. After what we shared last night, he wouldn't give up on me. Why can't I scent him, though? I know each of their scents by heart at this point. They all smell of sweat and have the primal, *man* smell I never encountered until Axel. Callan also smells like the salt marshes in the hot sun, and Ethan's scent has a hint of the woods and the exhaust from his bike. Warrick smells like leather and cigarettes. But I can't find any of them in the air tonight.

Still, the idea that one of my pack is looking for me gives me hope. When the vampires depart, I shift into wolf and howl.

I call for my new lovers. I tell them, "I'm here, come and find me!" After

an hour of my plaintive howls, I'm worn out and have to stop. I can only hope they got my message. I lower my head and try to sleep standing, not to think about the latest thing Axel didn't tell me—that even when our bond isn't connected to each other, it's never truly gone. He will be part of me forever, a wound that never heals.

It's still dark when I finally rouse from my half-sleep of exhaustion and sway on my feet. It's the time when the transition between night and day begins. I know it to be a time of power, when darkness yields to light.

More than that, I smell him—one lone wolf.

I stand at attention, searching the shadows for him. Is it Callan, who found me before? Or will it be Ethan this time? My skin tingles and my fur rises with excitement.

A large wolf pads out of the woods toward me, silent as a cloud moving across the moon. I step back in confusion. This is not the right wolf.

I shift into human, knowing he can't reach me inside my silver cage, since he's a wolf, too. I bare my teeth.

"Who are you?" I ask, even though I know. I don't want him to know that he's familiar to me. I want him to think he'll always be a stranger.

The wolf shifts, and once again I find myself face to face with the man who hurt me so much. He keeps showing up, refusing to let me forget.

"They put you in a silver cage?" he asks, his voice and eyes burning with dark fury.

"Why are you here?" I demand.

"I heard you calling," he says simply.

"I wasn't calling you."

He flinches, just a bit, but doesn't acknowledge that. Instead, he sighs. "I'm here to take you home."

"Your home is not mine, Axel."

He steps to the edge of the cage, wrapping his hands around the bars. I hear the hiss of his skin burning, and his jaw clenches, but he doesn't step back. He stares at me through the bars of my cage, his eyes sad and intense. "You're wrong," he says quietly. "Just like I was wrong. You're my home, Luna. And whether you like it or not, I am yours."

I step back again, wrapping my arms around myself, the wail of my wolf inside me so full of anguish I nearly crumble. "No," I say, shaking my head. "It's not true."

"It is true," he says. "I know you feel it, too. Stop running from me. You

can't escape destiny."

"You're the one who tried to escape destiny," I cry, my hands balling into fists and tears filling my eyes at the fresh reminder of his betrayal. "You severed us, Axel. You wounded my wolf—my soul."

He shakes his head and steps back, his voice going flat. "You might be angry at first, but you'll thank me when you stop being proud and admit this is where you belong. Now get yourself together, Luna. I'm taking you home."

Shunned by the Pack

Book Two

Chapter One

Axel

The crickets surrounding the woods and marsh near the vampire's lair make so much noise my head wants to explode. Or maybe my head wants to detonate because my mate stands before me. Luna, her hair a glorious shade of purple, is trapped in a cage like a dog, teeth bared like I'm the one who put her there.

I'm going to tear the vampires' limbs from their bodies with my bare teeth for this.

She must have been in her skin when the vamps took her, as now she stands there naked. It takes every ounce of willpower in me not to rip apart her cage and take her in my arms.

I don't think she'd like that very much, though.

The enormity of my mistake hits me again. I insisted on severing our mate bond, and now I wish to hell I hadn't done something so drastic, even to protect the pack. And yet, even though the elder destroyed the bond, turning the crescent moon on my arm into just another battle scar from my life, I can't get Luna out of my mind. Thoughts of her haunt me like a banshee, wailing for the dead.

"Luna," I say, staring at her through the bars of the cage they put her in. I can smell the burns on my hands from the silver, but I can't let my wolf heal me right now. I have to stay in human form and convince her to come home.

"Get away from me," Luna snarls.

"Luna," I say again, the rest of the words I want to say clogged in my throat.

"Leave me alone."

"I can't do that, Luna," I say quietly. "You're in my bloodstream. You

consume my every waking hour and haunt my dreams like a wraith every night.”

I step closer to the cage again, but she backs away, looking over her shoulder. When she turns back to face me, a look of anguish torments her features, and the nights’ shadows darken her expression. Without answering, she lifts her palms and studies them.

In the faint moonlight, I notice the blisters on her palms, and rage throbs in my temples. Those fucking vampires. She must have burned the shit out of her hands when she gripped the bars of the cage, too. I’d give anything to take her pain away right now.

“You’re coming home with me tonight,” I say firmly. “There’s no other choice.”

“Why should I?” she demands. “You *broke* me, Axel. You left me ruined.”

She snuffles, and my chest tightens until I can barely breathe. “I’m sorry. You know how fucking sorry I am.”

“You got no idea what it’s been like for me since you dragged me out of the swamp,” she says. “I didn’t want to be bonded with you or anybody. I didn’t know what it meant at all. And then to have that bond *erased*...” Her voice cracks, sending a million glass splinters through my heart.

“I know,” I say miserably, because there’s nothing else I can say. Every word from her lips is the truth.

She crosses her arms defiantly over her tits, fuller now than when we found her half-starved in the swamp. “And then I find out you demolished my home in Bogbeast Waters. You’re nothing but a liar and a betrayer. I’m not going anywhere with you.”

I swallow and continue. “I was wrong to sever the bond between us, Luna. I was trying to do my job, to look out for the pack’s safety and put them first. I didn’t think I had a choice.”

She casts her gaze at the ground.

“I should have been more patient and taught you everything you need to know,” I admit quietly. A man like me, an Alpha, doesn’t admit he’s wrong easily, but I can’t stand the thought of her hating me so much. She deserves the truth. “I should have treasured you as the most precious thing in the world, because that’s what you are. I’ll do anything to get you back. Anything in the world. Name it, and it’s yours.”

A shrewd expression forms on her face. I can almost see the chit she’s

stored in some pocket in her mind, which she'll bring out and use against me at a later date. "Anything?" she asks.

I swallow again and nod. "You'll see—I've changed. Things will be good with us when I bring you home. I'll make sure of it."

"My home will *never* be with you," she says in a voice so low I shouldn't be able to hear it—but the intensity pouring through her words comes through as if shouted them into a megaphone.

Luna loathes me, pure and simple.

"I'm going to get you out of here," I promise. With a sigh, I pivot and stride along the damp ground toward the vampire's lair.

At the door, I lift my hand and hammer against the metal and wood. The sound seems to echo and dissipate, like swamp fog swirling around the trees.

"They're not there," Luna calls.

It's the first thing she's said to me in a civil tone since I arrived—I'll take it as progress.

"Then I'll find them," I tell her.

Vampires stink like ash and death, so they shouldn't be too difficult to track down. Just as I pivot to go on a blood-sucker hunt, a vehicle pulls into the driveway. It looks old and elegant, a 21st-century Bentley, and it gleams like polished silver in the faint moonlight.

Evan and Drake, two of the nastiest vampires in Jacksonville, emerge from the car, talking loudly and grinning like they've just scored crimson meals and hot pussy.

Evan rounds the bumper of his vehicle, still chatting with Drake. But then he stops, stares at me, and lets his eyes flash with red.

I return an equally assaulting glare. "I've come to get my woman."

"Have you now?" Evan's lips curve into a cold smile. "What makes you think we're going to give her up?"

"You don't like the taste of wolf, for one. She's young and inexperienced. She's of no use to your kind."

His smile becomes a taunting grin as he saunters toward me. "*You're* here, so I guess the bitch has a use after all."

I clench and unclench my fingers. "What do you want, blood-sucker?"

Evan stops and stands before me with Drake by his side. "You know the answer already. We want territory. Give us Creebay Preserve, and we might have a deal."

His request slugs me like a fist to the gut. Creebay Preserve is all the

hunting ground the pack has left. Our pack fought for that land as Florida sank into the sea and every creature's habitat shrunk. Creebay is a tiny fraction of the land we once hunted, but it's all we could carve out for ourselves in the new world. The pack once commanded the hundreds of acres making up Bogbeast Waters, until the hurricanes and tornadoes claimed it as their own, making the swampland unfit to live. Only panthers and a few strange souls choose to live in Bogbeast, side by side with the swamp monsters, ogres, and alligators.

The two vampires move in on me, and though they have a few inches on me, I stand steady, unafraid. I could shift and rip their tonsils from their throats if I chose to. But killing them wouldn't get Luna back—one wolf can take out a few vamps, but not a whole army of them, and I know there are more on the way.

"Creebay's not an option," I say. "It's our hunting ground."

"Then Luna is not an option for you," Evan says with a shrug, pushing past me.

"Wait," I say, trying to calm my raging heartbeat.

"Why should I?" Evan says, standing before his front door. He shoves his hand in his pocket and retrieves a few jangling keys.

I glance over at Luna, standing stock-still in the middle of that fucking cage with her arms hanging by her side, and my heart tears apart. "We have some other property in South Jacksonville, closer to the ocean. We haven't done much with it because there's no game for hunting, but I'll consider giving you a piece of it. It's called Dead Waters. It would be perfect for your clan."

Evan barks out a laugh and turns to face me. "You're a funny one. Dead Waters is called that because it's dead. The land and all its occupants. Nothing can live there."

"You don't have a beating heart. Why should it matter?" I know I'm grasping at straws. Dead Waters is one of the foulest bogs on the planet, thanks to the disasters that left it uninhabitable.

"Let's see," Evan says, making a show of tapping his lip with his forefinger and directing his gaze skyward. "Do I want a piece of land where I'll have to wade through four feet of water to get to my home in the treetops? Or do I want the Creebay Preserve with its lush forests and waterways and the perfect spot for a domicile worthy of my stature? Hmmm. I can't decide."

I glance at Luna again. Wet streaks glisten on her cheeks.

A flare of pain shoots through my chest. The only way we managed to secure Creebay was to sign treaties granting hunting rights to a few of the other supernaturals as long as they stay out of our way. What will happen if I give our territories to the vamps?

I turn back to Evan and Drake, who both stare at me with eyes like cold gunmetal.

Then, the fatal blow to my heart occurs—Luna shifts into her wolf form, throws back her head, and howls in anguish.

Evan grins widely. “Oh, this is rich. She’s got you by the short and curlies, Wolfie.”

“Shut up,” I snap. I work my lips between my teeth as I consider my options. “I can grant you ten acres in the north.”

Evan laughs coldly. “Ten acres? That’s hardly worth the toilet paper you wiped your ass with this morning.”

He pivots and fits his key in the lock.

“Okay, thirty acres,” I say as Luna continues to howl.

“One hundred, and you’ve got a deal,” Evan says, twisting open the door.

The entire preserve is only two-hundred acres. How can I possibly give the vampires half of our territory? “Fifty,” I counter.

“Seventy-five,” Evan says, still keeping his back to me.

My teeth grind together. Luna’s cries are like jagged metal twisting into my body. “Sixty,” I say, as the earth crumbles beneath my feet.

“You have a deal,” Evan says, tossing me the keys. “Unlock your bitch, and we’ll sign an agreement.”

As I rush for my mate, he calls after me. “We’ll assume ownership at once.”

I’m sure they will. I’ve got a shitload of explaining to do to my pack. But first, I have to convince Luna to come home, or I just gave away almost half our land for nothing.

Chapter Two

Luna

Axel opens the door of the cage and steps inside, holding out a hand to me. I don't want to touch him, especially because both of us have shifted into our human skin, and being so near to him only reminds me of the last time we were together without clothes between us. I avert my eyes and shake my head.

"Luna, come on," he says. "I just bargained to set you free. You can't mean to stay here."

He's right, but I'm not happy about it. He sees my hesitation and steps back, giving me a good amount of space so I can step out of the cage without touching him.

"Good," he says when I'm out. "Now let's get to my truck before they capture us both."

Without warning, he scoops me up over his shoulder and takes off. I cling to his neck, afraid he'll drop me if I let go. I don't want to go home with him, but I'm not staying with the horrible monsters who stole me away from my loves, either. As soon as I'm able, I can escape to the only place I can truly call home.

I want to be with the triplets.

Axel sets me gently in the front seat, leaning around me to buckle the belt across my lap. His thick shoulder brushes my bare nipple, and it hardens against him. I suck in a breath, shocked by the ripple of pleasure his touch brings. I don't want it, though. His pleasure comes with too high a price.

Axel swallows and leans back slowly, his eyes searching mine. I turn my face away and cross my arms to hide my jutting nipples. He closes the door and starts around the truck. This is my chance. If he takes me back to his

house, he might not let me leave, and I don't want to make Callan come get me again, not after the triplets told me that the pack wants them dead.

The second Axel turns the corner to the driver's side, I yank open the door handle and bolt into the swamp. My feet squish through the sodden ground as I race across the landscape. I will make it back to my men, make sure the vampires didn't hurt them.

I hear a curse and footsteps behind me. I run faster, my heart racing as he chases me through the swamp. I don't want to go anywhere with him. I want to be with Callan, Warrick, and Ethan—they're the wolves I consider my pack now. If they think I'm dead, it will break their hearts. I have to tell them I'm okay.

I hear Axel getting closer, and I put on a burst of speed, but I don't have time to stop and shift. The next second, Axel catches me from behind, his arm wrapping around me.

"Let me go," I scream as he hauls me off my feet.

When he sets me in the front seat of his truck again, he stands like a tree in the door, blocking my way out. "I can do this all fucking night," he says. "You can run, and I can catch you."

My nostrils flare as I regard him. He's right. I'm wholly famished and weak with hunger. I need food, water, and a long sleep after being unable to lie down in the cage.

But first, I've got to get back to my men.

I wait, breathing hard, as he backs around the front of his truck, keeping me pinned to the seat with his gaze. Once he's inside the cab, he fires up the engine and takes off.

That's when I make my move, flinging open the front door and pitching my body out. I fall onto the sand and dirt road, scraping my shoulder. I quickly shift and take off, limping slightly from my injured limb.

I hear Axel shout, and the truck skids to a stop, but I'm deep in the underbrush before he has a chance to exit the driver's side door.

The scent of the swamp lures me toward its watery oasis, so I put on more speed. I long to disappear into the misty wetlands, hide for a while, and find my way back to the triplets. Thoughts of them are the only thing that's keeping me going. A few minutes later, a large black wolf rockets through the marsh, sinks his fangs into the ruff of my neck and takes me to the ground with the force of his attack. With his teeth clenched tightly against my fur and flesh, he secures me to the damp earth with his forepaws.

I'm so weak my struggle must seem pathetic. I can feel his body on top of mine, and something exciting and confusing ripples through me. I'm not scared of him, even though he hurt me before. I know, somehow, that he won't hurt me again. That even though I'm pinned to the ground, I have some sort of power over him. I don't like the confusing sensations rolling through my body, so I snarl, snap, and writhe beneath his bulk, digging my claws and teeth into whatever I can get my paws on.

Axel shifts suddenly, still pressing me to the ground beneath his forearm.

I shift, too, and suddenly our hot skin is pressed together. We're both panting from the run and the struggle, and even though I hate him for what he did, I feel a stir of hunger in between my legs when I feel his cock pressed to my thigh. His length begins to stir and harden, and as I stare into his eyes, I feel my heat throbbing with desire. The energy between us shimmers like hot coals, waiting to erupt into flames.

Axel's tongue darts out and wets his lips, and my thighs clench at the memory of that tongue stroking my heat until I exploded. I want more. I don't think about anything, just spread my legs and shift my hips so he's between them. He sucks in a breath when his rigid cock meets my sensitive flesh. I gasp, too, rocking my hips against him in a desperate attempt to ease the ache growing inside me.

"Luna," he growls. "What are you doing?"

I rock my hips faster, grinding against him, wild with need. "Help me," I whimper.

"Oh fuck," he groans, pushing up on his hands and watching me wriggle and writhe and buck under him. "You're soaked. Did being chased turn you on?"

His words bring back the reason for this, and I give him a forceful shove. He doesn't budge. He's staring down at my open thighs, his cock against the wet heat between.

"Why is your pussy shaved?" he asks quietly.

"Get off," I yell. I shove him again, and this time, he willingly rolls from my body, though he's far too strong to be moved by the force of my little push. His swollen erection bobs between his legs, and I nearly buckle at the sight. I want him so bad it aches in my blood, my bones, my wolf. I never had these feelings before leaving the swamp, and I don't know how to keep them from controlling me.

Until recently, I lived alone with my mother in Bogbeast Waters, with no

contact with anyone but her. I was naïve, and even though it was a constant struggle to care for Mama and her moods, I stayed content. As long as I brought home a good catch every day and could keep Mama from tearing down the house in one of her fits about being watched by wolf packs or murdered in the night, I could rest easy.

Now I'm all over the place, with mood swings like a 'coon swinging from the Spanish moss, flying from one tree to the next. I wonder if this is how Mama's moods felt from the inside, since I only saw them from the outside.

Tugging my mind back to my current situation with this maddening man across from me, I drag the back of my hand across my lips. Axel watches my every move, as hungry and wanting as I am. But I don't want to want him. I want to hate him. I leap to my feet and sprint away again, through the palmettos and pines. I hear his footsteps coming hard and fast behind me, and again, he catches me. He lifts me off my feet, growling into my ear.

My body explodes with shivers of heat. I writhe and kick, my foot connecting with his shin, and he takes us to the ground. He pins my hands, his body matching mine on all fours. I can feel his cock, and I arch my back, pressing back against it, panting for him to fill my throbbing core. My wetness coats my center, my thighs, his thick cock.

"Axel," I moan, grinding against the heat of his cock. It keeps slipping away when I try to push back onto it, impaling myself. "Help me."

In one motion, he flips me onto my back. I open my legs eagerly, and he sinks between them, his cock pushed firmly against my entrance. I wriggle and pant, trying to get him inside, where the need is gnawing at me maddeningly.

"And you'll behave?" he asks, his eyes boring into mine.

"Yes," I breathe, my fingers curling around his hands that hold mine to the ground.

He gives one powerful, slow push, sinking his cock into my slick channel, opening me and filling me with the delicious stretch I needed. I cry out, digging my nails into his hands, bucking my hips under his. He stays pushed up on his hands, watching me squirm, dig my heels into the ground, and beg for more. But he doesn't move.

"Axel, please," I beg. "Just... Just—"

I break off, finding the spot that feels so good when I grind it against his pelvic bone that I see stars.

"What?" he growls, his hands crushing mine into the ground, his hips

holding me impaled.

“Fuck me,” I whimper. “Please.”

He grinds his pelvic bone slowly against me, and the angle his cock hits inside me pushes me over the edge. I shriek and arch up, my body gripped in some kind of muscle spasm, my sheath squeezing rhythmically around his cock, though it hasn't moved once. The explosion is so strong that for a second, all I see is black, with a billion stars strewn across my vision. My cries fill the swamp, making the insects and birds fall silent. Axel looms over me, watching me writhe and convulse under him.

At last, when I settle back into my body, back to the earth, he pulls his erection out of me, where it stands straight and glistening with my body's pleasure.

My need having been fulfilled, the hatred I feel for him settles back into place. He crouches before me as he wipes the blood away from his lip and hands. My teeth must have connected with him when he had his fangs sunk into my neck or had me pinned. Good. I hope he needs stitches. Better yet, I hope he bleeds out and dies.

I sit up, swiping angrily at the pine needles stuck to my elbows. A warm trickle of blood drips down my own neck from where he caught me in wolf form.

“Let me tend to your wound,” he says, his eyes landing on the blood.

“Why should I?” I ask, shying away.

A little smirk tugs at the corner of his lips. “I'll make you come again.”

“Come where?” I demand.

“Where you just did,” he says.

I stare at him, conflicted silence filling the air between us. I want more of those feelings, but I don't want him near me. I like that he didn't get any satisfaction for himself, that he kept his body separated from mine and just watched me find the place where everything is perfect and blissful and nothing feels bad.

Axel crawls forward over me again. I say nothing, just sit on the ground as he licks my neck, collarbone, and the top of my left breast with his tender tongue. The feel of his tongue is intoxicating as it sweeps along my bare flesh. He cradles my body and lays me back on the ground, his mouth latching onto my nipple. Pleasure spikes through me, sharp and sudden, and I cry out. He slides his hand between my thighs, stroking through my slick folds and rubbing his thumb across the little bud that throbs every time his

tongue pulls on my nipple.

His mouth moves across my chest, his lips tugging and nipping at my skin, his tongue lathing over my other nipple. I whimper helplessly, borne up and out of my body by the pleasure he keeps pouring into me. He slides two fingers into me as his lips close around my other nipple and suction to me. I bury my hands in his hair, gripping his head, pulling him in while he pulls me into his mouth, sucking my nipple until it aches from pleasure. His fingers pump into me relentlessly, his thumb caressing the swollen, tender bud in my pussy until I'm moaning and writhing.

He lifts his head, swiping his tongue up the column of my neck to my ear. "Come for me, Luna," he murmurs, his voice throaty and hot in my ear.

A shiver of pure, erotic longing goes through me, and my body is wracked with shudders of bliss as my hips rise, my walls clamping down around his fingers as I explode again.

When the last of the shudders in my body subsides, he sits back on his heel, licking my juices from his fingers and watching me with hooded eyes. His gaze is clouded with fevered longing, his cock still straining against his skin, standing up against his belly.

I'm too spent to move, to stop him if he tries to mate me again. I don't care. I feel so good, so relaxed, I think I'll fall asleep at any moment.

"Look," he says at last. "I know you're pissed. You have every right to be angry. But we can't leave you here in the woods alone. The vampires will only capture you again and do worse harm to you. Let me take you home. I'll make you feel good any time you want. If you hate it there, if you can't stop despising me, we'll make another arrangement. Okay?"

I file away his promise, the same way I filed away his assurance that he'd do anything to get me back while I stood in the vampire's horrible cage, and then I nod. Axel scoops me up in his arms and starts back toward the truck. Instead of fighting this time, I drape a lazy arm over his neck and let him carry me like I'm his catch of the day.

As we trek through the swampland, the sun punches its way over the horizon, clearing the way for the dawn.

Axel sets me gently in his truck and buckles the belt around me. He hesitates a second, then leans in and buries his nose in my lilac hair, taking a long, deep breath. I watch his cock bob against his belly before he pulls away.

When he climbs in his side of the truck, I relax against the door, but I'm

already plotting my way back to my men. Axel can make my body feel good, but only they make my heart sing.

Axel drives us out of the marsh and into the chaos of Jacksonville, with the cars careening toward us at breakneck speed, making me nearly scream before they zoom past without touching the truck.

We power past derelict neighborhoods, fallen into disrepair. Stores and shops where humans and supernaturals purchased clothes and food stand in the middle of water where there was once dry land. Seas are rising as if the earth's liquid wants to flush away the civilization that has made such a mess of this sacred land.

At his house on Golden Glade Street, Axel parks the truck and strides around to my side to hold open the door for me. Silently, I slide from the leather seat and back into his arms, feeling safe and cared for despite what he's done in the past. He makes his way across the soggy ground of his yard, up the steps of his front porch, and into his small dwelling. Once more, thoughts of the triplets fill my heart with longing. Axel's house is cleaner and just as big, even though he lives here alone, but it's his home, not mine. What are my men doing? Are they looking for me, feeling as lost without me as I do without them?

But once we cross the threshold, I stiffen as I catch sight of Ama lounging on Axel's sofa.

"Ama, get up," Axel snaps, suddenly seeming angry, though I'm not sure why. "And for fuck's sake, put some clothes on."

A wounded expression crosses her face.

Axel sighs. "Look, I'm sorry I snapped, Ama. I've had a rough night. I had to... *fuck*." He sinks onto the couch, still cradling me in his arms. I give Ama a smug smile, enjoying the withering look she's giving me.

"So, she's back?" Ama asks, smoothing her thick, straight hair over her shoulder.

"For now," Axel says. "I had to do some fucked up shit to get her back, though."

Ama puts her hand on his back, arching a brow at me like she's waiting to see if I'll react. I want to tear her fingers off with my canines, though I'm not sure why I care that she's touching him.

Even Axel notices her attempt to draw him into her greedy spider web, and he scoots away from her and settles me onto the couch.

"I have to talk to the pack right away," Axel says. "I'll call a meeting."

Make sure Luna feels welcome and gets settled while I'm busy."

He stands, then turns back and crouches in front of me. I notice his cock is finally hanging down, like it's given up and accepted defeat. "You can tell Ama anything you need," he says. "She's here to serve you while I'm gone."

"I think I need to eat something, and then I need sleep," I murmur. I can barely keep my eyes open.

Axel snaps his fingers in Ama's direction. "Get Luna some food."

Ama's mouth works around, settling into a sullen line before she rises. "Of course, boss. Right away."

Axel bristles. "Without the attitude, please. I'll get the bed ready for Luna before I go. She needs to rest."

He heads up the stairs toward his bedroom. After he's gone, Ama turns to me with a sneer. "He's fair game, you know."

"What?"

"He chose to break your True Mate bond because *he doesn't want you*. Can your dumb brain understand that?" She scrunches her face up in an ugly way.

"He went to a fair bit of trouble to get me back," I point out. "He must want me for something."

"You had your chance," Ama says in her snarly voice that grates against me like sand ground into sunburned skin. I feel her more powerful wolf looming over mine, and my wolf whines and begs to retreat from the threat. "Now stand down. He's *mine*."

I don't want to be with Axel, but the words spewing from her mouth make me want to fight her to the death—if only I had an ounce of fight left in me. "Aren't you supposed to be fixing me some food?" I ask.

"I'm not your servant," she snaps, glaring at me.

"But Axel is your Alpha, and he told you to serve me." I lay my head back against the sofa, drawn by the lure of sleep.

Ama's nostrils flare, and hatred burns in her eyes. "Axel feels sorry for you. You're nothing but a pathetic, uncouth little mutt who's brought nothing but trouble to our pack. The only reason he wants you here is because he hates those disgusting heathens you've shackled up with, and he doesn't want them to have you."

My heavy eyelids sink shut. "I didn't ask to come here."

She says nothing, but I can feel her scorching my skin with her eyes. "He'll never love you," she finally says. "He wanted to break the bond, and

there's a reason for that. You're not a suitable mate for an Alpha."

"Uh-huh," I mumble, giving way to my body's demands.

"He's going to love me. Just you wait."

"Mm-hmm."

"He'll be mine, so you better watch yourself around him."

I let out a yawn. "Then why'd he give up half of your land to get me back? Answer me that?" I open my eyes long enough to witness the shocked expression on her face, like someone lit a bomb under her butt.

I feel Axel's presence a moment before he steps into the room. As he scoops me up, I give way to slumber before he even delivers me to bed. My last thoughts are that he'll have some explaining to do with Ama and the pack that apparently won't accept me, and I'm fine with that, because the sooner he gives up on keeping me, the sooner I can get back to the three brothers whom I adore.

Chapter Three

Luna

I don't know how long I sleep, but when a hand touches my shoulder and shakes me, I rocket to consciousness, fists flying, ready for a fight.

"Easy, Luna," Axel says, ducking, palms up to fend off the blows. "It's just me."

"Just you," I say, blinking at the fading light outside. I must have slept all day. My chest feels as empty as my belly, aching for the triplets and not this man who betrayed me so badly.

"Ama prepared some food for us," Axel says. "I sent her away so we can have time to connect."

Groggy as hell, I scrub my face with my hands, trying to wipe the sludge from my brain. My bruised, confused heart clatters about in my chest. "We're never going to connect," I say, "but tell her thanks for the food next time you see her."

"I will," he says simply. "I'll get you some clothes."

I sit up and yawn again, stretching my arms over my head. The dust lining the side table catches my eye. I drag a finger through it, hold my finger before my lips, and blow on it. A tiny cloud of particles wisps into the air and slowly floats toward the floor.

When I'm done, Axel has brought me an oversized shirt and a pair of soft pants that must be his. His jaw looks like rigid glass as he glances away from me. "I've let things go a little since you've been gone."

I pull on the clothes even though they're six sizes too big. "You mean since you severed our bond and cast me from your pack?"

The muscles in his jaw tighten and bulge. His skin pulses near his left eye, and I'll bet if I were any other wolf, he'd have flattened me by now for

my insolence. My neck would be seized in his sharp teeth, and I'd be pinned against the floor. The thought makes me squirm a little, the way it did when he chased me through the woods.

"Let's eat," he says, stepping away from the bed.

We pad downstairs, ignoring the groans in the old wooden steps. Wrinkled gray curtains hang around the front window. The sofa is made of worn, cracked leather, the color of a raven's wings, while a low table made of shabby wood slats sits in front of it. A large, extended slab of wood affixed to the wall serves as a shelf. There's an old turntable resting on the shelf, right next to a globe. A smaller rack made of wire hangs above the turntable, filled with old vinyl records from the last century, kind of like the one the triplets have back home.

"Luna," Axel says, interrupting my inspection.

"Right," I say. "Food prepared by Ama, eating and connecting."

Axel takes my arm gently, and I allow him to guide me into his kitchen and help me into my seat—a simple chair made of the same wood slats as the table in front of the sofa.

Similar gray curtains line the small window in the kitchen, too. Wood shelves lined with stacks of mismatched plates, bowls, and sturdy drinking glasses sit on the wall above the countertop and stove. It's fancier than the triplets' kitchen for sure.

Axel moves around the kitchen with quiet confidence, pulling bowls and plates from the shelves and filling them with food that smells delicious, despite being prepared by a hateful woman.

When Axel sets a plate of meat and vegetables in front of me, my stomach cramps with hunger, and I dig into the food without another thought. Manners—something the triplets tried to teach me—are forgotten. I'm too hungry to consider them.

Axel settles into a seat across from me and patiently waits for me to finish. When I'm done, he reaches for the white cloth next to my place setting, shakes it, and hands it to me.

I grab it and wipe the gravy and juices from my face before licking my fingers.

Axel eyes me as I groom myself, saying nothing.

When I toss the napkin on the table, I lean back in my chair, lifting the front two legs from the floor, the way Ethan would.

"I'm sorry you lost your mother," Axel says quietly. "The healer said she

did all she could.”

“I didn’t *lose* her,” I say, folding my arms across my chest the way Callan did. “She died.”

Axel finishes chewing his bite of food, but he doesn’t snap back at me. “I’m sorry you’ve endured so much tragedy in such a short time.”

I grunt the kind of response Warrick did all the time when I lived with the triplets. I’m guessing that Axel’s apologies are more sorries than he’s ever uttered in his life, what with him being an Alpha and all. It kind of thrills me to witness how I’ve affected him. I feel that same power I felt in the swamp when he had me pinned, but I knew that somehow, I was the one in charge.

Axel takes another bite, watching me while he eats slowly and neatly. A thick, smothering silence hangs between us. The floorboards creak and settle from somewhere in the house.

“What do you want from me, Axel?” I ask, letting the front legs of the chair fall to the floor with a loud thunk. I stare at him in a manner I would never have been so bold to try when we met. It’s a look that conveys how much I loathe him and how much I long to have him inside me, defiant but almost hoping he’ll command my submission the way Warrick did.

“I want you to be my mate,” Axel says simply, returning the smoldering gaze.

My betraying body’s response is instant and intense, and I feel heat shimmering in the core of me, where he pushed his cock earlier and let me feel it buried there until I came apart. I swallow hard, squeezing my knees together. “What if I don’t want that?”

Axel tips back his head and sniffs the air, then drums his fingers on the placemat in front of him. A smile plays at the corners of his mouth. “I think you do.”

“I liked what you did today,” I say, acknowledging the desire humming through my system. “So if we mate again, will that be enough, or do you want something more?”

“I want more,” he says, his fingers crumpling the napkin next to his plate into a ball inside his fist. Then, he pins a lust-filled gaze on me and slides the tip of his tongue along his upper lip.

A thrill of excitement wiggles through me. I squirm in my seat and look away from Axel.

“Like what?” I ask, staring at my empty, blue-rimmed plate. I pick it up and lap at the juices lingering on the porcelain. When I set it back down on

the table, Axel's still staring at me with hooded eyes. A simple look from him is cracking open all my defenses. My wolf preens inside me, begging for more than his gaze on me.

His broad shoulders rise and fall in a long sigh. "I was a fool to break our bond. I knew the pack couldn't forgive you, and it's my job to protect them. I have to lead, but that doesn't mean I don't want you, too."

His head cocks to the side as he says this, as if measuring my response. The vulnerability he's sharing with me must come hard. Alphas, I've learned, aren't keen on letting people see them as less than anything other than the strongest, most dominant leaders. The fact that he's opening up to me means a lot. But it doesn't undo what he did.

"It was a pretty stupid move," I concede. "You could have told me about the vampires before I left here."

"You didn't give me that option," he says, sounding frustrated. "You ran out of here. I tried to find you, but your scent trail just... ended."

"That must be when Evan carried me," I ponder aloud.

Axel nods, looking miserable. "I should have heard you out."

"Yeah," I say. "You should have. You did everything so fast. You brought me here, and threw me in with the pack at that horrible dinner, and then the mating part—well, that part I liked, but then it... Scared me. I didn't even know you, and I felt more bound to you than to my own mama."

"I know," he says, lifting his hands in the air. "I acted rashly, which is exactly why I need a submissive around to help calm me and slow me down. I'm too alpha for my own good. But I can admit I made a huge-ass mistake. I still feel the bond, though, Luna. It might have been dissolved, but it's still here. Isn't it?"

He studies me, his eyes filled with pleading and hope that makes my resolve soften.

I cross my arms over my chest and look past him so I won't give in, even though he's not using even a trace of his dominant wolf energy on me.

"Look, Luna, I get it," he says, reaching over and gently laying his hand over mine. "We can never be True Mates again, and that's something I have to live with, because it's the biggest mistake of my life and it always will be. But maybe, if you'd give me another chance, I could make it up to you. I could still be your mate."

I eye him warily. "How?"

"By being your mate," he says. "We can rule the pack together, side by

side, how it always should have been. We can get married and have pups. I'll protect you with my life, Luna. I'll never let anything hurt you again. And we'll be bonded, not just the pack bond, but a special mate bond. We'll be able to hear each other's thoughts. I can always see if you're in danger."

If I'd never met the triplets, the idea might appeal to me. But now thoughts of them flow through my body like blood.

"What about Ama?" I ask.

"Ama's too dominant to be a match for me," he says without hesitation. "We bring out the worst in each other, not the best. You, though... You bring out the best."

"So after everything, you still want me," I marvel. "You want me to stay and be your mate, ruling the pack side by side."

His Adam's apple bobs up and down as he stares at my lips with a yearning expression. "More than anything."

I stare at his lips as he leans forward, so close I feel his warm breath on my lips. My heart flutters in my chest, and something hot flutters between my thighs, and my wolf whines with longing. When his lips connect with mine, more confusion swamps my brain. He doesn't taste or feel anything like the other two men I've kissed. His chin is smooth instead of scratchy with a beard, but his lips are warm and tender as they connect with mine. He scoots in, moving his head in a slow, sensuous circle, his hand cradling my head. My body floods with heat and desire.

Cars roll by on the street outside the window, making the wet thwack, thwack, thwack noise that all cars make around here. A motorcycle roars past, and I'm suddenly filled with longing for the triplets and their motorcycles. A tear escapes from my eye as I think of Callan, Warrick, and Ethan. I pull away from Axel and regard his hooded gaze.

His lips are shiny, his breath coming as quick as mine.

"Was that a yes?" he asks, hope shining in his eyes.

My wolf urges me to say yes, but my human isn't on board. No matter how good he makes my body feel, my heart belongs to three others. I swallow and shake my head. "No, Axel. I'm not your mate anymore, and I never will be."

Chapter Four

Axel

Luna's denial crushes my lungs so hard I can't take a breath. After she answers, she scurries away from the table and races upstairs, as if she can't bear to see my face. I pace the floor, prowling through the house that should be ours to fill with children and nice things, but instead is a lonely, dusty bachelor pad without Luna.

At last, I climb the stairs to the second floor and knock on the door of the room I prepared for her. I'm met with stony silence. At least I know she's still in there because even a wolf can't jump from the second-floor window without being injured in the fall. I can hear her on the other side of the door, anyway, can smell her and sense her presence just out of reach. Her wolf calls to mine, and my wolf roars for me to tear down the door and go to her, claim her fully this time. I fucked her during our mate bonding, but I never came, and my wolf is tormented with the memory that our claiming was never completed. He wants Luna, wants to claim every part of her to the depths of our wolf spirits.

Today, it took every ounce of willpower I possess to let her come on my cock without fucking her into the ground the way I wanted. But I had to gain her compliance, and pleasure is the only offer she's responded to so far. I had to show her that I can control her pleasure without forcing her submission. I want it given willingly.

Fuck, what I wouldn't give to ravish her sweet little body, though, now so much more womanly and appealing than when we found her in the swamp, half-starved and on her own.

When she refuses to open the door, I plod back downstairs. I've got to do something to get out of my head and end the torment she's filled me with. I

grab my phone and tap in Ama's number.

"Yes, boss?" she says on the third ring.

"I need you to watch my house and keep an eye on Luna," I say. The pack is about to rebel over my reckless decision to get her back, and I'm not about to lose her already. I have to convince her that this is where she belongs and convince them that she's worth what I gave up.

"Do I have permission to kill her if needed?" Ama asks with a sassy tone to her voice.

"No, you don't have permission to fucking kill her. You're not to harm a hair on her head."

"You're the boss," she says, then hangs up.

A few minutes later, Ama strolls in, not bothering to knock. She flashes me a simpering gaze, then sidles up next to me. "What's wrong, Alpha? Trouble in paradise?"

"Nothing I can't handle," I snap, not wanting to involve her in my personal life. She's already wormed her way into it more than I like. Appeasing my Second helps keep her happy, which helps keep the pack running smoothly, but Ama pushes my boundaries every chance she gets.

"You shouldn't have brought her back," she says. "But you know that, don't you?"

"It's already been done."

"Let me stand by your side," she says. "If you gave it a shot, you'd see how good we can be together. How well we can rule. Luna's nothing but a whelp. She'll never understand pack politics." Her palm lands on my bicep, and she scratches her nails gently against my skin, giving me an inviting look. I know she's down to fuck, that she's hoping I'll give in when I get too frustrated, the way I have before. She doesn't seem to understand that's all it will ever be.

"You're not to talk about my mate disparagingly," I say, brushing her hand from my arm. I slide past her and grab my keys from the hook next to the door. "Stay here until I get back. Do not leave under any circumstances. If Luna needs something, get it for her. She's allowed anything she wants, but don't let her leave. If she tries, contact me through our pack bond. I'll be back soon."

Ama glowers at me, but I don't care. She, Luna, and everyone I know will be better off if I run this out of my system.

I drive like the Devil's on my tail, heading to Creebay Preserve. Once

there, I park, shift into my wolfskin, and head into the swamp. Anything but centered, I only chase instead of catching this evening. I already ate, so I don't need to catch anything. I just need to hunt, to run and feel the wind in my fur, my powerful body racing through the preserve. When I'm utterly and thoroughly exhausted, I head back to the truck, shift to my human form, and drive back home.

On the drive back, I can't stop thinking of Luna. She's taken up space in every cell in my body. I can still taste the sweet nectar of her cum when I knelt over her today, and she lay there unashamed, with her legs spread while I took in the sight of her glorious, well-pleased body lying limp before me. With every breath I inhale, I breathe her into me. Every exhale, I try to let her go. The constant, maddening push and pull is driving me mad.

I'm furious I gave away so much land to get her back, and now it's all for nothing. Her rejection lances my heart like a blunt arrow-tip, shredding my muscles and organs as it burrows its way through my chest. What do I have left? We have only a bit more than half the land we had yesterday, and I have nothing to show for it. I gave away pack territory without consulting the pack, and I got nothing in return for the sacrifice. This impulsive, selfish decision will carry severe consequences.

When I arrive back at the house, I'm almost as twisted up again as I was when I left.

Ama is sprawled across my sofa, staring at the television with a bored expression on her face. "Hey, Axel," she says, picking up the remote and shutting the TV off.

"Any sign of Luna?" I say, hanging my keys on the hook.

"I heard the toilet flush about an hour ago, and then she must have gone to bed, because I haven't heard a peep out of her since." She swings her legs from the coffee table and rises to her feet. "Am I dismissed now?"

"Yes. Thank you for caring for Luna."

"I don't give a fuck about her," she says, fishing her keys from the pocket of her shorts. "I only did it for you."

"Thanks again," I say.

"Anything for you," Ama coos, stepping in to wrap her arms around me. I start to detach myself, but I've been such an asshole since I lost Luna that I should probably start making amends. So, I submit to her embrace—until she starts grinding her body against mine like she's trying to see if she can get me hard.

I untangle myself from her and step back, putting a healthy amount of distance between us.

“I’m with Luna,” I remind her.

With a huff, she whirls around and storms out.

I don’t have time for her ridiculous infatuation, so I lock the door and head upstairs to shower. I’m in the middle of rinsing off when the lights blink out. From the darkness outside the small window, I know it’s another blackout, something that happens on the regular in these parts. Probably another powerline swallowed into a sinkhole.

With a sigh, I finish rinsing off in the dark and climb out of the shower. We’ll be left to wait in the dark until the city decides to restore the grid. I towel off and then remember what Ama said—that she hadn’t heard a noise from Luna in hours.

My chest does a funny little squeeze, and I almost lose my breath at the thought that maybe she tried to escape out the window after all. Tucking my towel around my hips, I sneak down the hall and press my ear to her door. When they say “lovesick,” they’ve got it right, because this is an illness I can’t seem to shake.

I can’t hear anything but deep breathing, so she must be asleep. But I have to know for sure, have to see with my own eyes that she’s here, in our home. Slowly, I turn the door handle to her room. It doesn’t make a sound as it unlatches. I open the door and wait for a shoe to be thrown at me or maybe one of the kitchen knives. When she doesn’t hurl anything my way, I step into the bedroom I set up just for her, knowing she’d want her own space.

“Luna,” I whisper in the darkness, turning over the beautiful word in my mouth, my fingers curling against the urge to touch her soft skin, to make sure she’s real.

I’ve seen she’s here, and I know I should leave, but I can’t seem to go. I have to be near her.

She doesn’t move, just lies there with the sheet over her rising and falling with each breath. I step closer, standing over her and watching her breathe. Her plump lips are parted, her lashes curling against her cheek, a picture of sweet innocence. I pull the sheet up, covering her shoulder. She sighs and gives a sexy little moan, rolling onto her back. The sheet slides from her body, leaving her gloriously naked, the outlines of her curves visible in the faint moonlight streaming in the window.

I swallow hard, trying not to gape at her body, at the way her legs are

slightly spread, her shaved pussy bare and scented like the sweetest nectar. My mouth waters, and my cock throbs. I made her come twice today, but I want to taste her now, to lick her until I've had my fill of her and she's come on my face. I remember how much she liked that the first time we were together.

She was thinner then, with more hair. Why the fuck is her pussy shaved now? Is she fucking the filthy outlaws she's been living with? That has to be it. How else would she even know to do that? I've heard the rumors in town, how they fight the men at the rough bars on that side of town and fuck their way through all the women they can get their dicks in. Rage pulses in my temples. They have no right to touch the likes of my sweet Luna.

Before I can think about it, I step forward and lower myself between her open legs. I just want to see her better. As softly as I can, I press my palms to the tops of her inner thighs and spread her open. My cock throbs, and my wolf growls for more. I can smell her sweet cunt, how wet it smells, like it flows with the nectar of the gods. Closing my eyes, I lean down and take a long, deep breath, inhaling her fragrance that makes my wolf go mad inside me. He still thinks she's our True Mate.

I wrestle for control as he roars to get free, to have at her. Leaning down, I promise him just a taste. I let the very tip of my tongue touch her. The taste of her invades me, takes me over. Unable to stop myself, I sweep my tongue along her inner folds and circle her clit. Excitement flares in my belly and cock like I'm on a good hunt, but the reward is a thousand times better than the first bite of fresh blood.

I let my tongue linger at her clit, pressing lightly until I feel it throb in response. She lets out a moan and murmurs sleepily. She's mine, and when she's not fighting it tooth and claw, she wants me to claim her. My wolf feels hers calling to him, to us, wanting us as much as we want her.

She shifts her hips, angling her pelvis toward my mouth. That's all the invitation I need. I slide my tongue as deep as it will go inside her. She moans, and I feast on her sweet pussy, licking her with more insistence, sucking and thrusting my tongue into her snug little hole.

She grips the sheets suddenly, jerking beneath my mouth. "What are you doing?" she hisses.

"I'm making you feel good," I say, my voice a moan of torment. "Don't you like it?"

A beat of silence meets my ears, and I hesitate before continuing.

“Yes,” she finally whispers, her head falling back on the pillow.

It’s the best word I’ve heard all day—hell, it’s the best word I’ve heard since she ran from my house the first time. I dive back in, determined to give her pleasure until she can’t bear it. I thrust my tongue deep inside her, fucking her tight cunt until she moans and buries her hand in my hair, pulling me in and opening her legs wide to let me go deeper. I want to slam my cock into her, fuck her until she screams for more. But this isn’t about me.

When her slick coats my tongue and she comes, I can hardly contain myself. She cries out in wordless pleasure, bucking under me. At last, she sinks back to the bed. But I’m just getting started.

I begin again, drawing back and moving to her clit, swirling my tongue around it to build her back up as she pants and whimpers, helpless against the pleasure I can give. I suck and nibble her lovely pearl while sliding a finger into her juicy entrance. After a minute, she starts to buck against me, and I add another finger, feeling the snug but delicious stretch of her cunt. I work a third one in, and she gasps and cries out, her hips writhing as I ease the third finger deeper, until it’s gripped with the others inside her hot, slick entrance.

The sight makes me lightheaded, and I let my other hand roam her body, caressing her silky skin, fondling her breasts, then pinching her nipple between my thumb and finger. She lets out a mewling cry, and I begin to thrust my fingers deep inside her dripping pussy as hard as I can. Then I lean down, licking her slippery clit before latching on and suckling at it. She shrieks as she comes hard, thrashing under me like a wild animal as her walls clench around my fingers and her clit throbs against my tongue over and over.

She falls back with a long moan afterwards. Her body shudders, and her grip on my fingers loosens. I slide my hand from between her legs and lick her cum from my fingers like I did before, licking my lips and savoring the taste and smell of her on my face. The connection of our wolves thrums between us, as if they were never separated, as if they can’t be. I crawl up the bed and lay beside her, wrapping my arms around her. She’s still breathing hard, and her skin is misted with a sheen of sweat.

“You liked that, didn’t you?” I ask, knowing full well that she did. But I want her to admit it aloud, so she has to hear it for herself.

“Yes,” she breathes.

I stroke her silken breasts, fingering her nipples into tight buds and relishing the way she sucks in a breath.

“I’ll make you feel this good every day,” I promise. “I’ll do anything for you, Luna, without asking for anything in return. I just want you to be mine, to give you all the pleasure you deserve. It won’t even be a sacrifice to forgo my own orgasm. Pleasuring you is all I need. Having you here is all I need.”

I wait for her to answer, to say anything, hating that I need her to agree so fucking badly. But I don’t push. As I remain by her side, waiting for her to answer, I continue to massage and caress her breasts, belly, waist, and hips. My cock is so hard I could explode, but I won’t ask for anything from her. I will only give until she wants to give back.

Finally, she rolls to her side and faces me. “You’ve said that a couple of times—that you’ll do anything for me.”

Soft light glimmers in her eyes as she regards me.

“I did. And I meant every word. What do you want, my love?” I reach for her hand and press her knuckles against my lips.

“Anything at all?” she says.

“Anything.”

“What if you don’t like it?”

“I don’t have to like it. I only care that you’re happy and at my side.”

“If you want me to be happy...”

“I do,” I say firmly. “What do you need, Luna love?” I scoot closer and kiss her neck, her collarbone, and the top of her breasts.

“I want to go home,” she says. “Back to the triplets.”

Chapter Five

Luna

“No,” Axel says flatly, rolling away from me, onto his back. I can feel his wolf raging inside him, though, and mine cowers. Somehow, by some wolf bond, she can feel how irate he is at my request. Axel the man may be keeping himself under control, but his wolf is wild with fury, and I can only imagine how hard it must be for him to control it right now. He’s so strong, stronger than anyone I’ve ever met, to contain that level of wolf fury. The mattress vibrates from the energy pouring out of him, but he doesn’t move a muscle to tear me apart like his wolf wants to.

Still, I feel like I’m going to be shoved through the wall from the force of his wolf’s anger.

I shrink away from him, covering my face with my hands. “Okay,” I say meekly, pulling my knees up to my chest to protect myself from his wolf’s outrage, in case it gets loose.

“Shit,” he groans. “You can feel that, can’t you? My wolf?” He turns to me, and I can feel him watching in the near darkness, though my hands are still over my face. “I can feel yours. That I’ve scared you.”

I nod mutely.

“Fuck,” he mutters. “Luna, I’d never hurt you. Neither would my wolf. I promise.”

He strokes my hair with his palm before trying to pry my hands from my face.

“Luna,” he says, his voice coaxing me to come out. “I was surprised at your request, that’s all. After today... I thought you’d reconsider. You asked to mate. That means something.”

“It does?” I ask from the shield of my hands.

He lets out a breath of laughter. “Yes, Luna. It does. To me, at least, it does.”

“What does it mean?” I ask into my palms.”

“It means... I want to be your mate. That I thought you wanted to be mine again when you said you’d let me fuck you.”

“Oh,” I whisper, remembering what the triplets said about choosing and jealousy. I didn’t choose Axel. I just like the way he makes me feel so good I think I’ll die, and the way my wolf feels cozy and warm when he’s near.

“Please take your hands away from your face,” he says gently. “I’m sorry I scared you. And I’m sorry I can’t give you what you want. Anything else in the world, yes. But not that.”

I shake my head. “That’s all I want.”

Axel sighs and rolls onto his back next to me. “I’m sorry.”

I peek through my fingers at his expression. Even though it’s nightfall, the moon outside the house lends enough light to witness his misery.

A chasm of silence swallows the two of us in its embrace.

“Let’s go hunting,” he says at last.

“Maybe,” I say through my fingers, my heart speeding with excitement at the thought. The triplets told me not to leave the area around their house when they weren’t home, and aside from checking Callan’s traps a few times before that, I haven’t been out and let my wolf really run since before leaving the swamps. The thought of a hunt has my wolf yipping for joy inside me.

“Not the whole pack,” Axel says, sounding more excited, too. “Just the two of us.”

“Really?” I ask, cautiously lowering my hands.

“We usually hunt as a pack, since it’s a bonding experience that unifies us. But it’ll be good for us, and I need to work off some of this frustration.”

“Frustration that I want to leave?” I ask.

“Sure,” he says with a little smirk.

I feel like I’m missing something, but I don’t know what else he could be frustrated about.

I let my legs unfold from my torso. “Okay. I’d like that.”

“That’s my girl,” he says, clearly pleased. “We’ll go at dawn. That’s the best time.”

My wolf preens at his praise, even when I try to quell her excitement. I allow her the comfort of his arms, though, and let him pull me in and hold me while we fall asleep. I dream of Callan, Warrick, and Ethan. In my dream,

I'm wading through water to get to them but as soon as I get close, a storm pushes them away.

When I wake, Axel is gone, and I'm groggy despite sleeping all day yesterday. A hunt will do me some good. I pad downstairs, excited by the prospect.

After coffee, toast, and eggs prepared by Axel, we drive off to the preserve. The skies are dark, and the clouds hang bloated with their liquid offspring. It reminds me of my dream last night, and I wonder how the triplets are preparing for the storm.

As the truck speeds out of the neighborhood, I turn to Axel. "Can I ask you a question?"

He glances at me, then nods and returns his gaze to the road.

"Why isn't Ama your mate? Ethan told me more about True Mates, so I know you can't choose that. But since we're no longer True Mates without the bond, you can choose anyone as a regular mate. Why choose me, after you went to all that trouble and pain to get rid of me? Ama is here already, she knows the pack, and she wants to be your mate something fierce."

"I told you. Ama's too dominant to be my mate," Axel says. "She doesn't temper my impulsiveness. We work well together, but we're not suitable mates."

I think of them leading together, the way he said he and I would if I was his mate, and my chest gets all tight and funny. I wish I could go back to my men, where I didn't have to think about anything else and didn't have to know about leading a pack.

Thinking about them makes the ache in my chest even deeper. Not wanting to bring brooding energy to the hunt today, I try to shake these thoughts out of my system. Hunting is fun and exciting, a way to catch food, and a way to let our wolves take charge for a while. It's rejuvenating and as essential as being in our human form sometimes.

"Let's hunt Key deer," Axel says, seeming to sense my mood. "You ever caught one of those?"

"I don't know," I admit. "I got a few deer before, but I don't know the names of them."

"They're smaller than a regular deer," Axel says. "They used to only live in the Keys, but the hurricanes and storms flooded the islands, and they swam north to the mainland. The ones that survived and made it to land spread out and migrated throughout the southeast. We'll have to coordinate our hunting

efforts because they're smart."

"Good thing we're smart, too," I say, offering him a little smile.

"They aren't usually taken down without a good chase, but that's exactly what we want—a good chase, right?" Axel grins, and my wolf does that swelling-up thing in my chest, like it would when I did something that made Mama real proud of me.

"Yeah," I say, turning to the window to hide my giddiness. "I haven't hunted for weeks."

The truck bumps and jostles over a section of road marred by potholes. I stare out the window at all the dilapidated buildings sinking into oneness with the earth. Living with Mama in Bogbeast Waters, I never encountered city buildings. I only first saw one when Ama dragged me to Jacksonville to mate with Axel. Sure, sometimes we'd find the remnants of a house, but more often than not, we just found stuff washed up in the bog. When we ventured far enough to happen on an old homestead, Mama would say it was time to turn around and head home. She said old houses have bad juju. But I'd go back on my own sometimes and get things we could use. They never brought any kind of juju.

"Weeks, huh?" Axel says, reaching for my hand and squeezing it. "That's too long for a wolf."

I let my hand go limp as a dead swamp rat in his, and Axel sighs and pulls back.

"Tell me how you'd hunt with your mama," Axel says.

That brightens me up, and I sit up straight in my seat. "The deer we hunted traveled in small herds. They'd try to outrun us, but that was when we'd keep 'em running, so we could find out who's the weakest or the oldest. That's the one we'd separate from the others. If it happened to be a male, then watch out, Mama! Their antlers could gore us real bad or gut us on the spot."

I bounce in the seat, starting to get caught up in the thrill of the hunt.

"That's right," Axel says, with a broad grin. "That's exactly what we'll do today. Once we've found our mark, we have to flank the deer on either side. If we both stay on the same side, it'll get away from us. We'll surround it and keep pace. When it starts to wear itself out, you go for a hind leg. When the deer stumbles, I'll go for the throat. That's my role on the hunt."

Axel pulls off on some gravel on the side of the road, and we toss our clothes into the truck and shift into our wolfskins. I'm practically dancing

with excitement. Axel jumps on me, startling me, and we roll over and over in the grass together. I finally break free and skip away, shaking off to get the dirt and grass out of my fur. Axel's tongue lolls out happily, and he pounces at me again.

This time, I hop out of the way, then grab him with my front legs. We tip over, rolling in the grass and playing for a few more minutes, nipping and yipping and pouncing on each other. Even though he's twice my size and he's the Alpha, Axel even lets me pin him on the ground a couple times. When I was a pup, Mama used to play wolf games with me, but as I grew older, she got more and more into her own mind and snapped at me if I tried to engage her in play, so I stopped trying.

I forgot how much I liked it—needed it. It feels like I've been starving for years and finally fed my wolf soul. By the time Axel gets up and lopes into the woods, my wolf is so happy I think she'll turn into pure sunlight.

Axel's nose keeps skimming the earth as we trot through the woods. I don't know what he's sniffing for, but I sniff, too. I take in all the scents of those who have traversed this land—rabbits and rats, snakes and lizards, even a big old gator. I come across a wolf scent, and my heart soars. I linger at the spot, trying to figure out who it belongs to. Is it one of the triplets, or do all wolves share this smell?

Axel doubles around and checks out what I'm doing. He politely sniffs, too, then turns away and bumps me with his shoulder, indicating I should follow. Some faint stirring tickles my brain as if he's trying to communicate with me, wolf to wolf, but I can't hear more than his emotions, since I'm not bonded into the pack to hear his thoughts. Maybe he's saying, "This is wolf territory—get used to it."

Since I can't really pick up his communication, I leave my investigation and trot behind him. Deeper in the marsh, Axel pauses, lifts his head, and scents something. I follow his lead and catch a familiar animal smell—the deer. My adrenaline kicks in, and I fight the urge to lift my muzzle and howl. It's just us, so there's no use in calling, though, just like when it was me and Mama.

Axel trots ahead and pauses, looking back over his shoulder at me and then ahead through some shrubbery at a clearing. I spot a herd of little deer, and a wave of excitement ripples through me. I know Axel feels it, too. He gets low in a semi-crouch, then bursts into the clearing.

The deer scatter, and the chase is on!

I keep an eye on Axel's movements, but my wolf instinct tells me all I need to know. We run beside and behind the frightened deer as they seek safety in the forest. A couple of deer stumble and fall back, but then they catch up with the others.

Axel cuts one of the stumblers away from the herd. It starts to panic and bleat, making wild, panicked sounds of alarm.

A buck doubles back and sets to attack Axel, antlers down. It makes a couple of quick snorts, followed by a hoof stomp. Axel charges and retreats, charges and retreats, careful to duck out of the way of the buck's sharp, spearing antlers.

I try to corral the young deer Axel set as our target by lunging back and forth, my exhilaration building. But the deer makes a bolt for it and scrambles away to join the safety of the herd.

Disappointed in myself, I head towards Axel.

He's still warring with the buck.

I guess we're going to feast on a male deer. I creep up behind the buck, who still has its eye on Axel.

The buck whirls on me at the last second, but I jet out of the way.

Axel nips at its hind leg, and it pivots to attack him instead.

I leap for its haunches, my teeth connecting, only to be nailed in the neck by its other rear leg. I yelp and scramble out of the way. Blood streams from the deer's hindquarters as it spins to charge me. The smell is intoxicating and sends me even higher into attack mode.

Axel darts in to take another chunk from the deer's rear. He's quicker than I am when the buck strikes out, narrowly missing his head. But now the buck has two injuries, and it's limping, clearly in pain. It circles around to Axel, and I charge toward it and seize the back thigh. The buck falters, and its rear legs give way.

Axel goes for the kill, tearing into the neck of our prey as it huffs its last breath. His teeth land solid, and he shakes and rips the deer's throat out. Then he tears apart its belly with his powerful jaws. I crawl toward the fallen deer, but some instinct tells me to wait for my Alpha to feast before I begin. I sit on my haunches, my tongue lolling out as I pant with eagerness, a high whine escaping unbidden. It smells so good I'm drooling.

Axel rips out the liver and chomps it down. Then, he rips and tears at the diaphragm, making room for his muzzle. Once he has access to the chest cavity, he shoves his nose inside and goes for the heart. He pulls it free of the

chest and steps over, gently setting it on the ground at my feet. I know it's the best part, a precious prize that he's honoring me with. I feel like the highest of all beings as I lean in and rub my face along Axel's crimson one, licking the blood from his fur. It's salty and delicious on my tongue, and I clean him for another minute before stepping back to consume the prize he's given me.

I can feel the pride rolling off Axel, that he thinks we did good, that we make a good hunting team. I can't deny it, and I feel myself preening under his attention. I know the gift of the heart is more than a reward for being a good hunter, though. It's a precious sacrifice he's making, showing me that I deserve the best, even better than what he had. That he'll put me first.

When I'm done, Axel nudges me, and together we turn back to the small animal. I tear the fur away from the hind leg's muscles and eat the delicious meat. It's a lesser prize than the liver or heart, but I'm in feast mode, and my wolf is the happiest she's been in a long, long time.

We feast as other carnivores—crows, a small fox, a buzzard or two—circle around, waiting for the leftovers. A couple of times, Axel has to chase away the bold ones who try to pick at the meat before we're finished. I stand over the kill, admiring his power and finesse, my wolf swelling with pride and adoration as he skillfully defends what is ours.

When we're both gluttoned and happy, Axel trots away, looks over his shoulder at me, and gestures for me to follow him. We head through the woods for a few minutes before emerging at a spring, steam rising from the warm water. We both leap into the pool, splash about and lap the warm, mineral-infused water.

Axel approaches me and begins to lick my neck—the place where the buck kicked me. It feels so soothing to be nurtured by someone. I've been the caregiver to Mama since I came of age six years ago, and being cared for is like a sweet memory of childhood. I fall into a lull, eyes half-closed, as Axel licks and cleans my wounds.

Something makes my fur stand on end, though, and I turn and sniff the air, scanning the trees at the same time. I can smell another wolf. Someone is watching us, I just know it. A flicker of movement catches my attention in the trees, and I whip my head back around, my ears pricked. Suddenly, Mama's words come back to me.

Wolves are the enemy. They'll betray you. Never trust a wolf.

Is someone watching us? And who? Did Axel ask Ama to come along in case I attacked him and tried to escape, like he did last night when he left?

And if it's not her, then who is it? Could it be Mama's ghost keeping an eye on me, watching over me, reminding me not to give in no matter how good it feels to have Axel's tongue cleaning my wound?

The thought of Mama coming back to warn me sends shivers through my soul. Add the fear of being watched to the mantra she instilled in me—never trust the wolves—and I know I need to get away. I scramble from the hot spring and bolt into the woods in a panic, trying to shake off the spell of contentment of being with Axel, so I can remember that he's not safe. He hurt me and my wolf, no matter how good he makes us feel now. I need to get away before I forget that he's the enemy.

Chapter Six

Luna

I know better than to think I can escape a more muscular, older wolf, but I still run. I'm acting on wolf instinct, not human logic. I dodge shrubs, leap over stones, splash through a marshy area. I can feel eyes on me, can smell a wolf, but when I look over my shoulder, I see nothing but the shadowy forest. Did Axel let me go, or did I somehow manage to escape?

A sense of giddiness crashes against the fear rippling through my body at the thought of him chasing me again, like he did outside the vampire's lair.

Then guilt tugs at my heart, because as much as my body and my wolf adore Axel, my heart still belongs to the three men who saved me when Axel didn't—who saved me from what he did to me.

I'll find my way back. I can do it.

I glance over my shoulder again, and finding no one in pursuit, I slow my frenetic pace. But when my head swings forward again, my heart leaps into my throat. Axel bears down on me, his teeth pulled back in a snarl.

The bastard got ahead of me!

Before I can even swerve out of the way, he tackles me. We tumble over and over until coming to a stop in a patch of pine needles. I'm soaked from the spring, breathing hard and turned around from rolling head over tail so many times, but have enough wits about me to feel Axel's jaw clamped around my neck.

I close my eyes, waiting for him to rip my throat out or use his Alpha dominance to make me behave, the way Warrick would. Instead, I feel his body shift on mine, and his human hand begins to stroke my neck and head, rubbing around my ears, soothing me. "Luna love," he croons. "You've got to learn to trust me. I won't hurt you, but I'm not letting you get away again.

You are mine, Luna. You can run to the ends of the earth, and I'll find you and claim you as many times as you need me to until you understand that."

His words make my wolf side thrill with joy, but they settle uneasily in my belly, where my human side balks in protest. I snap at his hand.

He yanks it away and leaps to his feet. "Go on then." He points toward the trees. "Run, my little mate. I'm happy to chase you a thousand times because I know I'll catch you and carry you home to warm my bed at the end of the day."

I lie there panting, considering my options. I will never outrun the Alpha who is so insistent on claiming me and making up for rejecting me to begin with. But if he's enlisted the help of his Second to watch us, that means he thinks I'm a threat. That I could hurt him enough to escape, if not kill him. I don't hate him the way I did at first, not enough to want him dead, but I do want the freedom to make my own choices. And if that means fighting my way out, I'm not afraid of getting my paws dirty.

I scramble to my feet and lunge for Axel, teeth bared, but he's too quick for me. He darts aside, and in the few seconds it takes for me to turn around and leap back to where he is, he's shifted back into his fur.

He goes for my throat again. When I'm pinned once more, he holds my throat in his powerful jaws, his fangs squeezing but not breaking the skin. A low growl rumbles in his throat.

We remain like this for several long minutes until I shift back to human. He shifts, too, and suddenly we're both naked against one another, glaring at each other like we could bite the other's head off like a catfish headed for the supper table.

"Get off me," I snarl, pushing against his rigid body.

"Are you going to run again?"

"Maybe," I say, refusing to look away.

He positions his forearm against my collarbones. "Then I'm not going anywhere."

"Get off. You're too heavy." I curl my fingers around the muscles of his arm, and he eases up, but he doesn't release me.

"Want to play chase again?" he asks, a smile curling his lips that makes me want to rip his face off.

"This isn't funny," I snap, seething with fury. "You had your chance to claim me, Axel. I could have been yours. But now I'm not, and that was your choice, not mine."

“How many times are you going to remind me?” he says, sorrow washing over his face.

“As many as it takes.” I jerk my head up and bite his shoulder.

His jaw clenches, but he says nothing. “Admit it. We were having fun before you got spooked. What happened?”

I shake my head, unwilling to share.

He huffs out a sigh. “Have it your way. I’ll wear you down until you trust me one of these days.”

“You threw me away,” I snarl.

“We’ve already established that. And now I’m trying to correct my mistake,” Axel says, nuzzling my cheek with his nose.

“It’s too late,” I snap. “I found other men who wanted me, even when I didn’t know how to use a fork. And I want them. Let me go home.”

He stills, and his eyes narrow. “That’s not your home.”

“You can’t keep me away from them,” I say, pushing against his solid muscles.

“Want to bet?” he growls.

I spit in his face, struggling under him, but he doesn’t budge, and the more I struggle, the more I can feel his cock hardening against my thigh.

“Let me go,” I cry.

“Did you let them fuck you?” His voice is low and sharp, like a ragged blade.

“What if I did?” I writhe beneath him, and the sand and pine needles scrape against my backside.

“That’s not an answer. It’s a question. Did you let those bastards fuck you?” His face has transformed into steel and edges.

I reach up with both hands and shove against him. “Why do you care?”

“I care,” he growls.

I stare up through the leaves overhead at the gray sky. It still looks like it’s going to storm, but maybe it’s biding its time just like I am, plotting my escape to find my lovers. What is the right way to get back to them? How can I get Axel to give me up? If I say yes, maybe he will think I don’t belong to him anymore.

I stare into his eyes, the color of agates. He seems to carry the weight of the ages in his gaze. My wolf shimmers inside me the way she does when her fur wants to rise at the lonesome howls we used to hear from the pack when we lived in Bogbeast Waters. Mama would always hurry us inside when they

were hunting.

Axel's body feels like a thousand tons, his cock like a steel rod against me, though he doesn't seem to notice. The sensation of it makes heat and wetness build between my legs.

Axel puts pressure on my chest and repeats, "Did. You. Fuck. Them?"

"One of them," I say, lifting my chin and glaring at him.

Axel reaches down with his free hand and strokes my mound. "Is that why you shaved your pussy?"

A smile lights my face at the memory of Ethan climbing in the tub with me. "No," I say. "I didn't shave it."

Axel's eyes flash, and I can feel his wolf's fury inside him even if his human tries to hide it. "Who shaved you?" he growls, pushing a finger inside my slick entrance.

"One of the others," I say, my breath coming quicker. I watch the way he flinches, and some mean little part of me is happy about that. I know that dissolving our bond hurt him as much as it hurt me, but the difference is, he chose it anyway. I would never have chosen to hurt him that way.

"One of them fucked you, one of them shaved you... What did the third one do?" His breath lands hot on my face and neck, and his cock pulses against my thigh as he thrusts his finger into me more roughly.

I gasp and open my thighs, pushing my pussy into his hand.

"Answer me, Luna," he growls in that same sharp-edged voice. He drives a second finger into me. "What did you let the last one do? Did you let him lick this sweet cunt like I did last night? Or are they too proud to eat pussy?"

"Nothing," I whisper, thinking of how Callan dyed my hair and pushed his cock up against me until we both nearly exploded.

"It doesn't look like nothing," Axel says. "It doesn't feel like nothing. Your cunt's dripping for them."

"He didn't do anything." My gaze whips toward Axel, and anger replaces memory of Callan. "What's it to you? They saved me after you—"

"Believe me, I know what I did," Axel growls, grinding his cock into my thigh while his fingers pump relentlessly into my slick tightness. "I get to be tortured by you every fucking day. How could I forget?"

"Tortured? How am I torturing you?" I buck my hips, panting for more. He's torturing me by not letting me find my satisfaction.

He groans and buries his fingers deep inside me. "You're hot one minute, icy-cold the next. I'm going out of my mind, Luna. I want to fuck you so hard

you forget they ever existed.”

His eyes are wild, his fingers stroking the spot inside me that makes me nearly lose my mind. Just when I think I’ll burst, he withdraws his fingers.

I fight back a cry of protest.

“Did you like fucking them?” he asks.

My eyes fly wide. “What?”

“Did you like it when those assholes fucked you?” Making tiny thrusts with his hips, he’s breathing through his mouth now, shallow and fast like me as his shaft slides against my slick folds.

“Maybe I did,” I say.

A twig cracks in the woods, and I listen hard. Axel doesn’t seem to notice—he’s too distracted with grinding against my wet pussy.

“Stop fucking around and answer the question,” he snaps.

“Fine,” I say. “Yes, I loved being fucked by him. Is that what you wanted to hear? Now, would you please get off me? I’ve got sticks and leaves poking against me, sand grinding against my skin, and you’re heavy.”

“Are you going to run? Because I will catch you, little mouse. And you might not like what happens then.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’ll reclaim you, and you won’t belong to that mutt any longer.”

He pushes up off me, standing to hold out his hand to me. I take it, stand, and start to knee him between the legs, but he’s too quick for me, as if he expected no less. He grabs my arm and whips me around, so my back is facing him and my arm is bent behind my back.

“Let me go!” I howl.

“Never,” he hisses in my ear.

I stomp on his foot.

“You wanna play this way, huh? You like it rough, is that it? Have I been too nice to you?” He marches me forward, his cock jabbing into my back with each step.

Another twig snaps in the woods, and I know someone’s watching us, though I don’t know who. A little thrill races through me, and it’s not fear. I hope it’s Ama, that she can see how much Axel wants me. I arch my back, pushing my backside against him. Axel pushes me away from him, and I start to run. I don’t get three steps before he grabs me from behind, pushing me up against a tree instead of taking me to the ground.

“I hate you,” I snarl, shoving my hips against his, aching for him to

quench the fire blazing inside me. He got me going and then left me undone.

He crouches slightly and then slams upwards, ramming his cock inside me with one brutal thrust. I cry out in shock and pleasure and pain, and he thrusts into me again.

“If you hate me, then why are you so fucking wet every time I touch you?” he growls, pumping his thick cock into me so hard I can barely breathe through the pleasure crashing over me.

I can't even begin to form words to answer him. My breasts and face will be scraped to shit by the bark, but I don't care. I want him inside of me, need him to feed my wolf this ecstasy that he gives me every time. He grabs my hair and twists my head to the side, pushing my cheek into the rough tree bark. Then, he bites my neck. I can smell the blood, and it makes me writhe and buck with madness, but he only slams harder and harder into me. I feel a burning stretch near my entrance, but I don't know what's happening, why it feels like he's getting bigger inside me. I just know I have to keep going.

“Fuck,” he says, suddenly, pulling out.

“What?” I ask, stumbling away from the tree in a daze.

“I'm knotting,” he says. “It only happens with a True Mate.”

I look down at the swelling that bulges at the base of his cock, the one I started to feel right before he stopped. “What does that mean?” I ask.

“You'll see,” he says, pulling me back to him, a determined look in his eye. He seizes the back of my thighs, lifts me up, and impales me with his erection. I can feel a strain when I reach the knotted part at the base, and he gives a quick thrust, pushing it inside me. The stretch burns, bringing tears to my eyes, but it feels so good to have him all the way inside me that I let out a helpless groan of pleasure. Axel matches it with one of his own.

“Fuck, Luna,” he says, his voice strained. “You feel so fucking good.”

He thrusts harder, my back slamming against the tree. I think again of Ama watching, and my core throbs with heat. Axel lowers his head to my neck again and bites me viciously as he pumps into me. My own wolf tears toward the surface, and I let her claws out, raking them through his skin, inhaling the intoxicating scent of our mate's blood and sweat. I spread my legs as wide as I can, lolling my head to the side so he can savage my entire neck if he wants to. He can rip my throat out, I don't care, as long as he keeps fucking me.

His tongue slides along my throat, lapping at the blood, and I rake my claws through his flesh again, slamming my hips against his and crying out

each time he rams his cock into me. The knot has grown so big he can hardly move, stretching me until I'm panting and begging for more in the same breath I beg him to stop, it's too much. My wolf pushes closer to the surface, and I bite down on his shoulder as his cock swells further still, tearing a shriek from my throat. I wrap my legs around him and ride up and down, but I can't pull free of his swollen knot.

I throw my head back and scream as he pumps deep into my core. I'm swimming in searing pain and ecstasy. I can't tell which is more severe. And with someone watching us from the woods and Axel's teeth clamped to my skin, I erupt in an orgasm so intense it threatens to tear me to pieces. My spirit shoots off into the sky from the intensity of pleasure coursing through me. I scream again and again.

Axel throws back his head and roars, claws extending from his hands that grip my hips, holding me down while he grinds deep inside me. Hot spurts of cum shoot into me, filling the core of me as I shriek and writhe and tear at him with fang and claw, a wild thing trapped by the knot stretching me until I can't bear it as he claims me to the depths of my soul. At last, I can't take it another moment, and blackness takes me.

Chapter Seven

Luna

When my eyes flutter open, I'm lying on the ground. Axel is kneeling over me. He slips a couple fingers into me before drawing them out and rubbing the musky-smelling cream into the gashes his teeth left in my neck. My wolf growls with pleasure though it burns. He dips his fingers in me again, then rubs it into the wounds I left on his own shoulders.

"What are you doing?" I demand, sitting up and closing my knees.

"It's a mating practice," he says.

"What is that?" I ask, looking down as more of the stuff trickles out of me, running down my thighs.

"It's my seed," he says. "You can rub it into your cuts to bond with me. You can rub yours into mine, too."

"What kind of seeds?" I ask, narrowing my eyes.

"Wolf seed," he says. "When we mate during your heat, that's what will make the baby grow inside you."

"I don't want your baby inside me," I say, wiping the stuff off my thighs. I sniff my fingers, and my wolf nearly swoons with pleasure. I had extra liquid after I mated with Warrick, but I went to the bathroom, and it came out pretty fast. And it didn't smell like this, like desire itself, like a male's dominance that makes me want to throw myself on the ground and open my legs and beg for more. I narrow my eyes at Axel, waiting for his explanation.

"You're not in heat, so it won't happen," Axel says.

"Why didn't you have seeds before?" I ask.

"I never came before," he says.

"Never?" I ask.

"Not with you," he says.

We stare at each other a long minute. “What does that mean?” I ask.

“It means... I finished,” he says. “I climaxed. Like you do every time.”

“You mean the thing you said you wouldn’t do, because it was only for my pleasure?”

He purses his lips. “Yes,” he grits out at last. “Do you expect me to fuck you to orgasm every time, and then you leave me wanting?”

“You promised me you wouldn’t take your own pleasure with me,” I say, glaring at him.

“So this is my punishment?” he asks. “Fucking you until I feel you come all over my cock, your tight cunt pulsing around me, and I’m not allowed to orgasm? Fuck that, Luna. I’m going to come inside you, and I’m going to keep coming inside you until you’re stuffed full of my babies. And every time you have one, I’m going to fill you with another one until we have a hundred pups underfoot. I’m going to love every single one of them because they’re *our* babies, because they show you how much I love you and want you and want to be your mate. And we’re going to raise them to be strong, proud, brave wolves instead of teaching them to be afraid of their own shadow and everyone else.”

“Are you talking about Mama?” I ask, my eyes narrowing with fury. Before he can answer, I whirl and stomp off through the underbrush.

“Where are you going?” he says, rushing by my side.

“To the fucking truck. Our hunting game is finished, don’t you think?” As I storm through the marshland, we pass the carcass of the Key deer we caught and killed. I don’t want to remember that moment—I don’t even want to think about how fun it was to hunt by Axel’s side, working together to bring down our prey. I let out a growl of exasperation and quicken my pace.

Axel stalks beside me. His expression is as dark as the clouds overhead. We continue to power forward, silent save for the rumble of thunder that ripples through the sky. When we get to the truck, Axel lifts me onto the seat. “You want my cum out of you?” he demands.

Without waiting for an answer, he pushes me flat on the seat and dives between my legs, sucking and fucking me with his tongue until all the fight is drained from me, and in its place is the pleasure he keeps drowning me with until I forget what’s real. I can’t stop myself, though. I come hard again, whimpering and trembling as my walls clench around his long, skillful tongue.

When he’s done, we dress, and then he buckles me in and climbs in the

driver's seat. He doesn't say a word all the way home, and neither do I. Fury and frustration pours from his body in waves—he doesn't need words to convey how he's feeling. My wolf can feel it.

Rain spatters the windshield as he speeds through the soggy streets, and his wipers sluice the water back and forth. It's not a fierce storm, not yet. It's only a preview of what's to come if it blows in off the ocean. I've lived through the same storms as the civilized world, only in the untamed wilderness of Bogbeast Waters, and I know them well.

Axel parks the truck outside his house, exits the driver's side, and strides around the front bumper to open my door for me. I don't need his help. I don't want him to erase my anger again, to make me feel good when I want to keep hating him. I push past him and stalk toward his stupid little house. The whole city of Jacksonville can fall into the sea for all I care.

I intend to head straight to my bedroom and lock the door, but I halt when I see Ama lounging on Axel's couch as usual. She's watching the television like she lives here, and an angry feeling rises in me, a feeling like she shouldn't be here even if I'm not. I shouldn't care. I've been living away from Axel, connecting with three other men. But the thought of him connecting with her that way makes me want to rip out her entrails like we did the Key deer.

Ama bolts to her feet, sniffing the air and glowering like she's picturing our entrails, too. "You fucked, didn't you?"

"None of your fucking business," Axel snaps from behind me. "Get out of my house."

A pout forms on Ama's pretty face, and her chin quivers. "I knew it."

Axel only points toward the screen door we just entered. "Out."

She folds her arms over her small breasts and stands her ground. "I can smell it on the two of you. You had sex. I know what your cum smells like."

Axel grinds his teeth and glares. "What I do or don't do with Luna is none of your business, Ama. You're my Second, not my mother."

"You mean, not your *mate*," she snaps.

"That, too," he says coldly. "Now leave before I lose my temper."

Though Axel only uses words and not his dominance display—I notice he almost never uses that—Ama stomps across the room and out the front door. A smug little seed of happiness sprouts in my belly. He defended me, picked me over her. I don't want him, but I also don't want her to have him. I just don't like her, and she doesn't deserve the kind of pleasure he gives me.

When she's gone, a wave of relief like a thorn plucked from my paw passes through me.

"Get cleaned up," Axel says. "I'll make us a drink, and we can talk."

I gawk at him, blinking. He's speaking calmly like we haven't been fighting or fucking all day. "What if I don't want to?"

"Do it anyway," he says before striding into the kitchen like he doesn't have the energy for my defiance right now. I'm not sure which of us will wear the other down first.

I obey him, just like Ama did, though. As I stand beneath the warm spray of water, I wonder how he gets us to do his bidding without involving his wolf. Does he get Ama to do things by making her feel as good as me? And why does she know what his explosion smells like? Does he do that with her, too? If she makes him feel as good as he makes me when I explode, why isn't he with her?

He must know that there's something better—me. Just like I know that no matter how good he makes my body feel, I want someone else, too.

But until I can escape, I'll just have to see what exactly Axel is planning. When I'm clean, dry, and dressed, I head out to the kitchen.

Axel looks up from his seat at the table. A tray of smoked and dried meat and cheeses rests in front of him, along with two uncapped beers in frosted bottles. His hair is damp, and it hangs in soft curls at his neck. He's wearing jeans and a skin-tight t-shirt that shows off his rippling muscles. Before I can stop my thoughts, my wolf pushes forward with pride and admiration at the strong, commanding presence of our Alpha.

No, not our Alpha, I remind her. Warrick is our Alpha.

Our mate, then, she argues. But he's not our mate, either. He's our captor.

"Have a seat," Axel says. "I want to talk to you about pack law. As the Alpha and his mate, we're part of a larger family—the Jacksonville pack. And that pack is part of an even bigger family—the southeast territory. Then there's the United States, and beyond that, the werewolf race as a whole. There are packs all around the world. Each of those levels within the hierarchy has rules and structures to maintain."

I take a drink of beer, thinking of the triplets and how much simpler their life is. All these explanations are making my head spin. "Won't they be mad if they find out I'm your mate again? You said they'd never accept me since I talked to the vampires about y'all."

"Once you're my mate, we'll explain to the pack why it was worth it to

give up part of our territory. Together we'll be the most powerful leaders in the southeast, and our pack will be stronger and more respected as well. They won't question it."

"Except for Ama," I say. "She'll question everything."

A scowl flits across his face, but he continues. "That's her right as my Second," he says. "And to be fair, her job as well. If I'm not making decisions for the good of the pack, she has to call me on it. She can even challenge me as Alpha. Besides her, we have warrior wolves who protect the pack in a more physical sense. Our sentinel is Kato. He keeps his eyes and ears open and alerts me of danger to the pack."

"Like me?" I ask. "Am I a danger?"

"Are you?" Axel asks, his eyes searching me with unusual intensity.

"No," I say, setting down my beer. "I don't think so."

"The guardian wolves aren't yet warriors." Axel takes a swig of beer. Neither of us are hungry after the hunt, so the food goes untouched. "They help raise our young. Mothers are supreme majesties in the pack. We always watch out for the mothers, since they continue our species."

"What about lone wolves?" I ask, thinking about Mama. They didn't watch out for her.

"Usually, they're younger, dominant males who either challenge the Alpha and lose, in which case they're automatically cast out of the pack, or who want to start a pack of their own because they're too dominant to take command well." Axel tips back his head and swallows the last of his beer. "Or they take off from another pack for their own reasons and wind up here, wanting to join after realizing the dangers out there for a lone wolf. Watch out for lone wolves, though. They can be feral or overly aggressive if they're dominant and don't have a pack to rule."

I frown at his statement, remembering the scent of a wolf in the woods today where we hunted and later, when we mated. I wonder if that was a lone wolf. And then my thoughts drift in search of Ethan, Callan, and Warrick. They were once part of the Jacksonville pack. Now they choose to live on their own, with only each other to protect. I wonder if that's why Warrick's so grumpy—not enough wolves to lead.

God, how I miss them.

"As the Alpha's mate, you'll have a very important role, too," Axel continues. "You will help me lead and use your practical knowledge and calmer temperament to keep order in the pack. We will truly be victorious

when we're together. We can even plan an attack on the bloodsuckers to reclaim our territory. They'll regret ever fucking with us."

Axel squeezes his beer bottle so hard I think it might shatter in his hands. I can practically see the steam billowing from his ears.

"So, would I be a warrior or guardian?" I ask. "Or a mother?"

"You're a submissive wolf," he says. "That doesn't mean you're any less important than the most dominant Alpha. In fact, a pack can't exist without submissives. Too much dominant energy, and we'd all be fighting and tearing apart each other and the pack. A submissive is a peacekeeper, the glue that holds the pack together and the grease that keeps it running smoothly. The dominant's first job is to protect the submissives. My most important job is to protect you, because you'll be the highest-ranking member of the pack aside from me."

"Oh," I say slowly. "So that's why Ama doesn't like me."

Axel looks at me a long moment. "Sure," he says at last, though his tone makes it clear I'm missing something.

"And because she wants you for a mate," I say.

He picks at the corners of the label with his short fingernails. "Also, I don't know if you know this, but all pack members live in this neighborhood. It runs up to the edge of the preserve. It's part of our territory."

I notice that he didn't answer the question about Ama, but I know I'm right. After a while, Axel goes out to take care of pack business, but I see Ama on the porch swing, so I know I'm still being guarded. I watch TV until I fall asleep on the couch. When I wake, it's dark outside the windows, and Axel is lifting me into his arms.

I let him carry me upstairs, cradling me against his muscular chest, and deliver me to my bedroom. There, he straightens the wrinkled blue sheets he covered the bed with and lays me down on the soft mattress, where he proceeds to strip me bare.

I burrow my head into my pillow, ready to slip back into the land of dreams. But Axel has different ideas. He climbs on the bed with me and pulls me into his arms.

"I can't get enough of you, Luna," he murmurs into my lilac hair. "I'm a man possessed."

He begins to kiss my ear, and shivers of pleasure move through me in waves. I lie back, languid and sleepy, while he kisses down my neck. After a while, he scoots down, his fingers skimming over my skin, making

goosebumps rise. When his mouth lands on my nipple, sucking and tonguing me, my body comes alive and wetness blooms between my legs. He groans and sucks harder, his fingers teasing as they inch lower. He moves to the other nipple, leaving the first one red and erect, glistening with his saliva.

His hands move over me, stroking and caressing. Then he moves his mouth across my skin, nipping and licking my neck, kissing my mouth, and nibbling my ear lobe. Yet again, I'm on fire, thrumming with a connection that goes far deeper than I like. After a while, he works his way down my body and settles between my legs. His tongue torments me into a frenzy. He's aroused, too, as evidenced by his rigid shaft, but he does nothing to satisfy himself. This is for me, like he promised before, but I find myself wishing it wasn't, because I want that deep pounding of his cock that he gave me earlier.

When I explode around his fingers in orgasm, he hums into my pussy. It's a hum of satisfaction at making me come so quickly. He doesn't stop, though. He replaces his fingers with his tongue, pushing it inside me and working his fingers over the little bud of pleasure until I explode again. When he's finally had enough, he lays beside me, nuzzling my neck.

"Your satisfaction is my satisfaction, Luna. I'll save my orgasms until you forgive me."

He falls asleep next to me, but I can't rest easy. I swear I can hear the triplets howling for me in the back of my mind. Longing rips through my heart, tearing me to pieces. I have to go back, to be with the men I love. I'll never be happy without my three biker lovers. They're my family, no matter what Axel says.

As soon as Axel's breathing deepens and his lips softly part, I remove his hand from my belly and slide away from him. I pause, looking at this man who gives me so much pleasure and so many promises. I feel for him, but I don't belong here.

I dress, tiptoe into the hallway, and make my way downstairs. My heart swells in my chest as I step outside and breathe in the night. It's time to go home.

Chapter Eight

Ethan

I've been hunting in the swamp all evening when I catch the scent of something so potent, so mind-blowingly powerful, I practically trip over my own feet. I smell Luna, as sure as the day is long. Excitement thrums through my veins, and I take off at breakneck speed, my paws splashing through the mud and sand. We haven't seen hide nor hair of our woman since the vampires attacked and made off with her.

I bolt through the underbrush, tearing over the land, not thinking about anything but Luna. Not thinking that she's not our woman but Warrick's woman. As far as I'm concerned, she belongs to all of us, even if she's the first woman I've ever wanted that I won't get to fuck. I don't even think about what will happen if this is a trap. I'm ready to rip apart any vamps who stand in my way. I fucking dare them to try to stop me from getting Luna back.

At last, I come upon a collapsed structure on a tiny hillock of land in the bog. There's no sign of our pup. It smells of mold and decay, but even that can't erase the sweet scent of our Luna. Certain she must be around here somewhere, I race to the north, the east, the south, and the west but find nothing. Crushed, I drag my ass back to sit before her destroyed dwelling.

Damned if I don't miss her like a motherfucker. I've barely slept since she's been gone. Instead, I lay in the dark, tossing and turning, remembering the short time that she was in our presence and thinking about shit I should've done different.

I've never felt this way about a woman before, and it fucks with my head. In my world, women are a means to an end. And the end usually lands eight inches deep inside them. But none of that was half as satisfying as the brief

encounters with the little purple-haired she-wolf who came into our lives and turned us all upside down. And no other woman ever kept me up at night when I wasn't fucking her.

I'm about to throw back my head and howl when I catch the scent of another wolf. The smell is as familiar as it is unwelcome.

Axel paddles through the water, pulls himself up onto the little island, and shakes himself, spraying water over me. I let out a sharp growl, but instead of fighting, he shifts into human.

"I'm not here to fight," he says.

I narrow my eyes and growl low in my throat. When the bastard makes no move to shift back and fight, I grudgingly shift into human form to communicate.

We have a history with the Jacksonville pack, and that history starts and ends with Axel. After our brutal upbringing, Axel took us in and the pack became our family. It beat living with an angry, drug-addicted father and a mother who was too beaten down to protect us. Life with our parents was shit, and we split at age sixteen and never looked back. Axel and the Jacksonville crew embraced us, and it pisses me off that we owe the motherfucker, even if we'd never admit it.

"Aren't you a little far from your territory?" I taunt. "Shouldn't you be babysitting the vampires who now occupy half of Creebay?"

He frowns. "How do you know that?"

I shrug. "Word gets around."

In truth, the vamps caught us hunting on Creebay land, since we like to hunt on Jacksonville pack's territory to piss off their Alpha. Turns out, that land doesn't belong to them anymore.

"It was worth it," Axel says, as smoothly as if we're shooting the shit over a card game. "To get Luna back."

A growl rises in my throat. He doesn't deserve Luna—not after wrecking their True Mate bond and her lost little wolf pup heart.

"You're the bastard who took Luna?"

"Yeah, that's me," he says. "The bastard who saved her from the silver cage the vampires had her in."

"What?" I demand, rage throbbing in my temple at the thought of Luna being burned that way. A silver burn hurts like nothing else.

"That's right," Axel says. "I gave up half our pack land for her. What did you give up? Nothing, because you have nothing to give."

My fingers clench into fists—in part because he’s right.

“I might have hurt her,” he admits. “But I realized my mistake, and I’m making amends. I’ll spend the rest of my life making it up to her. She’s worth it. I’ll do whatever it takes to keep her by my side.”

“What about what she wants?” I ask.

“She doesn’t know what she wants. She hasn’t experienced enough to make an informed choice. But we both have.” His head cocks to the side, and he fixes me with a squinty-eyed glare. “And we both know what’s best for her. I can give her everything a she-wolf needs, and you can’t. With me, she’ll have the protection of an entire pack, the social customs and companionship of similar wolves. All of her needs will be met—socially, emotionally, physically. What can you provide her?”

I want to rip his fucking head off as he speaks. My breath billows from my lungs at a rapid pace at the realization that he’s right. My brothers and I don’t need anyone else, but that doesn’t mean she doesn’t. She’s not a rough and ready biker living outside of the law. Luna is sweet and gentle, the type of woman who deserves friends and a good, full life, not the tawdry life we can give her.

I’m too pissed to even speak. Instead, I shift and race away through the swamp, my head hammering with fury. A wolf is a social animal. We need bonding, play, wolves all along the spectrum from submissive to the most dominant Alpha. In truth, we probably need that, too. But we don’t fucking have it. For a moment, it felt like we had it all with Luna. We can’t keep her from all that Axel’s offering, though. She deserves a pack.

We’re three strong as fuck dominant males. We might be able to provide her with protection, but all the other stuff—Examples of submissive males, older mothers who can help her with her pups, submissive and dominant females she can learn from... Yeah, we can’t compete with that.

My chest is so tight I can’t breathe as I tear through the marsh. I’ve got to get Luna out of my system in the only way I know how—get hammered and hammer some pussy.

It takes me nearly forty minutes to get back home, and when I do, Callan and Warrick are nowhere to be found. I take a quick shower, dress in cleanish Levis and a Henley, and head out to hop on my fully restored Harley motorcycle, circa the mid-2020s. She’s a forty-year-old beast of a ride with high-performance capabilities and the loudest, most powerful engine this city has ever seen. If she were any faster, she could parasail across the swamp.

The sky's so dark it blots out the moon and every star. It's going to be a whale of a storm whenever it hits. The wind howls as I power along the driveway, but it matches my angry mood. Once I hit the paved road, I speed along at about one-twenty. Cars and trucks move out of my way as if they can feel my rage.

Other supernaturals in the area hole up at Gideon's Bar when it floods, but my mood's a little rough for that crowd. Instead, I head to the Demon's Eye, a favorite biker bar my brothers and I frequent. I park my bike, swing my leg off the frame, and stride inside.

The bar's dark and dingy, just the way I like it. As I storm across the concrete floor, every patron lifts their head to look at me, no doubt feeling the energy I leave in my wake as I pass their tables or booths. The bartender, a swarthy panther shifter named Dagger, looks up when I stalk toward the steel and carbon bar-top at the back of the pub.

"Y'look like ya need somethin' stiff and strong," he says, grinning with a feral glint in his eyes. Like most of the panthers, he's a First Nations cat. He's got shoulder length black hair tied back with a bandana, and like most people in this bar, he's got scars and tats and missing teeth to show for the crowd he prefers.

"The stiffer, the better," I growl, planting my ass on the bar stool.

"I got jus' whatcha need. How 'bout an Irish Car Bomb? Part Guinness, part whiskey, part Irish-cream—all ready to fuck you up." The gold grill in his mouth glints in the dim light.

"Make it a double, and you've got yourself a deal." I swivel in my seat, eyeing the bar for a fuckable woman. Guilt swells inside me, like I'm cheating on Luna, which is fucking pathetic, since she didn't even choose me when she was with us. Axel is right—we're not equipped to give her a full life. All I'm equipped to do is fuck a woman good and hard, give her a few orgasms to write home about, and send her packing. I shove the thought of Luna roughly away and spy a couple of hotties watching me in return. They look like the kind of women who need nothing more than what I can give—a good, deep dicking.

Dagger slides the glass of dark chocolate-colored liquid in my direction, and I start to lift it to my mouth.

"Not s' fast," Dagger says, reaching for a shot glass filled with a creamy mocha substance. "Wait for the good stuff. Gotta to chug the whole thing before the cream curdles." He chuckles, making the scars on his face and

neck dance as he drops the entire shot glass into the Guinness.

“To better times,” I say, hefting the mug.

“Better times,” he says with a nod, planting his palms on the bar top.

I tip back my head and drain the drink, pushing away the shot glass with my tongue. Then I slam the mug back on the counter. “Hit me up with another.”

“Y’got it.” Dagger turns and gets busy with my second drink.

The first was only a warm-up...I plan on getting so wasted tonight that all thoughts of Luna are drowned.

Half a dozen Car Bombs later, my mind is starting to fuzz out when a warm hand slides across my back. My first thought is, *Luna!*

When I pivot, there’s one of the hotties from across the bar. Even three sheets to the wind, I can tell she’s not as pretty as she looked from across the room. Looks won’t get me what I crave, though—a good lay who can squeeze Luna right out of my mind.

“Help you?” I growl.

“Is that your best line?” she asks with a teasing smile.

“I don’t need a fucking line.”

“Well, then it’s your lucky day, because you can help me, in fact,” she says, swaying on her feet. “You can help me quench this fire.” She runs her palm across her body. She’s wearing a skin-tight, see-through t-shirt that shows off her black bra.

“Good, then let’s go.” I slide from the bar stool, grab her hand, and drag her toward the exit.

“No foreplay?” she teases.

“We both know we want to fuck. Let’s skip the formalities.”

She shrugs and grins at her friend. Her friend should be concerned that she’s going off with a man like me, but then, what do I know? She probably does this as much as I do. I haul the woman out the back door into the alley. It stinks of piss and garbage, but I’ve dropped my share of used condoms in the swill back here.

When we’re deep into the shadows, I push her against the bricks and savage her mouth with mine. She tastes like cigarettes and beer, but she’s willing and responsive. My dick, however, seems to have a mind of its own—it’s not rising to the opportunity.

She grinds her hips against me, and I know she can feel the disappointing show happening in my jeans. Like the whore she is, she drops to a crouch,

unzips my fly, and takes my limp dick into her mouth. This'll work—blow jobs always get me off. I can fingerfuck her to make her happy afterwards.

But, no, her mouth and her tongue aren't working, either. I can get it up, but just barely, and I'm nowhere near finishing even after fifteen minutes of her best work. I keep picturing Luna and losing my concentration. I want *her* mouth on me. I want to touch her, to taste her, to hold her. Hell, I want to be with her, near her, even if I never get to fuck her. Just sitting beside her on the porch swing at night, shooting the shit with a few beers, is better than a blowjob from a stranger.

What the fuck is happening to me?

I grab the woman's head and ease her away from me. "Sorry, babe, it ain't happening tonight."

I turn and stomp off down the alley, ghosting the woman who thought she'd scored tonight.

"Hey," she yells. "Limp dick asshole!"

I groan and throw my leg over my bike. If I can't even have a meaningless lay to satisfy my needs, I'm well and truly fucked.

Chapter Nine

Luna

I took a wrong turn at a creek in my excitement to see the triplets. Now, morning is coming, damp and chilly from the cloud cover which obscures the stars. Good thing I've got thick fur and sure feet, so I don't fall into the warm swamp water.

As I run, I imagined every reunion the men and I could have when I see them again. I pictured their surprise and delight, their crushing hugs and soft kisses, their passion, and wonder. All of the images in my head are happy ones.

So why do I feel so guilty at leaving Axel?

For one, he wasn't horrid to me—not by a long shot. Not this time. But I don't trust him, and if I don't trust him, how can we be together?

We can't.

Besides, I don't want to be his mate. I want to be with Warrick, Ethan, and Callan.

Right?

I slow my run to a loping pace. Just then, I catch the scent I caught earlier, when I was hunting with Axel. Is whoever was watching me earlier following me now? This thought sends a ripple of fear along my spine. It was exciting when I pictured Ama watching Axel fuck me, overcome with his desire for me. Having her stalk me through the woods and catch me alone? Not so exciting.

I slink into the underbrush and listen intently with my nose tipped up to scent the air, a knot of dread and fear pulling tight in my belly. Now that I have time to really take in the scent, I'm less sure that it's Ama. It smells like... Something familiar. Maybe it's a male's smell. I fought Ama once,

and though I don't remember her scent, I don't think this was it. When I don't hear anything, I venture back out into the clearing, intending to make haste toward the triplets' place.

Suddenly, an enormous wolf attacks me, knocking me to the ground. I've never seen a wolf this big—and I've seen the triplets in wolf form. Axel's words about "watch out for a lone wolf" swim through my mind as the wolf sinks its teeth into me.

I scream piteously, sure this guy will tear me to shreds. I have no chance against a wolf this big. But I have no choice but to fight, so I yelp and wriggle, finally raking my back paw down his belly, where the fur can't protect him. He roars, and I shoot out from under him and run for my life. My mind is whited out with fear, making it impossible to take a full breath or think of a better strategy than to flee. The swamp's ahead, and I race for it, leaping into the water and swimming like mad.

I scramble up the bank to the other side of the water, grateful an alligator didn't have me in his sights, since I'm bleeding bad from where the wolf bit me. Then I race for home. Out of nowhere, the lone wolf rockets from my left and attacks. His knife-like teeth catch purchase on my neck, and he shakes.

I cry out and struggle, howling like a banshee. I kick and claw, trying to break his hold on me, but he's too damn strong. My short life flashes before me, and I know this is the end.

He continues to shred my neck, growling and tightening his jaws.

My consciousness starts to fade. I know I'm losing blood, too much to survive. I'll be dead before I had a chance to really live, outside of the lonely swamp existence with Mama, which was really just surviving. Before I had a chance to really love, to tell the triplets I love them all, and to tell Axel... I don't know what.

Just before my lights go out, I call silently for Warrick, Ethan, Callan, even Axel, begging for them to save me. Then I realize that's all wrong, that I need to tell them how I feel. That they made a difference in my life. That I love the wild motorcycle men who were banished like me, and I wish my rejected mate the best in leading the Jacksonville pack.

Without telling them anything, though, I succumb to death's cold embrace.

Chapter Ten

Warrick

I sit on the porch swing and light up the first cigarette of the day. I'm up before the light because Ethan came stumbling in drunk just before dawn, crashing around like the inconsiderate asshole he is and waking the rest of us. I'm surprised he didn't bring home a woman, but he hasn't done that since Luna came to stay with us.

She's gone now, though. He could bring home a woman. I wouldn't stop him. We need to let her go, all of us. I want my brothers to be happy, and I want Luna to be happy, and this is the best way. I haven't told my brothers, but I know where she is. I crept through the Creebay preserve, watching for signs of her every night since the vamps took her. Surely I'd catch her scent if they let her out.

But I didn't find her around the vampires' lair. I found her in the woods with Axel, hunting and then fucking. At first, I wanted to rip both their throats out. But as the gut-punched sensation drained, and I saw her come hard for him before he rubbed his seed into her marks as a claiming, I realized I couldn't intervene. She was with her mate, and he was satisfying her in every way. If she'd been a simple chosen mate before, not a True Mate, I would have fought for her. But nothing can interfere with a True Mate bond. Obviously, even severing it couldn't unbind their wolves from each other.

We were a bunch of fools to think we could ever be more than a temporary refuge for her battered heart.

I finish my cigarette and flick the butt into a puddle off the side of the porch. It lands with a quick sizzle. I hear something near the edge of the swamp and perk up my ears. From the sound of it, two wolves are in a fight

to the death.

And even though I didn't interfere with Luna, she's my first thought. It's one thing to admit she's better off with that prick Axel. A mating bond is sacred, and I want her to be happy, even though I despise that motherfucker and don't think for a second that he deserves her. But she seemed happy as fuck when I saw them together, and if I put my ego aside, I have to admit that the Jacksonville pack can offer her protection and safety in numbers, something me and my outlaw brethren can't.

But if someone so much as lays a paw on her...

I shift and race toward the sound without a moment's hesitation. As I get closer, I smell her, and my pace quickens. I tear through the underbrush to get to her.

My baby girl, Luna.

I burst into the clearing just in time to see some asshole wolf ripping out the flesh in Luna's throat. Rage floods through my limbs, and I lunge for the wolf. He's bigger than me, and when I leap at him, he flings me clear across the swamp. I've never known a wolf so strong—not naturally. He must be hopped up on goblin blood or some other artificial enhancement. And he attacked our sweet, gentle, little Luna. In a rage, I fly back at him, fueled by desperation and a fury so deep even his superior size and strength can't stop me. In a blur of fang and claw, I slash and rip until I tear his throat out and then rip his body limb from bloody limb.

Before he's even stopped twitching, I shift back to human and scoop up Luna in my arms. Her body hangs like dead weight, everything drooping toward the earth. I spring into action, setting my legs to sprinting as the life force drains from her body.

I'm not a religious man, but as I race for the house, I pray to all the demons in hell she'll make it out of this alive. Slowly, she begins to shift in my arms, first a leg, then her head, as if she doesn't even have the strength to turn fully human. But finally, as I reach the house, she's back in her human form. Her skin holds a ghostly gray pallor, like the edges of the swamp after a storm, and I'm sure I'm too fucking late.

The second I get within earshot of our house, I start to yell, screaming at the top of my lungs. "Callan, goddamn it! Get something for Luna. She's dying in my arms!"

When I burst into sight of our cabin, my brothers are already in action, racing toward me. Callan's got the medical bag in hand. A medic he ain't, but

he knows enough to deal with all our injuries. Ethan's got a stack of towels and rags. As soon as he sees me, he spreads a large towel on the sparse grass in front of our house. "Lay her here. Quick! I'll get whatever Callan needs."

I practically skid onto the ground, scraping the skin off my knees as I gently lie Luna on the towels. She rolls like dead weight onto the ground, and her crimson lifeblood blooms across the cotton fabric.

"What the fuck happened?" Ethan snarls.

"Wolf attack. That motherfucker's gone to his maker in pieces," I growl back.

"Give me your hand, Warrick," Callan commands. "Press here to staunch the flow."

I do as he says, pressing my hand against the artery out of which her blood spurts.

"Harder. Stop the flow," Callan says. "Ethan, go get alcohol and peroxide from the bathroom. I'm going to try to stitch up this artery, then put her neck back together." He gently picks up the flap of skin that was once attached to her neck and now hangs by a mere half-inch of skin. I'm in no fucking way squeamish, but I about hurl at the sight.

Ethan races into the house, flinging open the screen door so hard it thwaps against the wall before it bangs shut.

"You're doing great, Warrick," Callan mutters, pulling out one of his kits from the medical bag. He can say that, but my heart is thundering inside my ribcage, ready to explode if she dies. One night with her wasn't near enough. A couple months was nothing. I want a whole fucking life of time with her.

"I'm going to wad a clean towel around your hand to staunch the peripheral blood loss," Callan says. He picks out a needle, threading it with whatever he uses to stitch us all up. He's had plenty of opportunities to sew our wounds closed through the years. He's got the needle threaded by the time Ethan bounds out of the house.

"Pour the alcohol all over this needle," Callan says.

Ethan unscrews the bottle and sloshes it onto the needle.

"Gonna try and work around your fat fingers, brother," Callan says to me. "Move a millimeter to the right."

I do as he commands, since Callan is the king of this arena. He pierces the artery and makes his first stitch. "Do you remember how to check her blood pressure, Ethan?"

"Sure," Ethan says, already rummaging through the kit. He lifts the cuff

and stethoscope from the bag and moves around to the other side of Luna. He affixes it to her arms, fits the earpieces inside his ears, and puffs up the cuff.

I tune him out, focused on keeping pressure on Luna's artery, until Ethan calls, "Seventy over fifty."

"Shit," Callan says, "She's shocking." His fingers move sure and steady as he stitches the blood vessel closed. Finally, he says, "Okay, we got that to stop. Now, the neck flap. Hold this towel in place, Warrick. Ethan, gauze."

With finesse, he places the skin back in position and starts to stitch. "Run and get some water—room temperature would be good."

"On it," Ethan says, already in motion.

I've lived through hurricanes, vamp attacks, and more bar fights than most men have under their belt in a lifetime. I can handle pain with the calm of a Zen master. But witnessing the damage done to my darling baby girl by that fucking wolf makes me about lose my head. I want to rip that wolf to shreds ten times over, but he's already dead. I can't do a damn thing now except hold a fucking towel.

Ethan rushes back as Callan ties off the last stitch in her neck. As Ethan pours water, Callan twists off the top of the peroxide. When the water is gone, my middle brother empties the peroxide bottle on Luna's neck. "Open a couple of those four by fours and dig for the medical tape in the bottom of my bag."

"Got it," I say, relieved to have a task.

Callan tapes gauze onto the wound before taking a deep breath and sitting back on his haunches. Then, the action finished, we just sit there, staring at each other over Luna's little body.

"She's still breathing," Ethan offers.

"What now?" I ask, irritated at being in a subordinate position to my brother.

"We get her into the house where she'll be warm and dry." Callan glances at the sky with its dark looming clouds. "Then we wait. She'll either make it or she won't, depending on the strength of her wolf."

Chapter Eleven

Luna

I'm stuck in the world between the worlds. I run. I run through bloody marshes teeming with monsters who chase me in endless loops. I race through crimson swamps lined with alligators waiting to consume me if I dare approach the shore. There are infinite dangers, unending treachery waiting for me, and there's no escape, ever.

A trickle of warm water drips onto my skin, and I try to scream and look up, sure that I'll see blood pouring from the Spanish moss hanging above. But a feeble squeak is all that comes from my lips.

"Luna." A gentle, urgent, *familiar* voice calls, and I feel myself being shaken. At long last, my lids flutter open, ending my nightmare.

I blink rapidly, trying to orient myself. I'm in a room, my room. Gentle hands bathe me with a warm cloth. A bearded man sits over me, but when my eyes open, he drops the cloth into a bowl of water and just stares.

"Callan," I say, my voice hoarse from disuse. "Is that really you?"

"Luna," he says, a gentle smile on his lips as he brushes my hair back from my forehead. "Oh, pet. You came back to us. Thank fucking Satan himself. We thought you might not make it." He gives a little relieved laugh and leans down, pressing his lips to my forehead for a long moment.

It hurts to be awake, so I close my eyes again. My body feels like it's been replaced with an old carcass that's been picked over by buzzards for days. I moan and reach up to touch something papery soft covering my neck. "What is this?" I croak, prying my eyes open. "What am I doing here? What happened?"

Callan's large, warm hand smooths my hair away from my cheek and I nuzzle into it. His voice is low and gentle, like a caress. "You were attacked

by a rogue wolf in the forest. Warrick found you and brought you home, and I stitched you up.”

“A rogue wolf...”

“Don’t you remember?” He picks up a soft towel and pats my damp skin.

I scrunch up my face as I strain to remember, but the only thing that comes up is running away from something...or someone...in the woods. And then there’s nothing but holes in my mind. “No,” I croak. “I was running from someone.”

He continues to stroke my hair. “The mind is powerful. It’s trying to protect you.”

“I’m glad to be home,” I murmur. A slight smile lifts the corners of my mouth as I open my eyes to study Callan’s beautiful face. “How dead is the wolf?”

“Unrecognizable body parts,” Callan says with a chuckle. “Warrick is thorough.”

I chuckle, too, until the sound turns into a cough. I roll onto my side and wheeze for a second. I’m happy to be back where I belong, but everything feels strange as well as familiar after so long away. “How long have I been here?”

“You’ve been out of it for over a week while your wolf healed you from within. One of us has been with you twenty-four seven, protecting you in case...” He retrieves his washrag from the basin of water that sits the small fridge next to the bed. Then he draws it across my back.

“In case what?” I ask, trying not to lose my train of thought and sink into the bliss of being bathed by Callan’s strong, rough hands that are so gentle in their care for me. The rough texture of the warm, wet washcloth is a spring-day-in-the-sun at Bogbeast Waters kind of feeling.

“The wolf is dead, but we don’t know where it came from or who sent it,” Callan says. “Or why it attacked.”

I don’t want to think about that. All I want to think about is how good it feels when he continues to dip the cloth in the basin, wring it out, and cleanse my body. When he’s done, he pats my skin dry. Then his hands swish together and land on my back with something like a liquid silk sensation.

“Oh!” I say, my eyelids fluttering open. “What’s that?”

“It’s oil,” he says. “To keep your skin smooth. But I can massage you if you like it.”

“I do,” I say, my voice half-moan. “Keep going.” I close my eyes, and

after about ten minutes, I roll onto my back so he can get at my front.

He scoots to the bottom of the bed, and his hands glide across my feet and legs, massaging and caressing. The sensation is divine. His slick palms travel up to my hips, belly, and breasts. His fingers twirl and tweak my nipples, stirring my heat into a frothing pool of want. No one has ever touched me this way, and I never want it to stop.

I writhe into his tender but firm touch. What was mere tenderness a few minutes ago becomes a torment, teasing my desire awake. I open my eyes and find him studying me intently as he caresses my skin. "Oh, Callan... It feels so good."

"Yeah?" he says, swallowing hard.

"Yeah," I breathe, widening my legs, hoping he'll massage between them.

He hisses in a breath as his fingers slide between my legs, answering my unspoken plea. He rubs gently through my folds, slickening them even more with the silky oil. At last, he slowly pushes a finger inside me. We both suck in a breath at once.

"Can you take off your clothes, too?" I ask. Last time, when we were in the kitchen, I didn't know what this fire in my belly meant. Now, thanks to Axel, I know how to get the relief I need.

"Luna..." Callan begins.

"What?" I ask.

He draws his hand from between my legs and starts massaging my thighs again, which only makes my craving grow. "The last night you were here, you chose Warrick."

"And today I choose you," I say, lifting my hips, urging him to return to the heat throbbing between my legs.

"That's not how it works," he says, shaking his head.

"Why not?" I ask.

"I don't know," he says. "It just doesn't. Werewolves have one mate."

"I had a mate, and then I had another," I say. "And now I want you to mate with me."

"So, you don't want Warrick anymore?"

"I want him sometimes," I say. "And sometimes I want you. And sometimes maybe I'll want Ethan. You said I had to choose. You didn't say it was forever."

"You want us all to fuck you?" he asks, swallowing so the little lump in

his throat bobs.

I whimper, so wet with desire that I can feel it soaking into the bed under me. “Yes,” I manage.

Callan slides his fingers between my legs again, pushing two inside me. He strokes across my little nub, and I explode with pleasure. When I’m done clenching around his fingers, he leans down and takes a deep sniff between my legs. “Still want me to fuck you?” he asks with a crooked smile.

“Yes,” I moan.

He quickly strips off his clothes and climbs on the bed, stretching the length of his body next to mine. He starts massaging my hip, pushing his stiff cock against my thigh.

“Closer,” I breathe. “I need your weight on top of me.”

I feel at once aroused and vulnerable, like I might cry one minute and come the next. It’s an odd feeling, one that’s no doubt the result of nearly losing my life.

“What’s the matter, pet?” Callan says, his eyes boring into me with concern, as if he can sense my conflict.

“I don’t know,” I say, as tears leak out the corners of my eyes. “Just... Hold onto me, and never let me go.”

“Never,” Callan promises, pulling me into his arms and squeezing me tight against him. “Never again.”

“Get on top,” I say.

Once he’s on top of me, I breathe a sigh of relief. He’s warm and heavy, and I feel completely safe under him, like his body is a shield protecting me. He kisses me gently, his soft beard rubbing against my cheeks.

Snug between my hips, he pushes up on his forearms to look down at me. “What do you want, pet? Want me to hold you like this? Whatever you want, I’m here to provide it.”

I shake my head, spilling out a few more tears.

“Do you want me to fuck you?”

I nod my head. “Please.”

“Okay. But you tell me if anything hurts, okay? I’m not as big as Warrick, but I’m still too big for a lot of women.” The intense caring pouring for his gaze is like a balm to my soul.

I sniff in a shuddering breath. “Please,” I whisper. “I want you inside me, Callan. You won’t hurt me. I want all of you.”

He presses his lips to mine and reaches down, fitting the engorged head

of his cock inside the opening to my sex. I moan in pleasure at the stretched sensation.

“You like that, don’t you, pet?” he asks with a knowing smile.

I nod eagerly and buck my hips under him, trying to impale myself on his cock.

The tip of his tongue lands on his upper lip as he eases his length inside of me, his eyes hooded as he watches my lids widen and my teeth bite down on my lip at the unbearable, delicious ache of his size inside me.

“Need to tap out?” he asks, a smirk on his lips.

“I don’t know what that means,” I admit, my breath coming short. “But I don’t want you out of me.”

He chuckles, draws his cock out, and then plunges back in—hard.

I squeak, and he grins like a wolf that just got a fresh kill and laid it out for the approval of his Alpha. It’s a gloating smile, one I’m not used to seeing on Callan’s face. I like this side of him. “How about now?” he asks. “Am I too much for you, little pet?”

There’s a challenge in his voice, like he wants me to give up. “No,” I cry, gripping his shoulders to keep him from pulling away.

“You’re fucking tight, aren’t you, pet?” he asks. “I’ll just be here waiting for you to get used to me.”

He doesn’t move until I start moaning and grinding up against him, scratching at his shoulders to get him going. “Fuck me,” I beg. “I’ve been gone so long. All I wanted was to get back to you and your brothers.”

“So we could fuck you?” he asks, sliding out and slamming deep into me again, making tears blur my vision.

“Yes,” I moan, rocking my hips up and down.

He lowers himself to his forearms and works himself around and around inside me. A low moan leaves his lips. “Fuck, you feel so good, Luna. I didn’t know a pussy could be this tight.”

I let out a whimper of pleasure, unable to look away from his eyes that captivate mine and hold me like I’m safe and warm at home. He pulls almost all the way out then drives his cock deep inside me. I eagerly tip my hips up to greet him.

“I’m going to make you come so hard, pet,” he growls, setting up a slow, steady rhythm of retreating and thrusting into me so deep I slide up the bed a bit each time our hips meet.

I match him thrust for thrust, panting and scratching his back, pulling him

closer, begging for more. The whole time he looks deeply into my eyes, watching my blissful torment unfold. As I gaze back into his eyes, an intense connection forms between us, burning through me, getting me hotter and hotter.

“I’m going to explode,” I cry at last, unable to hold myself back.

“Let me feel you come all over my cock, pet,” he growls, grinding deep so his pelvic bone smashes against my clit. “Let me feel that pussy milking me.”

Words desert me as an explosion of pleasure rocks through me. I cry his name, bucking wildly, my wolf howling inside me.

“Oh, fuck, Luna, here I come,” he shouts, and his hips move faster and harder. His head falls back, and he lets out deep grunts and moans as his liquid fire pours into me, sating my core and my wolf’s heart.

Our bodies fuse together, and for a minute, I can’t do anything but feel the mind-bending bliss and love pouring through us both. Our wolf spirits seem to be dancing together, crashing into, under, around, and through one another. A song I’ve never heard sings through my soul, like it’s fusing with his just as my body has.

When we finally come down, it’s this slow, sweet melting, like we’re two feathers floating back to earth. At last, Callan slides off me so I can breathe but wraps his arms around me and threads his legs through mine.

“Fuck, that was incredible,” he says, a deep sigh of satisfaction heaving through his muscular, tattooed chest. At this moment, I don’t care that running back here almost cost my life. As long as I’m with the triplets, I’ll die a happy wolf.

Chapter Twelve

Luna

My heart is full and my wolf satisfied after Callan's fucking. Cuddling up together, we settle down for a sweet nap. When we wake up, we wrestle in his bed, pinning each other to the mattress with the loser having to deliver kisses to the victor before being released to try again. I can't remember laughing and having so much fun in my life.

Our fun is cut short when a voice bellows outside the house.

"Fucking hell," Callan mutters. "Wait here." He rolls from the bed, yanks on his pants, and heads out of the room.

"No way," I say, scrambling into my clothes. "This is my fault."

I race after him, heading through this house that I love. I glance right and left and notice it's gone backward in the cleanliness department—but not as bad as it was when I first arrived. There are hardly any beer bottles or cans on the floor and only one or two pieces of clothing.

"Luna!" the voice bellows again.

I halt in my tracks. When I heard the call the first time, I thought it was one of Callan's brothers returning and somehow knowing that we'd mated. I remember all the jealousy and conflict I stirred up before. But it's not one of them—my wolf knows.

As happy as she was playing with Callan on the bed, she positively sings inside me as she demands we answer the call of her mate.

But Axel isn't *my* mate, even if our wolves are still bound.

"Luna, I know you're here," he calls. "I can smell you."

The plaintive note in his voice twists a wicked knife of guilt into my heart. How can this be? I'm with the guys I want to be with. But the whispers in my heart tell a different story—they remind me that, in my soul of souls,

Axel is my Alpha. My wolf still wants him to be our everything.

Shoving those feelings aside, I barrel outside, determined to put Axel in his place. It must have rained while I was out. The air smells damp and dank as if the gators have wrestled in the swamp, stirring up the swamp gasses.

I skid to a stop on the porch. Axel isn't alone. Callan and Ethan have his arms pinned to his side, and Warrick is watching with his arms crossed over his bare chest and a scowl on his face. All sorts of flutters stir in my chest at the sight of the triplets. But these elated thoughts are crushed by the presence of Axel, writhing and struggling against their grip.

Though the brothers are bigger, Axel's strong, too, and it looks like he might just get free of the hold Callan and Ethan have on him. I chew at my lip, looking from one to another. All these men are fighting for *me*.

It's a far cry from when Axel dragged me from the swamp, then tossed me back like fish guts, making me think no one would ever want me.

The triplets, though, they always treated me right.

"Of course I'm here," I say, crossing my arms and staring back at him defiantly. "I told you I wanted to be with these men. You'd have to be dumber than an demonling not to figure out where I'd gone off to."

Axel glares at me. "Come home, Luna."

"I am home," I say. "Where else would I be? The question is, why are *you* here?"

"To bring you home," he says. "To *our* home. I'll do whatever it takes, Luna. I'll fight to the death to get you back if that's what you want."

"Where was your protection when she needed it?" Warrick demands. "Can't you see her neck? I found her at the brink of death."

Axel stills, and the color drains from his face. "Luna... What happened?"

"A lone wolf tore out her throat," Callan says. "I stitched her together. My brothers and I saved her life."

His chest puffs, and I give him a grateful smile, as proud of him as he seems to be of himself.

"I'm deeply indebted to you," Axel grits out. "But if Luna hadn't run away, she wouldn't have put herself in danger. How could I protect her if I didn't know where she was?"

He directs his gaze at me, his eyes the color of the sky on a winter's afternoon and so full of hurt and accusation that my wolf cowers inside me, shrinking onto her belly to have displeased her Alpha. He's right. If I hadn't run away, I wouldn't have been attacked. It was a stroke of luck that Warrick

found me. If not for him, I'd be dead right now.

Warrick, standing tall like an imposing statue, looks as formidable as a bog beast. "She ran away because she doesn't want to be with you," he growls at Axel. "It ain't that complicated."

Axel begins to struggle again. "Luna, tell them that's not true. How we're mending the rifts between us. Tell them what a good time we had hunting and... The other things, too."

"You mean when you fucked and fought like enemies," Warrick says, spitting into the dust near his feet.

Axel's face darkens with fury. "How the fuck do you know that?"

"I was watching you," Warrick says coolly.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Axel snarls back. "She's my mate. Stop interfering."

"If she's your mate, why is it that even after you tried to pacify her with a few orgasms, she came right back here?" Warrick taunts. "I'll tell you why. Luna needs a real man wrecking that pussy every night... Three of them, in fact."

With a roar of rage, Axel rips his arm free and clocks Ethan in the jaw. Ethan instantly lays into Axel, landing a powerful blow against Axel's cheek. Blood spurts from Axel's mouth as he shoves Ethan to the ground. He falls on him and starts pounding him with his fists.

I let out a scream—I don't want anything to happen to Axel *or* Ethan.

"Keep Luna safe!" Warrick bellows, heading for the two men jostling on the ground as Callan leaps to my side. He tries to tug me away, but I wrestle out of his grasp.

"Luna, stop!" He whips me around and pins both of my wrists behind my back.

"Quit trying to stop me," I yell, kicking at his shins. "Let me go!"

"Cool your jets," he growls. "This isn't just about you—at least not entirely. It's been a long time coming. This fight's been brewing for years."

Warrick is now straddling Axel and pummeling him with his fists. I can barely see Axel's face through the blood.

Ethan is on his feet again, delivering vicious kicks to Axel with his steel-toed boots. "You mangy motherfucker," he snaps, huffing his breaths out between the barrage of blows. "That's the last time you'll deck me."

Axel draws wolf strength from somewhere and manages to roll Warrick from his belly. Swiftly, he scrambles behind Warrick, lands on his back,

positions his hands around Warrick's head, and twists.

Warrick roars and clambers to his feet with Axel still clinging to his shoulders. He backs into a tree and slams Axel into the trunk. Axel lets out a bellow and falls from Warrick's back, rolling across the dirt, barely conscious. Ethan grabs his enemy and hauls him to his feet.

"Have at him, Warrick," he yells. "He's your kill!"

Warrick grins wide enough to show a missing molar and punches the palm of his left hand with his right fist. "Oh, I've been waiting for this for a long time, Golden Boy. Ready to meet your maker?"

He hauls back his arm to send Axel to the wolf pack in the stars with one final blow. I know he can do it. I've seen Warrick in action.

"No!" I scream, twisting out of Callan's grasp and racing toward Warrick. Warrick's head whips toward me, and he stares in confusion.

I lunge and grab Warrick's beefy bicep. "Don't kill him," I cry. "I'll never forgive you."

Axel's hanging on by spiderwebs at this point. His head lolls on his chest, and Ethan's grip is the only thing keeping him upright.

"You'll never forgive me?" Warrick asks in disbelief. "Why would you want to save a man who severed your mate bond?"

"I don't know," I wail. "Just... Don't do it."

Ethan lets Axel fall. His body slumps onto the ground like a bag of crabs.

I fall to my knees, the sand and dirt grinding into my skin. My hands flutter over Axel's body, smoothing away the bloody hair from his face, patting his swollen jaw.

Warrick and Ethan stand over me as Callan joins them, surrounding me.

"What the fuck is going on here, pet?" Callan says. "You said you wanted to be with us."

"I do," I say. I shake my head, trying to clear the panic and horror at seeing my men's barbaric side. "But I don't want anyone to die because of me. Y'all make your point with fists, and that's just how you are. I accept that. But you need to accept that I make mine with words. I can make Axel listen to me. He's no good dead."

The triplets exchange a look. "What use is he to us alive?" Ethan asks.

"I don't know," I say. "Guess we'll find out."

Chapter Thirteen

Luna

If anything is a testament to the triplets' regard for me, the next few minutes prove it.

"We've got to get Axel into the house to care for his wounds," I say, rising to stand, knowing full well their resistance to having anything to do with Axel.

"Fuck that," Ethan says, crossing his muscular arms over his chest as if to hold himself back from launching into Axel again.

Warrick clamps a hand on Ethan's shoulder. "If my baby girl wants to negotiate with the Alpha of the Jacksonville pack, let her have her way."

"Yeah," Callan says, giving Axel a disgusted look. "He's obviously dick-whipped as fuck if he'd show up here without backup, just asking for us to stomp a mudhole in him."

A slow grin forms on Ethan's bloody lips. "I hadn't thought of that," he says. "But damn, Luna. You sure do have a point. I bet he'd give up his entire pack for one more taste of that sweet little pussy you got him hooked on."

"No fucking way," Warrick snarls. "I let him have her when I thought it was her choice. But she came back here, which means she chose us. No one touches my baby girl without going through me."

I glance at Callan. With all the blood and dust and swamp smells, they must not have noticed that we mated earlier. "We'll help her speak her piece with this mutt," Callan says, spitting on Axel's body. "But Luna's pussy is ours."

I like being called their queen and being told I'm theirs. My wolf preens with joy at his words, even though I know we have a hard conversation ahead. I didn't know Warrick thought if I mated with him that meant I'd be

mated to him forever, and I need to correct that misunderstanding. But first, I need to make sure Axel lives.

Callan and Ethan haul him up and carry him into the house, his feet dragging on the ground and his head lolling. I can't tell if he's lost consciousness entirely. They lay him on the couch, and I kneel beside him.

"Get me something to wash away the blood," I say.

Callan retreats to get what I asked for while Ethan and Warrick stand like two giant Seminoles.

When Callan returns with a plastic basin full of water, I reach for the washrag floating inside. After squeezing it out, I gently swipe the blood from Axel's bruised face.

One eye is swollen shut, ringed by two angry gashes, and his lip looks like it's been stung by hornets. I peel up his crimson-stained t-shirt to get at his torso, but Callan stops me and shows me the sharp-edged tool in his hand.

"Scissors," he says, using his thumb and finger to snip at the air. "Cut the damn thing off." He demonstrates this by slicing through the bottom of the shirt. After placing the scissors in my hand, he backs away to stand with his brothers.

Tentatively, I snip at the stained cotton until I get the hang of it. Then, I slice through the whole thing. I place the scissors on the floor and gently smooth away all the fabric from my former mate's discolored chest. Large purple bruises mar his chest and abdomen and ribs, while scrapes and abrasions cover his neck and collarbones. But once all the blood has been cleared away, I can see Axel beneath all the discoloration and swelling.

My heart wars with itself—I care about Axel despite myself, but when I think of our True Mate bond severing, I still hate him, too. In his condition, Axel's busted up face and body reflect what I feel inside.

His good eye opens, and he regards me somberly. "Luna," he manages to say with effort.

"Stop," I say, putting my palm in front of his face. "Let me talk. I don't want none of this fighting between you and the triplets. I get that you hate each other, but you brought this on yourself, Axel. None of this would have happened if you hadn't gone and destroyed our bond. I wouldn't even be with the triplets at all, let alone almost killed, and them almost killing you, and you losing the pack land. I'd still be sad about Mama, but none of the rest would've happened at all. I'd still be yours and yours alone, but you chose a different path." I roll my lips between my teeth to keep from letting out a

little hiccup of tears.

“And I’ll regret my actions every day of my life,” Axel rasps. “But if I have to suffer, even if I have to die to prove how much you mean to me, I’ll do it. Just give me a chance to.”

The room grows as quiet as a moonless night, and Axel’s gaze rises to Warrick. My breath catches in the back of my throat.

“Everything I did, I did it for the good of the pack,” Axel continues. “But I’d give up the pack and let Warrick take over just to get you back.”

Warrick lets out a grunt from his sentinel stance by the door.

Axel lifts his bruised hand and brushes my hair back from my face. Then, he fingers the gauze bandage at my neck, and a shattered look replaces the tenderness. “If you didn’t make it…”

His voice trails off, and he brushes a hand down my arm. I close my eyes, savoring the touch while gathering my thoughts. Finally, I open my eyes.

“Maybe it all had to go down this way,” I say.

Axel’s scraped-up forehead bunches in a frown. “What do you mean?”

“How else would I have met these men?” I ask. “My heart belongs to them, Axel. Even though my wolf and my body feel good with you, my heart is still busted up where you broke it.”

Axel’s scowl deepens, but he stays quiet.

I wipe away some blood that’s seeped from one of the gashes on his face. “Maybe if you can understand how much these men mean to me, and that they’re not going anywhere... If you can accept that they’re part of my life and they’re my mates now, then I can start to forgive you for severing our True Mate’s bond.”

A dark storm forms on his face, and he squeezes his eyes shut. When he opens them, his anguish is clear in his gaze. “That’s not how it works, Luna. It’s against the laws of nature. A wolf has one mate. She is his everything, as he is hers.”

I swallow hard. “In this house, we break the law.”

This time the silence that fills the air is brittle and hard, like glass with spidery little cracks.

Axel closes his eyes and takes a few deep breaths, with his lips pressed tightly together. “What do you want?” he finally says, opening his eyes.

I take a long, deep breath before answering. “I want to join the pack,” I say. “But not as your mate. I want to live in safety on pack land, not to be scared I’ll be attacked in the woods. I want my own house on Golden Glade

Street, like the other pack members. The triplets can come and go from my house as they please and stay there as much as I want them to. And they get to hunt on Creebay preserve without having to skulk around like criminals.”

Axel’s jaw juts out in the way it does before he explodes. A look of outrage replaces the anguish in his eyes. “I can’t do that,” he says, the words sounding forced.

“Then I can’t forgive you, and I’ll continue to live here,” I say, raising my chin.

Axel drags a hand over his face, wincing at the pain he’s no doubt causing by touching his battered skin. “You don’t know what you’re asking.”

“I know full well what I’m asking,” I snap. “I’m asking you to give me something *I* want, rather than assuming you know what’s best for me. Yes, I liked all the mating things we did, but you can’t control me by making me feel good. That’s not everything a girl wants, Axel.”

“Fuck, Luna,” Axel says, squeezing his head. Slowly, as if he’s aged fifty years, he hauls his body upright. “That’s not why...”

“Then think about it like this,” I say, as confidence grows at my certainty that I’ve found just the way to convince him. “A lone wolf attacked me. Remember when you said they could be dangerous? Well, there could be more out there. It could happen again. And maybe next time, Warrick won’t be around to save me.”

Axel pulls his hair and lets out a low, rumbling groan.

“You said you’d do anything for me,” I remind him. “So, prove it. Prove that you mean what you say, and you’re not just trying to get me back the way that suits you. Then I’ll think about it—after you prove you want *me* to be happy.”

Axel flashes the triplets a glare that would incinerate most werewolves. But not my men. My men are stronger and fiercer and scarier than any wolf in the world, I just know it.

“Come on, Axel,” I say. “These men make me happy. How can I trust you not to hurt me again if you won’t let me be happy?”

At last, Axel nods, his troubled gaze searching mine. “I’m happy to have you in the pack, where I can keep you safe. You know that, Luna. And I do want you to be happy.”

I raise my brows. “And my own house?”

“There’s one down the block from me,” he says, glowering like it offends him to think I’ll have something of my own, separate from him. “Adolpha

and her family need a bigger house.”

“I remember her,” I say, brightening. “She was nice.”

“I’m sure she’d love to have you take over the place. She fixed it up real nice.” Axel’s face is hard, like stone.

“I can’t wait to see it,” I say, clapping my hands together. “My very own house, that I didn’t have to build myself. I hope it has a tin roof like the one me and Mama had. I like the sound of the rain at night.

Axel’s bruised jaw clenches. “When someone challenges the Alpha and loses, he’s forced to leave the pack.”

“And he did,” I say. “But now he’s coming back. I don’t care if it’s the werewolf law. We’re outlaws. Ethan says that means we can do stuff other people think is bad, and we don’t care.”

“This will make you accept me as your mate again?” Axel asks, his miserable gaze on mine.

“It’s a start,” I say. “You can keep proving yourself, and one day, when I’m done forgiving you for hurting me and my wolf so bad, we can talk about whether you can be my mate again.”

Axel looks like he might explode. Instead, like the Alpha he is, he stands up, and even though he’s beaten and battered and has to limp across the room, he somehow still looks imposing as he stops in front of the triplets. The glare he gives them makes my wolf cower down inside me, begging for mercy even though he’s not angry at us. “You are granted hunting rights to our share of Creebay Preserve,” he says. “Don’t fuck it up, and if you hurt Luna, I will disembowel all three of you and hang you by a noose made of your own intestines.”

With that, he wheels around toward the door. My wolf cries for him to come back, and his wolf must feel it, because he glances over his shoulder with one long, searching gaze. My wolf blazes to life, eager to answer his every command. But he turns without a word and walks out the door.

Chapter Fourteen

Callan

For the next week, we work on getting Luna settled into her new place and enjoy our newfound freedom to Jacksonville pack territory. Warrick's a dick about it, of course. He flaunts our ability to hunt on Creebay Preserve by going as near to the pack houses as possible to make a kill, marking his territory on every tree he trots past in wolf form, and roaring down Golden Glade Street on his motorcycle at all hours of the day or night when he's in human form.

When someone questions him the first time, he flashes his gap-toothed grin and says, "Why don't you and your Alpha have a little talk? He'll tell you we're welcome."

After that, no one bothers us. They don't talk to us, either.

Ethan's just as bad. Like now, when Axel stops by for the tenth time today, this time asking Luna if she needs her plumbing fixed or the boards on her deck looked over for signs of decay.

"We're taking care of her plumbing just fine," Ethan says, throwing his arm around Luna, who's standing near the counter, stacking her new dishes in the cupboard. "In fact, we take turns flushing the pipes four, five times a day. Don't we, darlin'?"

"I don't know," Luna says, a picture of wide-eyed innocence. "I haven't checked the pipes at all."

Ethan guffaws, and Axel glares.

Luna looks like an advertisement for domestic bliss standing in her kitchen, organizing all the items Axel bought for her. The kitchen has sunshiny yellow walls and curtains with sunflowers on them. New tile covers the floor, and her cupboards have been painted blue. It looks like something

out of a damn magazine, and Luna loves it.

“Need anything?” Axel asks our pet, ignoring Ethan’s crude comments. “I can stop by the grocery store if you do. Food, cleaning products, anything.”

Luna taps her lips with her finger. “I do need a few things if you don’t mind.”

Axel brightens like she’s granted him his wildest dream. In a way she has, since she’s agreed to join his pack. If he was the one pounding her pussy every night, he’d be a happy man. But that joy belongs to our Alpha—Warrick. I’m amazed Axel has been so good-natured about the whole affair. He hasn’t tried to take off any of our heads since our big fight a week ago. He probably doesn’t know Warrick’s nailing his mate every which way after Axel goes home to jerk off alone each evening.

After she tells Axel what groceries she needs, he heads off, and Ethan roars off on his bike to pick up a paycheck from our last job. I cross the blue and tan tile floor, reach into the box with the remaining plates and bowls, and start handing them to Luna.

She holds up one of the brown-rimmed, blue ceramic bowls. “Aren’t these pretty? I picked them myself. Axel said I could have anything I wanted. Imagine!”

I glance at the bowl. What do I know about dishes? All I care about is that Luna likes them. “They’re real nice,” I say.

“You don’t like them?” she says, sensing my indifference. Her full lips form a pout. “When I lived in the swamp with Mama, I never dreamed of owning something this pretty. We barely ever used a dish at all.”

“I said they’re pretty,” I say, holding up a hand. “If you like ‘em, I like ‘em.”

“What do you really think, though?” she asks, setting the bowl in the stack with the others. “I want your honest take.”

“Luna,” I say with a grin. “Plates are hardly on my radar. I don’t give two shits whether they’re made of pure gold or you don’t use one at all. You, however, are a different story.” I snake an arm around her waist and pull her into me. “I give lots of shits about you, pet.”

The cutest blush colors her face. I kiss her warm cheek until she pushes me away. “Quit,” she squeals. “I vowed to get all these dishes and pans put away before evening, which, in case you haven’t noticed, is coming right up.”

“That’s why I’m helping you,” I say, setting the stack of plates into the cabinet. “You need a break. Let me take you out tonight, Luna. A real date. My brothers can make their own dinner.”

“What’s a date?” she asks, her forehead furrowing.

“Something I haven’t done in a long-ass time,” I say with a grin, hefting a box of glassware onto the tan-tile countertop. “But it’s when people are getting to know each other, and they go out and do fun things.”

I slice open the box with a box cutter Axel got Luna. Dude thought of everything.

“Like when I went hunting with Axel,” she says, her lilac eyes lighting up the way they do when she catches on. She fishes a blue glass from the box and sets it on a shelf in another cupboard.

“Sure.” I hand her another glass. “Only on this date, we’ll go into town. Maybe catch an old movie at the restored theater.”

“What’s a movie?” she asks, placing the glass next to the other one.

“It’s like TV but bigger. We sit with a bunch of other people and watch the show together.” I hand her the rest of the glasses and flatten the empty box, tossing it onto the pile of others.

“Oh,” she says. “So more like when I met the pack, and we all ate dinner together instead of at home with just us.” She arranges the glassware on the shelf in a neat row.

“That’s a good way to put it,” I say, smiling at her. “So, what do you say?”

“Okay,” she says, standing on tiptoes to put up the last of the glasses. As her little body stretches, my cock throbs in my jeans. I’ve kept my hands off her since the day she woke up. I still need to tell Warrick about that. Luna rambles on, not noticing that I’ve fallen silent as I try to control the stiffy that’s popped up from simply watching her do a mundane task. I want to fuck her again so bad it’s a constant battle with blue balls.

“TV is funny,” she says. “It don’t make no sense to me. I don’t even know those people. Why do I care about their stories? And then when I found out that half of them aren’t even telling the truth?” She shakes her head, then turns to lean against the counter.

I shrug, resisting the urge to adjust myself. “It’s entertainment.”

“Then let’s do it,” Luna says with a bright smile, right as Axel strides through the door holding two bags overflowing with groceries.

“Where are y’all headed?” he asks, eyeing us with a frown. I can see it’s

eating the guy up that he can't be with Luna the way he wants. I almost feel for the asshole. Thanks to his wolf, the cuts and scrapes on his face are almost all healed, and he's back to looking like the perfect All-American asshole he is.

"To this thing called the movies," Luna says before I can stop her.

"You can't go to the movies," Axel says, setting the heavy bags on the kitchen table pushed against the wall.

"Why not?" she demands, crossing her arms over her chest.

Oh, boy. Here we go.

Axel and Luna have a tempestuous relationship if this week is any indication. They bicker all the time. I can't tell if it's foreplay building up to some big, explosive fuck-fest when they give in, or if they really can't stand each other despite wanting to fuck each other's brains out.

"It's not safe," Axel says flatly. "I only granted these assholes access to our territory because you agreed to move onto pack land where it's safe, and you'd be protected from lone wolves. The rest of Jacksonville isn't safe."

"How safe was I roaming the land when the lone wolf attacked me?"

"You weren't, which proves my point," Axel says, drawing himself up to his full height. "You weren't on pack land."

"I smelled the same wolf when we were out hunting at the preserve," she counters.

"What you smelled," Axel says, removing soup cans from the paper bag and slamming them on the counter. "Was Warrick. He even told you he was out stalking you, spying on us. Probably jerking off like a fucking pervert."

"I know what Warrick smells like. It wasn't Warrick," Luna spits back at him.

"How do I know this asshole won't run off with you and take you somewhere to have you all to himself?" Axel growls.

"This asshole," I say, "has no intention of taking her away to have her all to himself. It's more fun to have her right under your nose, Alpha."

Axel rakes his hand through his hay-colored hair. I like rattling his cage—we all do. But he seems to be mastering the ability to not let us get to him, though I know the only reason he's holding back from ripping out my entrails is because he'd lose Luna forever if he killed one of us.

"You do seem to take pleasure in fucking with me," he says, glowering at me. "But it's still not a good idea to leave pack land. Even if that was a lone wolf and Warrick got rid of it, there are vampires, goblins, all kinds of shit

that might hurt her out there.”

“If you were so worried about it, maybe you shouldn’t have invited them onto your territory,” I point out. “By the way, they’re not keeping to the north. I’ve seen at least one near here.”

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” Axel barks.

I shrug. “You’re not my Alpha.”

“This is my territory,” he growls, squeezing the back of his neck.

“Axel,” Luna says, laying a hand on his forearm. He drops his gaze to her fingers and swallows.

“No one else stays on pack land all the time. I want to go out with Callan, so I’m going. You can’t protect me every second.”

“Bullshit,” he snarls.

Luna sighs and takes her touch from his arm. “Besides, I have Callan with me. He’ll protect me. If my safety is what you’re really worried about, then you can’t object.”

“The girl’s decided, *Dad*,” I say sarcastically. “I’ll make sure she’s home by midnight.”

“You better be damn sure she’s safe,” he growls. “Protect her with your fucking life, because I’ll end it if something happens to her.”

I grin and shake my head, laying an arm over Luna’s shoulders and puffing up my chest. “I don’t need you to tell me to keep her safe. Again, you ain’t my Alpha, so you don’t run the show where we’re concerned.”

“Boys, boys,” Luna says, stepping between us. “Don’t fight. Please?”

She looks up at me with her little puppy dog eyes that make my dick hard and my defenses crumble. Then she turns to give Axel the same look. He sighs. It’s the weapon of a submissive wolf—they’re anything but weak. She may be naïve, but she’s not dumb. She’s learning fast, and I have no doubt that within a year, she’ll have us all eating out of her hand and doing anything we can to earn one of her smiles or a night between her heavenly thighs.

“Good,” she says, laying a hand on Axel’s chest. “Then it’s settled. Callan will protect me if anything goes wrong.”

“Fine,” Axel says grudgingly, sending me a fierce scowl. “I’ve got to consult with my wolves about the vampires encroaching. They’re already pissed about having them on half the preserve, and if they’re not respecting our boundaries...”

I can feel his wolf surging, the instinctual urge to fight rising inside him.

My own wolf responds even though I'm not under his command and not bonded to the pack, so I can't read his thoughts. I can still feel a stronger wolf's agitation. I have to remind my wolf to stand down, that this isn't our battle, and we don't care about his pack's land.

Distracted by his concerns for the pack, Axel leaves Luna to me. Forty-five minutes later, we're standing in line at the movie theater, waiting to buy tickets. Luna and I are holding hands like a couple of teenagers. Well, I guess Luna is a teenager, as uncomfortable as that makes me. But it's too late to back out now. She's got me—hook, line, and sinker.

"I haven't been to the movies since I was in high school," I say, wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

"What's high school?" she says, snuggling into the crook of my arm.

"It's where you go learn bullshit you'll never use," I say with a grin. "I barely went."

"Why would you want to learn something you don't need to?"

"My thoughts exactly."

Luna gawks at all the people around us and presses into me, clearly uncomfortable with this crowd. "Were the movies part of it?" she asks. "Because if they're like TV, I don't see the use."

"You could say that," I admit with a grin. "Getting my cock sucked in the back row was definitely more memorable than most of the shit that happened during those years."

"You can suck a cock?" Luna asks, all wide-eyed innocence.

"You sure can, pet," I say. "I'll let you suck mine as soon as the movie starts."

"Can we fuck again, too?"

"If you can stay quiet, you might be able to slide that pussy down over my dick," I say with a wink. "If not, you'll have to settle for making out."

"What's making out?"

"This is making out." I tip up her chin with my fingertip and lower my lips to hers.

Our lips grind together until the prick behind us says, "Hey, buddy, move."

"Yeah, fuck you," I say, not bothering to look at him. Instead, I slide a hand down the back of Luna's pants, cupping her tight little ass as we take a few steps forward.

"I like making out, too," she says, her eyes all bright with excitement.

“But not as much as fucking.”

“Keep that talk up and we won’t make it through the credits before I’m wrecking your ass.”

“This date is sounding more and more fun,” Luna says.

“I couldn’t agree more,” I murmur against her ear. “I’ve been dreaming of being inside that tight pussy again all week.”

I step up to the ticket booth, hand the cashier a card, and pay for our tickets, keeping my hard-on pushed up tight against Luna’s back.

“What are we going to watch when we’re not fucking?” Luna asks.

I almost bust up laughing when the pimply little pipsqueak behind the register turns ten shades of red. Apparently we forgot to teach Luna about appropriate voice levels when talking about pussy in public.

When we walk away from the ticket counter, I crack up and laugh my ass off. I can’t remember the last time I had this much fun. Maybe never. Sure, I like to come as much as the next guy, but I’m usually on the serious side. Luna brings out something else in me, though, letting me feel carefree and young, pussy-whipped and about head over fucking paws for the rest of her, too.

Chapter Fifteen

Luna

Living in a real house with rugs instead of rags on a floor made of wood instead of dirt, with walls instead of tin and plastic we found in the swamp... It takes a bit of getting used to, but luckily, I've been eased in by living with the triplets and Axel. But this house isn't one that belongs to someone else, where I'm a guest. It's *mine*.

I can't believe I can call something so lovely my own.

Best of all, I get to say who comes and goes instead of Axel or Warrick making the rules. In this one little place in the world, no matter how submissive my wolf is, I am an Alpha. This is my domain, and I treasure its beauty like the miraculous gift that it is.

The triplets still have their home in the deep woods, of course. Warrick says a man needs his space. But they spend so much time in my house that I forget we don't all live here. Axel stops by each day, too. He brings me anything I need, fixes every loose floorboard and shutter, and does whatever I ask. Maybe he thinks I'm an Alpha, too.

I'm both pleased and hurt by the fact that he never tries to touch me again. His actions convey the world about his character and how much I mean to him, though, even if I don't know what made him stop wanting to fuck me. I still want to fuck him—a lot. That time in the woods, when his knot filled me up until I thought I'd tear in two, was the most intense physical sensation I've ever had.

Even though Warrick is big, and he satisfies me completely, I'm curious to try the knot thing again. Warrick says he can't do that, though. Only a True Mate can. And Axel seems uninterested in trying again. In fact, when I hint at it one evening, he leaves like I spooked him as much as the wolf watching us

in the woods spooked me.

Still, I know he must care about me in other ways, since he gave me my beautiful home. I keep it in tip-top shape and sparkling clean, which is hard with the three oafs who have taken it over with their muddy boots and stray socks and beer cans. One afternoon I'm doing something called vacuuming with a device that sucks up dirt, running it over the rug in my living, when a paper cup of coffee appears in front of my face.

"Oh!" I cry, dropping the vacuum and jumping back.

Axel bends to pick up the vacuum and turns it off, setting it upright. "I knocked," he says with a small smile. "I heard the vacuum and figured you didn't hear me. Seemed safe enough to let myself in. None of those heathens would be cleaning, so I figured I wouldn't find you..." His smile falters, and he doesn't finish his sentence.

I wonder what he was afraid he'd find me doing.

He whips a colorful bouquet of wildflowers from behind his back. "I thought you might like these, too. They're just for decoration, not to eat. Brighten up the place, that kind of thing."

"Oh, thank you!" I cry. "They're perfect."

Axel smiles at my appreciation, watching me take a sniff of each different one.

I pull a ceramic vase from the cupboard over the sink and fill it with water before plunking in the orange, yellow and white blossoms. Then I just stand there, not sure what to do with it. Axel takes it gently and sets it on the kitchen table, which I see immediately is the right place. They look right at home and make the room even prettier.

Axel looks at me, standing uneasily in the center of the room. Then I remember what he told me about manners—that it's polite to ask if people want something when they come over. Civilized people expect more than sniffs and licks when they stop over. They want something called hospitality. The triplets didn't teach me that, since Axel says they don't know the meaning of the term. Even though he doesn't like the triplets, I take his word for it, because they mostly killed anyone who came by their house when I lived there.

Apparently other people offer tea.

"Can I get you something to drink?" I ask, the way he taught me.

He arches a brow and holds up his coffee cup, a cardboard one that matches the one he gave me. "I can't stay long," he says. "I've got pack

business to attend to. Just wanted to bring you something pretty to look at.”

“Thanks,” I say, hopping up on a bar stool and picking up my coffee. “How’s it going with the pack?”

Axel sighs and leans against the wall, wrapping one arm across his flat stomach to hold the opposite elbow. “Not too good,” he admits, taking a swig of coffee. “Everyone’s uneasy with vampires roaming Creebay and your guys moving in here. They could understand you coming back, but the triplets were part of the pack once, and they chose to leave.”

“It’s my house,” I say. “I don’t know why anyone cares if they’re in my house.”

“Because they know you’re my mate, Luna,” Axel says. “It looks all kinds of fucked up for my mate to be entertaining my enemies right under my nose, and them flaunting it in my face, and me not doing a goddamn thing about it.”

“You agreed they could come on pack land.”

“And I stand by that,” he says, holding up his free hand. “I’ve explained it to the pack as my gesture of goodwill after what I did, but some of them don’t think I’m fit to lead if I’ll let that go on and not put a stop to it. And when an Alpha’s warriors start to think he looks weak, it’s the end of him. Anarchy creeps in, and the next thing you know, some asshole like Warrick is challenging me for Alpha again.”

“Am I really worth all this trouble you’ve gotten yourself into?” I say, curling my legs under the chair and hooking my toes around the crossbar on the chair.

“Yes.”

My heart expands to fill the room.

Before I can tell Axel how happy that makes me, back door opens and thwacks shut, and Ethan strolls into the kitchen, shirtless and glistening with sweat. He looks so good my tongue wants to loll out like my wolf is eyeing a fresh kill.

He catches my lusty gaze and grins. “Garden’s all dug up and ready for planting.”

“Thank you,” I say, watching him wipe his forehead with one of my kitchen towels.

He tosses it on the counter and leans against the stove, his tattooed, bulging muscles on full display. When his attention swings toward Axel, his grin turns wicked. “And here’s the mutt who keeps sniffing around like

you're a bitch in heat."

"Hello to you, too, Ethan," Axel says wryly, not rising to the bait. He turns toward me. "That's where we're at with the pack. Constantly putting out fires. I'll see you later, Luna."

He gives me a kiss on the forehead and Ethan a nod he doesn't deserve before ducking out the front door and pulling it shut behind him.

I wish the triplets would be nicer to Axel, but I'm not sure what I can do about it. I already told them, and they didn't listen. Ethan saunters toward me, scoops me up off the barstool, tosses me over his shoulder, and heads for the living room. He flops onto the couch with me and pulls me into his lap. The scent of musk pouring off him makes me instantly aroused.

He nibbles at my neck, his scratchy beard tickling my skin. "So, beautiful... When do you go into heat? Because you're going to have to tell me and Callan ahead of time so we can hole up at our old place beforehand unless you want me to fill you with a whole litter of puppies."

"What?" I ask, twisting around on his lap.

"Come on, Luna. Now that you're a good little housewife, Warrick's going to want to breed you right to prove you're his. The pack's really going to lose their shit over that."

He chuckles and grips my hips, moving me around on his cock.

"What do you mean?" I wrap my arms around his neck and blink up at him. "I'm not Warrick's. I'm all of yours."

"Does Warrick know that?" Ethan asks, running his hand up and down my shorts-clad thigh.

"Well... I mean... I think so?"

"Don't get me wrong, I like our little stolen moments like this, but he'd rip my throat out if he saw you grinding on my dick like this. Totally worth the blueballs for me, but you might want to tell him if you're not serious about him. He definitely thinks it's more than just fucking."

"It is," I say, thinking of how nice it feels to curl my little body up against his huge one every night, to feel protected and treasured as he holds me in the crook of his arm after fucking me hard and calling me his baby girl while he comes so deep inside me that I can't even breathe.

"You don't understand relationships at all, do you?" Ethan asks, grinning at me while he pushes his hips up under me.

"No," I admit. "Not really."

"Well, let's just say that you'd better tell him you're not his alone before

you go into heat if you don't want a bloodbath on your hands. Every unmated male wolf will be howling at your door, and I'm sure as fuck going to put my seed in you if you let me."

"Warrick did say I should wear clothes when I'm home so y'all and the rest of the pack aren't panting after me, but I didn't really know what he meant," I say. The heat level has been unbearable, and it's all I can do to wear any clothes at all. Warrick used his wolf dominance to stress the importance, though, and all of Axel's pack wears clothes. I've been doing my best to keep them on, so I fit in when I'm ready to go out into the pack again.

"Haven't you ever been in heat before?" Ethan asks,

"Once," I say, stroking the fur on his leg. "Mama got a witch to make them stop, but Axel gave me something to take the spell off when I was staying there. I don't think it worked, though, because I haven't gone into heat yet."

"I'm glad we didn't miss it." Ethan eyes my lips with intense, feral hunger. "What happened when you were in heat before?"

"Mama tried to keep me locked up our little house, but it wasn't built to withstand anything, and I kept escaping. I didn't know what I needed, exactly, just that I had this heat between my legs that ached so bad, and that I had to find a way to put out the fire."

"Did you touch yourself?" Ethan asks, his eyes blazing with desire.

"Some, but it didn't help much," I say. "And then it started to hurt because I did it too much. Mama took me to the hot springs and told me to soak it off, but it only helped as long as I was in the water. The second I got out, the need would be back."

"Oh, baby, I can't wait for that to happen." Ethan guides my body until I'm straddling him, pushed against his rigid length. "Feel that, sweetheart. I'm going to help you quench that fire all day when you're in heat. I just hope I'm the one who gets a baby in you."

He palms my belly before pulling my head in to meet his lips.

We make out—my new favorite term after the movies with Callan—for a few minutes. Our tongues collide and caress as Ethan thrusts his cock against my core. At last, he slides my shorts aside and sinks a finger into my wet pussy. His eyes roll back, and he groans.

"Want to start practicing now, so we're ready when it comes?"

I laugh. "We could. But first, I have a question."

"What is it?" he asks, pumping his finger into me slowly.

The sensation scrambles my brain. I arch into him, panting for more. “How can I think of what I want to ask when you’re doing that?”

“That’s my plan.” He leans forward and bites my neck, adding a second finger to the first that’s gliding in and out of me. “If you’re not just Warrick’s, this pussy’s mine for the fucking.”

Mercy on the swamp dogs, it feels so good I almost lose my mind.

“What’s your question?” he whispers into my skin.

“Have you ever done that before?” I ask. “Got a baby in someone?”

“No,” he murmurs against my neck. “I never wanted to before you.”

“Why not?”

He shrugs. “Growing up with a son of a bitch for a father didn’t leave me keen to sire my own offspring. I figured I’d only fuck them up. None of the women I’ve known were interested in anything but having their brains fucked out, and that’s all I was after, so everybody wins.”

“I see,” I say, as a sudden jab of jealousy stabs at my insides.

“I don’t think you do, pup,” Ethan says, circling his fingers inside me until my eyes roll back and my hips buck involuntarily against him. “I’ve seen that expression on you before, and I can assure you there’s nothing you need to worry about. I never cared for a woman before, but now that I’ve met you, I want things I never dreamed I’d want. I don’t even remember a single one of those women’s names. When I try, I just think of you.”

I start to melt in his lap at his declaration and the magic spell his fingers are casting. I feel utterly delicious hearing that Ethan’s never before felt what he feels for me.

“You gonna come on my fingers, or am I going to have to pound you with my cock to get you off?” he asks, his breath coming fast as he rocks his hips against my ass in rhythm with his pumping fingers.

“Your cock,” I moan, reaching for the button of his jeans.

Just as I’m about to slide my hand inside, a knock sounds at the door, interrupting us.

“Luna?” Axel says, easing open the door and sticking his head inside. “Are you still here? I wanted to talk to you.”

Chapter Sixteen

Luna

Axel steps inside as I scramble from Ethan's lap. I button my shorts, pat my hair, and smooth the front of my lavender top, trying to bring order to my appearance before turning to face my Alpha.

"Axel," I say. "What are you doing here?" I stand beneath the overhead fan, enjoying how it cools my flushed skin. The temperature outside must be approaching one-hundred, and it's muggy from the swamp, making us all damp and sticky.

"What do you mean?" Axel's gaze slides back and forth between Ethan and me. He looks hot and grumpy as he stands in my tiny foyer, as if it offends him that I'm with someone besides Warrick. Which doesn't make sense, because he hates Warrick most of all.

I'm afraid I will never understand this thing called relationships.

"I come by every day," Axel says. "Am I interrupting?"

"No," I say, just as Ethan says, "Yes."

Ethan's fly is hanging open, and I want to stand in front of him, so Axel doesn't notice. I'm not sure why, because I know Axel won't tell Warrick before I get the chance. Ethan makes no attempt to zip up, and his cock bulges against his jeans. He lounges on the couch, his arm resting along the back.

Axel's mouth works back and forth as he regards the two of us. "What's going on, Luna?" he asks, looking... Hurt, I think.

I'm still learning to read his expressions, but I can tell he's trying to hide it. His wolf isn't doing as well at appearing unbothered, though.

Ethan palms his erection. "What's it look like? Do you think I get this hard over the furniture?"

I could just about slug him. He's constantly tormenting Axel.

"Ethan, don't," I say. "There's no need to stir up trouble."

He grins up at Axel, ignoring me. "Yeah, okay, little pup. Let's not stir up trouble for the guy who's constantly checking up on you. She's fine, asshole, and she'd be even finer if you hadn't just stopped her from getting wrecked by the best dick of her life."

Axel gives me a wounded look. "I thought..."

"What?" Ethan asks, giving Axel a savage grin. "That because she's your mate, we wouldn't pass her around every night so we can all get a turn to come in that tight little pussy? Come on, now. You know our reputation. Surely that's all we know how to do with a woman."

Axel swallows, the little Adam's apple lump on his throat moving up and down, his eyes fixed on Ethan. I can feel pain radiating off him, and I don't like it.

"Ethan, stop," I say. "Axel, that's not true. Only Warrick comes in my pussy every night."

I'm not sure what I said wrong, but Axel looks like he's in danger of wolfing out and tearing Ethan's head off.

"Maybe you should go out back for a minute," I say to Ethan.

"Fuck this guy. I'm going for a ride," Ethan says. "Want to join me?"

"I need to talk to you, Luna," Axel says. "Before you head out with... Whatever this guy is to you."

"Let me see what he wants, and then we can go for a ride," I say to Ethan, desperately trying to make him happy and not make Axel sad at the same time.

"Nah. You do your thing with this asshole, and I'll catch up with you later," Ethan says. He grabs his black leather biker's vest off the living room chair where he deposited it earlier. Before heading out, he leans down to give me a soft kiss on the lips and chucks me on the chin. Then he skewers Axel with his hateful gaze before striding out the front door.

An awkward tension stretches between Axel and me.

"Can I get you anything? Beer? Water?" I ask, practicing the new social manners he taught me. Maybe if I show him that I'm using what he gave me, he'll feel better.

"Let's go for a walk," he says, taking a few sniffs of the air. "I need to get outside."

"Sure," I say, since by afternoon, it's hotter inside my house than out. I

can smell what he does, the scent of my arousal perfuming the air around us.

“You have everything you need here?” Axel asks as we step onto the porch. The sky is darkening in the east, but the air is still, with a restless, irritable charge. Definitely a storm coming.

“Yes, Axel,” I say. “You’ve been getting my every need met before I even know I have it—buying me dishes, towels, groceries... I do appreciate it.”

“All of your needs,” he says, his mouth in a sour twist. “You mean your material needs, right?”

“Exactly,” I say as we start along Golden Glade Street. The sidewalk shimmers from the heat, and I hope my sandals don’t melt. Wearing shoes has taken some getting used to, but sidewalks retain heat like crazy. No way could I place my feet or my wolf paws on this searing concrete. The palm trees lining the road do nothing to shield us from the thick, sweltering air.

The further we get away from my house, the more Axel seems to settle. He leads me along a path into the woods, so we’re not baking in the sun. “So,” he says. “You like the new place?”

“Oh, I love it!” I say, my mood lifting instantly. “I never owned anything so amazing in my life.”

This statement seems to please him, as evidenced by the smile on his face. But after a few minutes of padding along the dirt path in silence, his frown returns. “Are you fucking them?” he asks. “I want to hear it from you.”

“Do you *really* want to know?” I ask, my mood turning south, too.

“No,” he admits, his jaw set as he stares blankly into the distance.

“How’d it go with the pack?” I ask, hoping to circumvent what will surely turn into a fight if we continue down the track of what I’m up to with the three brothers.

“As well as could be expected, what with you living here, the triplets living here, and the vamps occupying so much territory... Ethan was right about the vampires not sticking to the territory I gave them.”

“I know he likes to lie to make you mad,” I say. “But I didn’t think that was a lie.”

Axel rubs the back of his neck before continuing. “Woulda been helpful if he’d told me sooner. But I know things are strained between us.”

“I’m sorry about that,” I say. “I can’t seem to stop making chaos wherever I go.”

“It’s not your fault, Luna,” he says, casting a long, wistful glance in my

direction. “How could it not be tense? We all want the same thing—you.”

“I know,” I say. “It’s so hard to figure out what to do. I want... I just want everyone to be happy. And once I learned what jealousy was, it don’t seem like that’s possible. If more than one person wants the same thing, it sure gets complicated.”

“It could be simple,” he says, snagging my hand. He waits, as if he thinks I’ll pull away, but my wolf is thrilling inside me at his touch.

Axel stops and pulls me in closer, turning to face me. “I’m still your mate, Luna,” he says. “No matter how much you deny it. I know your wolf feels it, too. No one would argue that—even Warrick let us be together when he thought it’s what you wanted...”

“But it’s not what I want,” I say, pulling myself away from him. “I want the triplets.”

“Do you?” he asks, cocking his head. “Or are you just punishing me for severing our bond?”

I turn and stomp deeper into the woods, smelling fresh water ahead.

“Luna,” Axel calls, hurrying after me. When I don’t answer, he falls into step beside me. “You heading for the pond?”

“Is that what you wanted to talk to me about?” I demand, stomping across the pine needles and dead palm leaves to reach a murky, shallow pond.

I kick off my shoes and wade into the knee-deep water. It’s brackish and slightly warm, but at least it’s wet. And wading through the water helps me feel my natural self, the one I was in the swamp with Mama. Once I reach the middle of the pond, I sit down in the silty mud.

Axel laughs and shakes his head. “You’re a trip, Luna. You’re the only person I know who would sit in the middle of this pond with your clothes still on.”

“Fuck clothes,” I say. “I wish I could strip mine off, but you and the others made it clear I’m to act civilized here in town.” I splash him with a scoop of water when he wades close enough for me to reach. “Are you going to loom over me, or are you going to join me?”

After a second, he grins and plunks down beside me, splashing me back.

We laugh and splash for a few minutes until we’re both completely doused with water. Then, I lay back in the shallow pond and let myself float, my hair spreading around me like blue clouds across the sky.

Axel watches with soft eyes.

“What?” I ask, spreading my arms in the water like a water bug.

“I’d like to offer you a position in the pack, Luna,” he says. “Will you be my Second?”

Chapter Seventeen

Luna

“You want me to be your Second-in-Command?” I ask, gaping at Axel.
“What about Ama?”

We’re still sitting in the pond off of Golden Glades Street, surrounded by marsh plants and a few palm trees. Paper cups and food wrappers float along the edges, having blown in from town, but I don’t have to scavenge for plastic cups or water jugs anymore, so I don’t pay the trash any mind. While Axel speaks, I let my hands swirl lazily in the pea-green water.

“Ama and I are two very dominant wolves,” Axel says. “It wouldn’t hurt to have a more submissive wolf to tame the tempers of the rest of us.”

I smile at Axel. I’m flattered to be offered a job in the pack and even more happy that he’s getting rid of Ama. I don’t like her one bit.

“What would I have to do?”

“You’ll be my right-hand wolf,” he says. “You’ll help me make decisions on what’s best for the pack, and you can even govern in my absence for a short time.”

“Really?” I say, my eyes widening. “So, I can boss around the entire pack when you’re not there? Is that what Ama does?”

Axel gives me an indulgent smile. “It’s not exactly ‘bossing around.’ They look to you for guidance, order, structure, and protection. And, yes, that’s Ama’s role in the pack.” The corners of his lips turn down. “But I think she might be good in a different role.”

“What kind of role is that?” I ask, trying on the role of Second in my mind. I like the idea of having authority in the pack, but then again, it also sounds like responsibility that I’m not sure I’m ready for. I don’t know any of the rules and laws like Ama does.

“To be Second, you’ll need to accept the pack bond and become an official member.” Axel’s face almost glows with excitement. “You’ll be bonded to all of the Jacksonville pack, even communicate with us telepathically if you’re in any trouble. The Alpha and his Second have an even stronger bond. We’ll be able to communicate just between the two of us, too.”

“Wait a minute...” My eyes narrow. “Was this all a ploy to get me to join the pack so you can basically be my mate without being my mate?”

“It’s not like that,” he growls. “I want to keep you safe.”

“Isn’t it like that, though?” I ask, my relaxation from a moment ago melting as my spine stiffens into a steel rod. “It sure sounds like it. ‘Hey, Luna, you can be my Second-in-Command and have an important role, but with one little catch. You’re going to have to become a member of the pack and share a special bond with me.’ That sounds just like being your *mate*.” The word leaves a bitter taste in my mouth after all I’ve been through because of it.

“You can’t be the pack’s Second if you’re not in the pack,” he says, looking at me like I’m looney. “The Alpha and his Second have to be able to communicate during times of crisis to help the pack.”

“And here I thought your offer was a gesture of goodwill.”

“Who says it isn’t?” he says, his golden eyes flashing fire.

“Your offer *stinks*. Being your Seconds sounds just like being your mate.”

I frown, thinking of Ama carrying that much responsibility and having such a close bond with Axel. I don’t like thinking about how close they are, how much they share that I’m not a part of because I don’t belong to the pack yet. That’s my choice, but I still don’t like her around him.

“Fuck, Luna,” Axel says with a sigh of frustration. “Of course I want you in the pack. I want you to be my mate. You *know* this. I never hid it. You’re my fucking heartbeat itself. Every breath I take is an homage to you. I can’t exist if you’re not in my life, in whatever capacity I can have you, even if you’re with those assholes instead of me. But I’m not going to trick you into being my mate.”

Our eyes lock in a tangle of still-fresh wounds at this declaration. I don’t know what to say. I might have grown to feel that way had the True Mate bond not been severed, but it was. Can I still feel like that now, after he hurt me so much? I don’t like the thought of him with Ama, but that doesn’t mean I want him for myself. Does it?

Doesn't Axel occupy a portion of my daily musings, whether I like it or not? He comes by every day, brings me things, dotes on me. I appreciate all the little gestures, the things he does to show he's sorry and let me know he's thinking about me all through the day. I feel *something* for him, I'm just not sure what it is.

"Look," he says, lifting his hands from the pond. Water drips down his arms. "Despite my personal desires, that choice is up to you. I won't force you to be my mate. That's separate from this. But either way, even if you're never mine again, you should join the pack."

"So you can read my mind?" I ask, thinking of how many times Mama told me not to trust wolves. If I can't keep a secret from them, I've trusted them completely.

Axel rakes a hand through his hair and blows out a breath. "You'll be safer in the pack. We protect each other. Imagine how being able to communicate with just a cry in your mind might have served you when that lone wolf attacked you. I'd have known the instant you were in danger, and believe me, I would have come running. All of the pack would have. We'd know your whereabouts, what you were experiencing, *everything*."

I chew on my lip, considering. "I don't know nothing about the law," I say. "Pack law."

He sits forward. "I'll teach you. Pack history, pack law, hierarchy, all you need to know to help me lead and be my Second. What do you say, Luna?"

I ripple my fingers in the water as I consider the request while Axel waits. "Too much responsibility," I say at last. "Even I know you're not doing this for the pack. Even if you're not doing it to trick me, you're trying to give me the best things so I'll forgive you for doing the worst things. The answer's still no."

His entire body sags, like sand's draining from his bones.

"But I'll join the pack," I pronounce.

"Really?" he asks, his eyes brightening and a smile starting at the corners of his mouth.

"If my mates can join, too."

"What?" he demands. "What the fuck, Luna? Warrick challenged me for Alpha and lost. He was banished. The other two chose to sever their pack bonds. They can't just stroll back in like nothing happened."

"Why not?"

"If I let them come back after that, I'd look weak. In a lot of packs, a fight

for Alpha is a fight to the death. Warrick's lucky he only got banished. If I let him come back, no one will ever take me seriously again."

"Why is it always about what the pack thinks of you?" I ask. "I thought you were their leader. Why does it matter what they think? You make the rules."

"I make rules for the good of my pack."

"And I make rules for the good of mine," I say, climbing to my feet. Pond water trickles down my legs and plops in drips from the hems of my shorts and shirt, making them heavy and tight. I want to peel them off, but Warrick forbid me from going outside without clothes. I pivot and start back toward my house.

When I glance over my shoulder, Axel's not following me. He stands still, as if his feet are glued to the mud in the middle of the pond. I'm almost out of view when he shouts for me to wait.

I whip around and stare at him as he rushes toward me, water dripping off his clothes, too. "What am I waiting for?" I ask.

"I'll give you what you want," he says, holding out a hand as if to stop me from walking away again. "I'll do it. They can join the pack, too, if you'll join it. That's how much I want to keep you safe, Luna. I'd give anything to protect you. Even my reputation."

"I still don't want to be your Second," I warn. "But if my mates can join, too, then we'll all be safe."

"They're not your mates," he grits out.

"They're my mates if I say they are," I say, crossing my arms over my chest.

Axel's wolf howls inside him, but I can hear it. His furious protests tear at my heart with knives of guilt and longing. He wants me to be *his* mate—and my wolf wants that, too.

"So, I give you everything, and I get nothing," Axel says dully. "That's where we are now."

"You can stay for dinner," I offer.

"Dinner," Axel says flatly. "That's what you're willing to give?"

Chapter Eighteen

Warrick

I got six dead Swamp rabbits draped over the back of my bike, and I'm eager to share them with the family—until I spot that dickwad Axel, strolling next to Luna like they're a couple teenagers courting. I fix a steely-eyed glare at him until he and Luna are within a few feet of me.

“You just can't stay away, can you, puppy-dog?” I growl at him. “Sniffing around here like she's a bitch in heat. Pathetic.”

I'd rip his throat out if I could walk out of here alive, but I know the pack would kill me and my brothers too if I touched their fucking Alpha. I'm so sick of his ugly mug showing up day and night, mooning over my Luna, it'd almost be worth it.

Luna sidles over to me and gives me a sweet kiss, trying to sooth my temper. I heft the rope-bound dead rabbits from my bike and hold them up like a prize. “See what I caught for you, baby girl?” I say, dismissing Axel from my line of sight. “Your man brought home food to feed the family.”

“Thank you,” she says, her eyes lighting up.

I sling my other arm over her shoulder, effectively pushing Axel out of the way. I sneer at him before speaking. “Food I hunted, not just bought from the grocery store.”

“That's great, Warrick,” Luna chirps. “Axel's joining us, and it looks like you brought home enough for all of us.”

Her statement grinds in my gears. I didn't spend the whole day in the preserve chasing these dumb bunnies through the marsh only to share my hard work with the likes of Axel. “What a good idea, Luna,” I say, my teeth bared in a snarl at Axel. “Maybe he'll get it through his head that your ass is mine now, and he'll stop mooning over you like he's got a shot.”

I kiss her thoroughly just to rub it in his face. He needs to know he's never getting her back. When I pull away, Luna giggles breathlessly. I smirk down at her. "You have a good day, baby girl?"

"I did have a good day," she says, smiling and snuggling into my side, where she's tucked into the protection of my arm.

"Same here." I lift the rabbits again and give the bundle of meat a wiggle. "These fuckers are wily."

"Don't I know it," she says. "I caught them for Mama and me when we lived alone. It was more fun catching Key deer with Axel, though." Her eyes sparkle at the memory, and my wolf growls inside me.

"They're hardly a sporting challenge," I say, shooting Axel a superior look. "All Key deer do is huddle together with the rest of the pack like sheep. These little guys give you a run for your money."

"They're hardly sheep," Axel mutters. "We felled a buck. Luna and I worked as a team to take him down."

I give Luna a little squeeze as we tromp up the porch stairs. Reaching for the door handle, I hold it open for her, then slide in front of Axel and release the door, so he has to catch it before it clocks him in the face.

"Callan!" I bellow when I've stepped onto Luna's tiny foyer.

"What's up?" he calls from the living room. "I'm kicking Ethan's ass in this game."

"Get your ass out here and make us some supper," I growl. "Luna's invited a *guest*."

I tromp into the kitchen and spread the rabbits out on the counter. Then, I head to the fridge and retrieve a cold brew for myself and hold out one to Luna. "Want one?"

"I'm good," she says as she shuffles toward the counter to start the rabbit prep. "Axel?"

"Sure. I'll take one." Axel gives me a cool look, trying to fucking lord his dominance over me in my own mate's house.

"Nah," I say, closing the fridge and leaning on the counter. "That's a waste of good beer."

I tip back my head and take a few long swallows, watching the priceless look of utter, impotent fury on Axel's face from the corner of my eye. Then I step behind Luna and massage the back of her neck with my free hand.

"Mmm. That feels good," she says, laying the rabbits out.

"Good," I say, pushing aside her long hair to kiss her neck. "Call it pre-

foreplay. It's to get you ready for foreplay, which is to get you ready for what I'm packing."

A pretty blush colors her cheeks while Axel's face grows apoplectic red.

It makes me want to laugh—it's so damn easy to get his goat. I head to the table, sit down, and lean back on the back two legs, enjoying myself immensely. If he's going to keep harassing my mate after we both told him to shove a dick up his ass, I'll remind him exactly how thoroughly he fucked up.

Luna opens a drawer and retrieves a shiny cleaver. Placing the first carcass on the cutting board, she chops off all four legs at the ankles, then slices off the tail and the head. Pulling the skin away from the belly, she takes a smaller knife and cuts apart the hide from groin to neck, careful to not pierce the stomach. Now she's ready to peel away the skin like she's removing a tight coat from the carcass.

I like watching her. Her focus and skill with a sharp blade make my wolf swell with pride.

Mine.

She carefully guts the rabbit, then removes its liver, which she places on a plate.

"You want the organ meat?" she asks me.

I shoot Axel a grin, and Luna's eyes fly wide. Maybe she thinks since he's the Alpha, he should get the organs. But Axel's status ain't shit in this house, and he knows it. He's leaning against the wall all casual-like, but what he sees in here must burn like a brand to his soul.

"Sure, baby girl," I say. "Bring it to me."

After presenting the liver to me, Luna affords Axel another glance, this one laced with what looks like sympathy. He doesn't react, but I know his wolf's seething inside. What Alpha male in his right mind wouldn't care when the woman he longs for serves up the best bits to another man? And I'm not just getting the best bits of the rabbit. I get the best bits of her.

"Thanks, darlin'," I say to her before picking up the raw liver with my fingers and popping it in my mouth. I chew slowly, watching the vein in Axel's head tick with each heartbeat.

As Luna finishes prepping the carcasses, Callan strides in with a grin on his face. "Now that I'm done kicking Ethan's ass," he says, talking about his dumbass video game. "Step aside for the master chef, pet."

Luna giggles and steps out of the way, taking the entrails to the trash.

"Callan," Axel says with a nod.

The poor guy's out of his league here. He must be dying a thousand deaths to witness the easy way all of us interact with Luna.

Callan prepares the rabbit stew and Luna cleans up, the two of them keeping up an easy banter all the while. Ethan joins and makes a salad while I have a cigarette at the table. None of us pay Axel any mind. Luna tries to include him in any conversations, but the rest of us cut him out. No one asked him to be here.

After we're all seated and the meal is served, we dig in. For a few minutes, none of us speak as we wolf down the food. Axel sets down his spoon halfway through his bowl, like he's been looking for his balls the whole time. He frowns at Luna and then turns to us.

"I'd like to extend an invitation," he says. "For you to join the pack."

No one says a word.

My brothers both turn their gazes to me, though. I slurp up a spoonful of soup.

"It's because I asked him to," Luna bursts out. "Axel can change pack law. He's the Alpha. And the pack *can* offer us protection."

"We didn't ask him to change anything," Ethan says. "We're fine with the way things stand."

Callan scratches his beard. "Can't say we need your protection," he says to Axel. "We've been getting along just fine without y'all for the past ten-plus years."

Axel blows out a lungful of air. "Yeah, I get that," he says, looking pissed. "You wouldn't benefit that much. But think of Luna—the pack can telepathically communicate with her if she's in trouble. Think of how that might have saved her from nearly dying a couple of weeks ago."

"I think we managed," I say, picking up my soup bowl and downing the rest of the contents in a few big swallows. I wipe my mouth on the back of my hand and glare at him.

"You can manage better with the pack, and we all know it," Axel states, placing his palms on the table. "I won't beg. But it's the only way Luna will join. I'm willing to share my pack, the protection it offers, and all that goes along with it for her sake."

"You just want to fuck her," Ethan says.

Axel's lips purse, but he keeps his cool.

"You already shared your mate with us," I say with a grin, enjoying goading the asshole. "It's a good thing, too, or she'd never know what it was

like to be fucked by a real man.”

I pull out my tobacco and start to roll up a cigarette.

“She’s not your mate,” Axel states, his fingers pressing into the table so that the muscles in his forearm bulge.

I light my cigarette and blow a cloud of smoke at him.

“She chose me as her mate,” I say. “Now she’s mine.”

“Please don’t fight,” Luna says, her appeasing nature surfacing. “We all share everything. If I join the pack, I want to share that with y’all, too.”

“We don’t share *everything*,” I growl. “Not with him.”

“But we all share with each other,” Luna says. “Me and you and your brothers. Our own little pack.”

“That’s right.” I crush out my cigarette and grin at her, eyeing her tight little body. “I’m your Alpha and your mate. Your ass is mine now, not his. Which means I can share you however I see fit, with whomever I see fit.”

Luna nods eagerly. “Yes, I’m yours,” she agrees.

I pull her from her chair and onto my lap, hook my hand behind her neck, and lower my mouth to hers. I can’t remember the last time I kissed a woman—it’s been years. I fuck Luna near every night, but kissing isn’t something that interests me. But tonight, I kiss her with fury and longing and lucifer be damned, how she responds. Her little hands grip my arms as I plunge my tongue rhythmically against hers, my cock stiffening under her ass until she’s squirming and panting.

When I draw back, she’s positively glowing, flushed with desire, and everyone in the room can smell the sweet scent of her arousal.

Axel stands from the table abruptly. “Thank you for dinner,” he says, turning on his heel. “I’ll see myself out.”

I nod at Ethan, who scoots his chair back from the table, blocking his path.

“Well, now, don’t be too hasty,” my brother says, an edge of taunting in his voice. “We couldn’t let a guest leave without showing our hospitality. And you wouldn’t want to be rude and run out on us now, would you?”

Axel’s jaw grinds back and forth.

“That’s right,” I say. “If you’re offering to share, I think you should know the full meaning of the word.”

“I understand I hurt Luna, and I’ve tried to make amends,” Axel says.

“I don’t think you do understand, mongrel,” I say. “We’re the ones who sat with Luna and consoled her after you threw her away. You didn’t see it,

so how can you understand? *We* rescued her and nursed her back to health. When she got hurt again running from *your* captivity, who saved her? I did. We took turns taking care of her, hoping like hell she didn't die. If you want to see why she didn't choose you, Axel, come on back to the bedroom and you can see for yourself just how good we take care of her."

The bastard's face goes a mottled gray, as if he's swamped with shame.

"Yes, you haven't seen any of the bedrooms since I fixed them up," Luna says, hopping to her feet and clapping her hands, obviously relieved to distract us from the tension. "Let's go see them."

She grabs Axel's hand and drags him down the hall. I glance at my brothers and grin. "Want to help me make his head spin like a fucking demon?" I ask. "Because I had to watch him fuck her in the woods and not do shit about it, so he's going to get to do the same tonight. But this time, we'll show him what sharing a mate is supposed to look like."

"I'll make sure he stays and watches," Ethan says.

I give him a funny look—I've never known Ethan to turn down pussy, and Luna's not just any pussy. She's my mate, and I'm offering to share her. We've shared lots of women before, but we've never given a fuck about one, so this is different.

Callan nods, though, standing from the table. "Thank you."

When we reach the bedroom, Luna's inside pointing out the new lace curtains, and Axel's standing in the doorway, looking tense as fuck. I give him a hard shove, and he stumbles forward before spinning to face us.

"You're not going anywhere," I say. "Until you see what you gave up, and what it means to share the right way, not for some bullshit purposes."

Ethan grabs Axel and yanks his hands behind his back, and I scoop up Luna. She gives a little giggling shriek and slides her small, soft hand behind my neck. I kiss her hard as I make my way to the bed. If I kissed a woman before—and I'm not sure I have—it couldn't hold a candle to how it feels to savage Luna's delicious little mouth. To taste her, to plunge my tongue inside like I'm thrusting it into her sweet little pussy, is pure heaven.

I hear Axel growling out protests, but he doesn't use his dominance to force Ethan to release him. The sicko might be fighting it, but he wants to watch us wreck his tight little mate. If he really wanted to go, he could.

I lay Luna down on the bed, and Callan slides off her shirt and shorts, leaving her stretched out in nothing but a pair of purple silk panties, bought on Axel's dime.

Luna seems torn between breaking up the growling match going on between Axel and Ethan, and submitting to the pleasure we're offering. I use a little of my own dominance to urge her to forget about the others, and she melts back on the bed with a sigh when Callan starts kissing her, massaging her tits and pulling at her nipples while he devours her mouth.

I spread her legs and have my way with her pussy, lapping at her like a man who's been withheld food for far too long. She moans and lifts her hips, and I force two long fingers into her tight core at once. She squeals, but I know she can take it. I pump into her while I suck and nip at her clit. She moans and writhes beneath my mouth, her juices slicking my fingers.

"Want to do that to me?" Callan growls to her, nipping at her ear.

"What?" she asks, her voice breathless.

"Want to suck my cock?"

She nods eagerly, and Callan straddles her torso, props her head on three pillows, and thrusts his cock into her mouth. I hear her gagging, and I just about come in my pants. Instead, I add another finger, working it past her stretched entrance.

Her moans grow louder as she's sucking my brother while he pumps into her mouth from above. I eat her cunt until she comes, crying out around Callan's cock.

He pulls out of her mouth and grabs his cock, aiming at her face. Cum rains down over her face and throat, and he slides back to unload the last of it over her creamy tits with their rosebud nipples.

She's panting, crying, moaning, and bucking into my mouth. Her hands fist the sheets and tear at the bedspread as I suck her clit hard until she comes a second time.

"Too much, Warrick!" Luna cries. "I can't take anymore."

Grinning, I withdraw from her, pulling my slick fingers from her juicy core. "Oh, I'm just getting started, baby girl," I say, standing and unzipping my jeans. "Now I'm going to fuck your cunt until you scream."

I glance back at Ethan, who's wrestling with Axel. I grin at the Alpha as I knock his mate's quivering thighs apart and lower my enormous cock to her little pink pussy. I'm about to wreck her, and he knows it. He knows he can't compete with me. The minute my brother lets him go, he'll slink away like a beaten Omega, knowing he's no match for us.

"Daddy, please," Luna whimpers, drawing my attention back to her.

At the sound of her sweet words, my cock throbs precum onto her waiting

flesh. I turn back to my sexy little mate, forgetting all about our audience. Throwing her legs over my shoulders, I force my cock deep inside her. She shrieks and bucks, tears of strain trickling from the corners of her eyes as she takes every inch of me. I ravage her tight little cunt, relishing every cry I tear from her lips as I demolish her until she comes, screaming my name.

When I'm done with her, I turn to see my brothers watching with hungry eyes. Axel is long gone.

Chapter Nineteen

Luna

I'm yanked from the fog of bliss at the sound of the front door slamming shut. I can feel Axel's wolf, how wounded it is, and guilt cloaks me like a shroud. I didn't mean for this to happen, even though some part of me thought Axel deserved to see what he threw away. That's why I let him stay and watch.

"Go make sure he doesn't destroy shit," Warrick says to Ethan.

Ethan leaves the room. I know Axel wouldn't destroy my house, though. At least I hope he wouldn't. He did demolish our swamp home, according to Evan. But I don't trust vampires, so I'm not sure if that's true.

The light of a half-moon streams through the slit in my blue and white lace curtains, lighting up the bed. Callan lays on one side of me, playing with my nipples and stroking my breast.

Warrick gives a low growl and settles in on my other side. "Did my baby girl like that?" he asks.

"So much," I say, snuggling in beside him.

"You want me to share you with Ethan, too?" he asks.

"Yes, please," I say, squirming at the thought of what Axel interrupted earlier.

He chuckles and gives my nipple a tweak. "Wouldn't Axel shit himself if we turned you into a regular club whore?"

"What's that?" I ask.

He rolls onto his side to face me. "What we like to do to them," he says, running his calloused fingers up my side, making me shiver. "Is one of us wrecks their cunt while another fucks them in the ass. Sometimes the third one fucks their face at the same time. Then we switch around. Keep going all

night until they're overflowing with cum."

"Oh," I whisper. "I'd like that."

Warrick laughs quietly, a sound I don't think I've heard before. "You're a regular little slut, aren't you?" he asks, sliding his hand between my thighs. "You'd do anything for an orgasm."

"Why wouldn't I?" I ask. "It's the best feeling ever."

"Can't argue with that," he agrees, sinking a finger into me.

Callan clears his throat and gives me a significant look, and I'm pretty sure I know what he wants. I thread my fingers through Warrick's chest hair and look up at him through my lashes.

"So, actually, I was thinking..." I begin. "Maybe I'd like to be mates with all three of you all the time."

"Is that right?" Warrick asks, pumping into me until I almost lose my head.

"Yes," I said, closing my eyes and sinking into the pleasure.

"Well," he says. "I don't guess I mind sharing, as long as it's with my brothers. I've done it plenty before."

"Thank you," I say, leaning in to kiss him before giving in to his skillful fingers and letting him shoot me into the stars again.

Later, Warrick falls asleep on one side of me, and Callan snuggles close on the other. I should be perfectly and truly content now that we've cleared up the mate situation. But I can feel Axel's wolf all the way from down the street, can feel the anguish I caused.

A fat tear spills from my eye.

"What's wrong?" Callan asks, propping himself up on one elbow. "Why are you crying?" He leans down and sucks the tears from my face, waking Warrick.

Warrick clears his throat and says in a groggy voice, "Do we have a problem?"

"We hurt Axel," I sob.

"We didn't hurt Axel—Axel hurt Axel," Warrick says, wrapping a protective arm around me. "Breaking a sacred oath the way he did is inexcusable."

"Yes, but hasn't he suffered enough?" I reach for the sheet to wipe my eyes.

"Not hardly, Luna," Callan says. "I don't think you understand the enormity of his actions. No one breaks the sacred True Mate bond. Some

wolves actually die from it, when their mate dies or is killed. Or they lose their minds, like your mama did. Axel did that to you knowing that could be the consequence. He's getting off easy."

"I doubt he sees it that way," I say in a too-small voice.

"Callan's right, baby girl," Warrick murmurs sleepily. "At your request, I spared his life. But that don't mean he doesn't deserve to die."

"You're tender hearted, and we love you for it," Callan says to me. "Now put him out of your mind and be here with us."

Warrick sighs again, and after a minute, he resumes snoring.

Callan lowers himself back to prone and nuzzles my neck. I smile and pretend to be okay for his sake, stroking his chest and playing with his unruly hair until he falls asleep. But I lay there half the night, feeling as battered as I did when I woke up from my wolf attack coma.

The next day, Callan and Warrick are already gone when I drag myself from bed. My heart feels as heavy as the stones lining the creek near their house. I pad to the kitchen and find a note resting on the table, scrawled in Callan's messy handwriting.

Gone hunting. See you tonight.

In a way, I'm glad. I don't want them around when Axel stops by today to bring me gifts or ask if I need anything. I intend to explain that I didn't mean to hurt his wolf and telling him how sorry I am.

I make breakfast and sit at the window seat, waiting for him to come knocking.

But I finish breakfast, and he's not there. I wash up and then tend the garden out back, looking up whenever someone strolls by. None of them are Axel.

All day, he never comes.

Nor does he stop by that night. Or the next day...or the day after that. Or the five days following.

Finally, I see him driving his truck down the street one day. My wolf leaps with joy. He's okay after all!

I race out onto the sidewalk, waving wildly, but his truck lumbers past without slowing.

I'm sitting at the counter the next morning when Callan comes whistling in. "What's up?" he asks, setting the coffee on. "You're looking morose for a girl who just got fucked until she couldn't take it no more."

I manage a small smile. "What's morose?"

“That,” he says, gesturing to my face before taking a seat beside me. “What’s bothering you, pet?”

“I miss the coffee Axel used to bring,” I admit.

“Oh, now, don’t you worry about that,” he says, tucking my lilac hair behind my ear. “How about this? I’ll take you down there right now, and you can get whatever frou-frou coffee shit you want.”

“Okay,” I say, nodding because I know he doesn’t really mean shit. He said that’s just a word to describe things in general.

I hop on his bike with him, and we race along the streets of Jacksonville, under the heavy sky. The air smells restless again. At the coffee shop, we step inside, and my wolf leaps high inside me, threatening to take me over. Our eyes fix on the blond-haired man at the counter—Axel. He takes his coffee and turns, his blue eyes landing on me. Without a word, his jaw tightens, and he pivots and heads out a side door.

A blade of regret cuts through my muscles and bones, leaving me raw and bloody. I should never have made him stay and see that I’m someone else’s mate. His wolf will never believe it.

The coffee doesn’t even taste good, even though it’s filled with cream and all the flavors of syrup that I want. I only drink half of it before I ask Callan to take me home.

The next week passes the same way. I’m happy that the brothers are sharing me, that there’s no secrets between us. We’re our own little family, closer than ever. We eat together every night. We joke around as usual. During the day, they head out and do whatever boys do. At night, I fuck Warrick and sometimes Callan, too. It feels as good as it always did, but something’s different.

Sometimes they ask me if I want to go out somewhere, but I politely decline. I need to stay close in case Axel stops by, and to guard my house. My wolf feels strangely, jealously possessive of it, even though no one has tried to mess it up, and Axel hasn’t said he wants it back.

When another week has passed with no sign of Axel, I can hardly stand it.

Warrick tromps in one morning and says, “We’re going hunting for deer today. Real deer, not those puny Key deer. Why don’t you come with us, Luna? It’d be good for you to get out and hunt.”

“Yeah, come with us,” Ethan says, winding his arms around me. “It’s a blast to take down a big deer. And I’m in the mood for venison.”

“That sounds nice,” I admit. “But I might stay in one more day.”

“You gotta let Axel go, pup,” he says, ruffling the top of my head. “It’s for the best. He finally got the message and is leaving you to live your life on your terms. Just like you wanted.”

“Maybe,” I say, adding a sad smile. “Or maybe I crushed his heart.”

“More like his ego,” Callan says. “An Alpha’s got a lot of pride, and you shoved a red-hot poker right up the ass of it. He ain’t comin’ around here after that.”

The realization of how much I miss Axel bobs to the surface.

“But I *liked* having him around,” I cry.

Warrick shakes his head and strides toward the front door. “A little late for that, baby girl,” he calls back. “Now come and hunt with us and take your mind off it.”

But my wolf refuses to come out. She’s as mad at me as Axel must be.

A few minutes later, the guys get tired of trying to convince me, and they take off on their own. Three motorcycle engines roar and zoom off down the street, and I sit in the stew of misery I cooked up for myself. But I’m tired of moping and dwelling in that misery, so I decide to pull up my big girl britches and do something about it. I put on my shoes and head over to confront Axel. Enough’s enough.

As I stride up the sidewalk toward his house, a gusty wind whips my hair in a tangle around my head. The palm trees sway back and forth with a backdrop of dark clouds. A storm that’s been taking its time in arriving has finally decided to make its presence known.

Seagulls struggle for purchase in the airwaves overhead. I feel sorry for birds when the weather’s bad—their delicate wings can’t compete with gale-force winds. Even I have to put my head down and force my way up the street. When I arrive at Axel’s house, I’m completely winded.

I stride up his porch stairs and rap on the front door. After a minute, he opens up. When he sees me, his expression becomes dead and lifeless.

“Hey, Axel,” I say, my heart hammering in my chest.

“Hey, Luna,” he says, his voice cool. “Help you?”

My wolf whines at his cold treatment. I chew on my lip before saying, “Can I come in? I need to talk to you.”

“Suit yourself,” he says. “But I don’t have much time, so make it quick.”

He moves away from the door and disappears into the house.

I enter but stand stiffly just inside the door.

A pile of puffy orange things that look like small pants filled with foam

sits on the floor next to the sofa. Axel taps away at his phone. Then, he holds it up to his ear and says, “Hey. Do you have the supplies I asked you to get?... Great. Meet me at Adolfa’s house. She’ll be our coordinator... Uh-huh... Yeah... Okay. See you there.”

“Who was that?” I ask when he sets down the phone.

“My Second in Command.”

He could have just said Ama. Or he could have just walked over and punched me in the gut because that’s what I feel at the friendly tone he used with her and the wooden voice he’s using with me.

“What are you and Ama doing?” I can’t keep the jealousy from my voice.

“Working to keep our pack safe. A hurricane’s coming, and we’re responsible for the entire pack’s safety.” He moves about his kitchen, opening doors, retrieving items, and tossing them into boxes.

“You think it’s a hurricane?”

“I know it is. Now, what did you want to talk about?” He strides toward the pile of orange things, scoops them up, and heads outside.

I follow him. “What are those?”

“Life jackets.”

The wind pushes us down the walkway from his house. Axel dumps the whole pile in his truck bed and heads back inside, with me continuing to follow.

“Anything I can do to help?” I say, grabbing the screen door before it whacks me in the head.

“Nope.” He strides down the hall, opens a hall closet, and retrieves several lanterns and a box that says “flashlights” on the side.

“Are you sure?” I ask hopefully. “What do you need done? I can carry things even if I don’t know what they are. I won’t ask you questions and slow you down.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he says. “Ama’s helping. That’s her job. We’ve got it covered.”

Another stab of jealousy tears at my stomach. I could have been his Second, but I chose the triplets instead. “I see.”

“Do you?” he says, finally looking at me with a world of hurt in his eyes.

It makes my wolf twist up tight inside me with her head and tail down. “Can I just explain what happened that night?” I ask, my tone pleading.

“I know exactly what happened,” he growls. “Though I’m trying my damndest to forget it by any means necessary.”

I race to catch up with him. “What does that mean?”

“You made it real fucking clear that you can do whatever you want with whomever you want,” he says, opening the cab and placing the lanterns inside. “That street goes two ways, Luna.”

“What street?” I ask, misery and confusion rising inside me.

“I don’t have time for this,” he says, rounding the bumper and heading toward the driver’s side.

“You’re leaving?” I call over the howling wind.

“I told you. There’s another goddamned hurricane coming. It’s my job to keep the pack safe—a job you rejected. Good thing Ama’s stepping up, like she always does.”

If I hear her name one more time, I’m going to bleed to death, right here on the sidewalk.

“Let me come and help you. I can explain everything in the truck.”

He gives me a sour look. “You made yourself perfectly clear, Luna.”

He opens the driver’s side door and clambers inside. I race around the truck and grab the handle before he can slam it shut. “Wait!”

He huffs out a sigh. “Let go of my door, Luna.”

“I don’t want to. I want you to stay and let me explain. Or let me come with you. I—I’ll make it up to you. I was stupid and hurting and wrong, and I don’t know how to do this thing people call relationships. I’m sorry.”

His mouth bunches up and scoots to one side. “It’s for the best, Luna,” he finally says in a flat tone. “Let it go and move on. I did. You can, too. I want you to be happy, and clearly, you can’t be happy with me. So, go be happy with them.”

Angry tears track down my cheeks. “You can’t mean that.”

“I can, and I do. You made it clear who’s important to you, and it isn’t me.” His expression softens, no longer the carved granite of a minute ago. “Now, please let go of my truck. My pack needs me.”

“You mean they need you and Ama,” I wail.

He sighs. “Head inside and put your house on the list for weatherproofing. We’re doing all we can before the hurricane arrives. That way we won’t lose as many homes.”

I step away from his truck and stand there as he drives away without a backwards glance. What have I done? I suddenly wish the triplets had never found me.

Chapter Twenty

Ethan

The wild winds have already begun testing the roof's mettle, so after the hunt, I start gathering my tools to work on it. This storm's going to be a bitch. The clouds look like bloated cows, and every body of water has white-capped waves. Mother Nature's serving us up one whale of a weather front—for the millionth time this decade. We just can't catch a break around these parts.

"What are you doing?" Luna asks, watching me as I buckle on my tool belt.

"Gonna go make sure your pretty little house doesn't flood," I say, smiling down at her. "Secure the shingles and add shutters to the windows."

"Can I come?"

I open my mouth to say no, she'll ask too many questions and slow me down. But she stares up at me with her big pretty eyes, and my resolve crumbles. I just can't take it when she fixes me with those purple doe eyes. I can't bring myself to deny her anything her sweet little heart desires.

"Sure, pup," I say. "Come on up with me."

None of us can seem to get her out of the house, so this will be a good chance for her to do something normal, though I figure I'll spend as much time explaining how to use the hammer as actually swinging it. She's been keeping to herself a lot since the night we forced Axel to watch my brothers fuck her. That asshole deserved every ounce of pain he experienced for hurting our Luna, but we agreed amongst ourselves to let Luna have her space to process the experience. You can't force insight or wisdom.

We climb a ladder and pad onto the roof. Luna crouches to examine the shingle, nodding to herself. She finds a loose one and pulls it up, peeking under at the lone nail remaining. Then she gets a handful of nails and a

hammer and gets busy. As she straddles the roof with me, she seems to have let go of some burden. She's still quiet, but she doesn't look sad. She's just concentrating. And damned if she can't wield a mean hammer, no explaining necessary on my part.

She pounds nails into the shingles that we bought to mend the ones that were clinging to the roof by a thread, and damn but she looks sexy. The wind billows around her, blowing out her long, lilac locks and plastering her sleeveless top against her body. The lack of sleeves shows off the muscles in her arms, and I'll be damned if they aren't the sexiest thing I've ever seen, in part because this is the last thing I expected when we came up here.

Luna seems so fragile because of the state we found her in, and so innocent because of her lack of social skills, but I have to remind myself she's not weak by any means. She may be submissive and adorably clueless, but she's strong and capable. After all, she was taking care of her mother for years, surviving on her own and being responsible for another's survival on top of it. She's a strong ass woman who deserves every ounce of respect I've got to give.

She looks up from the nail she just secured in the shingles and smiles at me. "What are you looking at?"

"What do you think?"

I'm pleased to see a genuine smile on her face—not the fake ones she's been giving us lately. My brothers and I might be rough around the edges, but we all know when a woman is faking it.

"I think you're looking at me," she says, still smiling.

"You're right. You win the prize."

"What's the prize?" she asks, cocking her head to the side.

I tap my lips with my fingertip.

"I won a kiss?"

"Come over here and see," I tease.

She gets on her hands and knees and crawls along the ridge of the roof toward me. I sit back, ready for her kiss. When she reaches me, though, she lowers her head and gently bites the fly of my zipper.

"What's that for?" I ask, loving the attention.

"It's for offering me a prize," she says, looking at me through her lashes.

"You don't have to repay a prize. Now come and get it while it's fresh."

She stretches her neck and puckers her pretty mouth.

I tip her chin up with one finger and gift her with the softest kiss I've ever

given. With Luna, there are endless firsts.

When she pulls away, she gives a little sigh of pleasure. “That was a good prize.”

“There are more where that came from,” I say, patting my knee.

She slides up onto my lap, her little body curling into mine as her delicate arms circle my neck. “I’m sorry I’ve been so weird lately,” she says, watching me from under her lashes.

“Don’t worry about it, pup. You’ve been through a lot. Your wolf spirit is so strong, though—that’s what I was thinking about when I was watching you. Not many people could endure what you’ve been through and come out of it with half the grace and gentleness you have.” I attempt to smooth her hair away from her face, but I know I’m in competition with the damned wind.

“That’s nice,” she says, nuzzling her cheek into my palm.

“No one’s ever called me nice before you,” I say with a grin, shaking my head.

“I have a question about that,” she says, cocking her head. “Why not?”

“And I have an answer,” I say, sliding my hands around her back. “Because I’m not.”

“I think you are,” she says. “But I have another question.”

“Shoot.”

This probably isn’t the safest place to hang out during a storm, but I know we’ve got a bit before the real fun starts. And I’m not going to waste the chance and risk putting her back into her gloomy funk.

She toys with the front of my T-shirt. “The night... You know... When Axel... *That night.*” Her lips pinch together.

“What about it?” Pushing my hands beneath her shirt, I stroke her back.

“Why didn’t you....” She nibbles her lip. “Why didn’t you let Axel leave?”

“My job was to make the bastard watch and suffer,” I say. “See what he gave up, and how much better off you are with us. We see you for what you are, and he never did. You’re a fucking treasure, Luna. He deserved to be tormented by seeing other men give you pleasure when he threw away that chance.”

“What about you?” she asks.

“What about me?” I ask, leaning away a bit.

“You had to see that, too,” she says. “Were you tormented, too?”

She peers up at me shyly, like she actually has doubts about that.

“Yeah, pup,” I say quietly, raising my gaze to the sky. “I was. And I reckon I deserved it, too.”

Her eyebrows raise and her eyes widen. “Why? Did you reject a True Mate, too?”

“No, pup. Nobody in his right mind would do that. I know you think different, but I’ve never been a nice man when it comes to women. I fuck ‘em once, and then I’m done. I don’t care if they’ve got feelings or if I hurt ‘em. They don’t matter to me. They’re not True Mates, but I toss them the way Axel did you, like they’re trash.”

“You’ve always been good to me,” she says, her face furrowed.

“You bring out the best in people.”

“No, I don’t. Just look at Axel.”

“Fuck Axel. That dumb son of a bitch should be castrated so he can’t have brainless offspring to follow in his footsteps.”

We sit in silence for a minute, and I try to ignore the weight and heat of Luna’s body in my lap. “Have you always been mean?” she asks after a while.

“Nah, not always,” I say. “I thought I loved a woman once—the first woman I ever fucked. But I was just a pup like you—even younger. I didn’t know better.”

“Better than what?”

“I must’ve been sixteen, and she was twenty-four, twenty-five.”

“So?” Luna says. “I’m eighteen, and you guys are twice my age.”

“But it’s different with you.” I bunch her flying hair in my hand and hold it behind her head.

“How so?” she asks, staring up at me with open curiosity.

“I don’t know.” I shrug. “It just is. You’re fucking irresistible.”

I like how with her, there’s no games. She doesn’t know to play coy, to hide what she truly wants and pretend to be what someone else wants until she has him reeled in. She’s just herself, our luscious little Luna, and that’s a thousand times more enticing than any put-on air.

“What happened with the older woman?” Luna asks.

“I don’t really want to talk about that.” I squirm beneath her, pushing my cock up against her bottom, hoping it distracts her. She’s a little pleasure chaser, and I already know my brothers placate her with orgasms.

But maybe she’s catching on, because she narrows her eyes. “I want to

talk about it," she says.

I sigh. "We fucked for a while, and I caught feelings. She was this hot, experienced, older woman, and I felt like a million bucks that I landed her. Made me think I was in love and shit."

I shake my head, trying to get the bitter taste of memory out of my mouth. "What happened?"

"I made the mistake of telling her how I felt, and she laughed her ass off. Said she needed a real man, not a kid. Someone who could take care of her, not just fuck her senseless every night. Said she was just having a little fun with me, but it was nothing serious."

"Isn't fun a good thing, though?"

"Not if you want more than that," I say. "I was fucking humiliated, but that's neither here nor there. I learned my lesson, though. I never let a woman get to me again. I've fucked around plenty, and I made sure to get out early so it don't mean shit. If they think it does, that's their problem. I just think they're pathetic for caring about a man like me and thinking it could be more."

"So... It can't be more?" she asks. "Not for you, anyway."

"No, pup," I say, circling my arm around her little body. "That's not what I'm saying. With you, I *want* it to be meaningful. I've had threesomes and gangbangs with my brothers before. They're fun as fuck. But I didn't want our first time together to be that way because... Well, for the first time in my fucking life, I think I do want it to mean something to the woman. To you."

I squeeze her hip and search her beautiful eyes.

"Oh, Ethan," she says, laying her small hand on my bearded cheek. "You make me feel more special than anyone in the world."

"You... You mean a lot to me, pup," I say. "Even if I didn't fuck you. That don't mean I didn't want to. I just want to... Deserve you."

"You do," she says, her eyes shiny like she might cry. "I love you, Ethan. I love all of you."

No one's ever said that to me before, and it lands heavy and immovable on my heart. It's a heavy burden, but one I'll work every day of my life to bear, to be worthy of the love of this little wolf angel who blew into our lives like a hurricane and tumbled us all head over tail.

I pull her in, cradling her soft little body against my hard one as I kiss her good and long. She shifts her position, straddling my hips and grinding against me while we kiss more. After a while, even with the whipping wind, I

can smell how wet she is.

“Luna,” I say, tearing my mouth from hers when I can’t take it anymore. “You gotta stop or I won’t be able to help myself.”

“Help yourself from what?”

“I won’t be able to hold back from fucking you silly.”

The tip of her tongue lands on her upper lip, and she reaches for my fly. She frees my cock with her deft fingers, running her little hand up and down my thick shaft until I think I’ll come then and there. “That’s not helping,” I growl. “You better stop if you don’t want to get that pussy pounded and that belly filled with my seed.”

“What if I do?” she asks, a flirty little smile on her lips.

“Then slide those jeans down, pup, because I’m about to breed you so deep I give you pups even if it’s not your heat.” I grab her around the waist and flip her over, rolling on top of her and parting her thighs.

Her eyes widen. “Is that possible?”

“I guess we’ll find out.”

I push down her jeans and slide a finger through her slick cunt. She moans and shivers, and I grab my cock and push it against her entrance. The stretch of her tightness makes precum ooze from my tip and into her straining opening. She rocks up against me, and I push my hips forward, forcing my tip inside her. She gasps, her fingers gripping my arms, her eyes going wide. I give her a few seconds to relax and adjust before bracing myself on my hands and sinking my cock slowly into her. Her cunt grips me in its stranglehold, and her mouth falls open, a little stitch pulling between her eyebrows when the head of my cock nudges her cervix.

“Oh, my fucking God,” I breathe, resting my forehead on hers. “I’m going to breed you so full of my babies, pup. I want to put a million of them inside your belly right now.”

She pants through the pain until she’s adjusted, and then I begin to pump my full length into her slick little pussy. Right here on the roof, in front of the devil and everyone, I proceed to give her all my love. The weather goddess spills her tempest across the land, heedless of our actions. And like the storm that’s about to unload on us, everything I’ve held back through the years comes bursting up, washing over her, over me.

“I love you, Luna. I fucking love you.”

The words spill from my lips unbidden, but I wouldn’t take them back for anything.

“I love you, Ethan,” she cries, bucking her narrow hips under mine. When she wraps her little legs around me and comes on my cock, my name on her lips and her cunt squeezing me in its hot, wet little vice, I come harder than I’ve ever come in my life.

Chapter Twenty-One

Luna

The tempest is on its way, and I think it's going to tear me from everyone and everything, just like in my dream. The winds are howling, screaming through the rafters, whistling through the telephone poles. Axel hasn't stopped by to make sure we're safe, even though I put my name on his list like he asked. He's supposed to tell us where to go if things get worse. We're not safe—we never even got the shutters on. The triplets are frantically trying to get them up before the worst of it hits.

While they're busy, I decide to run back to Axel's and get the emergency plan myself, since he was too mad to bring it to me. Head down, raincoat wrapped around my body and tied securely at the waist, I power through the wind that nearly takes me off my feet. When I get to his porch, I have to pry open the screen door with both hands. I don't bother knocking, just hurl myself inside and release the door, afraid it'll knock me out if it hits me.

"Axel? That you?" comes a dreaded, familiar voice. Then Ama saunters down the hall, her arms full of clothes.

"Not Axel," I say, eyeing her.

"Oh," she says, wrinkling her nose like I still smell the way I did the day she found me in the swamp. "Just you. Want to help me fold this laundry?"

The smug smile on her face puts me on guard. "Why are you doing your laundry here?"

She grins. "Not mine. *Ours*. He's out making sure everyone's house is storm proof and they know where to go if things get dicey. He's so considerate that way." She drops the armload of clothes onto the sofa, revealing that she's not wearing anything. "He and I will ride out the storm together."

My irritation kicks up a notch. “I just came for the emergency plan.”

“Sure you don’t want to help?” She plucks a pair of boxers out of the pile and holds them up for inspection, and a secretive smile flashes across her face. “Wait, never mind. You’ve helped enough.”

“What does that mean?” I realize my fingers have curled into fists, so I shake them out.

“Well,” Ama says, folding the boxers and setting them on the back of the sofa. Next, she plucks a lacy bra from the pile and again makes that sly smile. “Thanks to your stupidity—he would have given you the world, you know... Anyway, you did the job I couldn’t figure out how to do. I guess I should actually thank you.”

She grins and arches her eyebrows.

“What job?” I ask, confusion and a bad feeling welling up inside. My heart pounds as loud as the wind outside, and my mouth is suddenly parched. “Being his Second?”

Ama titters and places the bra beside the boxers, giving it a little pat. “I’ve been doing plenty of *jobs*, if you catch my drift. Mmm...he’s yummy. So big.”

Her tone makes wires inside me start to fray even though I don’t entirely know what she’s talking about. “What job did I do?” I demand, more loudly this time.

“You sent him straight into my arms, of course,” she says, her voice matter-of-fact as she continues folding their mixed laundry. “Before, he was always resistant, giving a hundred reasons why we shouldn’t be together. But a man with a wounded pride, he’s vulnerable, isn’t he? And I have you to thank for that. I got everything I ever wanted thanks to you. When he was too hurt to know what to do with himself, I was there to lick his wounds, to make him feel like a big man again.”

“He is a big man,” I manage, my voice small. She isn’t saying what I think she’s saying... Is she?

“I know. And seeing him so beaten down and despondent, it just broke my heart.” She picks up a pair of satiny panties that match the bra, folds them and places them on her growing stack of clothes. “Good thing I was there to comfort him and prove to him I was exactly what he needed all along. A strong, capable, experienced woman, not a dumb little puppy who doesn’t know what a blowjob is.”

Each item of co-mingled underwear slices the frayed nerves inside until

I'm one giant nerve ending. "What is it?"

"Something you'll probably never do, pillow princess," she says with a sneer. "It's part of sex, in case you still hadn't figured it out. We're together now. The whole pack approves, since I'm already his Second. And since he needs a mate, as soon as I go into heat, he can breed me, and I'll give him the heirs he needs to be a fully-realized Alpha with the lineage to carry on the title. You'll be nothing but a distant memory... Or a nightmare that he wakes up to when he's lying safe in my arms."

My wolf is howling with such rage and hurt and betrayal inside me that I can't even think right now. I can't breathe, can't do anything except experience the most intense pain of my life, almost as bad as the mate bond severing. This must be what Axel felt when he was forced to watch me, only his pain was one hundred times worse because he had to watch it and not just find out from someone else. He had to see it with his own eyes, knowing it was punishment for something he'd done and not just the unintended consequences of his mistake.

He did this *because of* me, but not *to* me. He moved on with his life, like he said, but he spared me the detail. I made him see every detail. I hurt him on purpose as revenge for the hurt he caused me. Oh, I'm a terrible, terrible person!

My lungs are heaving, but I can't tear my gaze away from the bitch who got my mate... The mate whose heart I crushed to smithereens.

The wind howls around the house, screeching like a demon. A loose shutter bangs against the siding, making a whack, whack, whack kind of racket—it matches the erratic beating of my heart. I finally manage to pry my feet from the floor and turn to run.

"Not so fast," Ama snarls, leaping in front of me and blocking my exit. Her face is a horrible mask of rage as she seizes my arm.

"Let me go!" I cry, trying to pry her fingernails from my arm.

"Not happening. That wolf I sent to kill you failed to do his job, so I'm going to finish it."

"You sent that wolf to kill me?" My eyes open wide in shock. "That was *your* doing?"

"Of course it was, dimwit. Do you think random male wolves give a shit about you? I paid him well, but the bastard didn't deliver. He was supposed to get rid of you for good so Axel would run into my arms. Fuck was I pissed when you rolled back into town."

“He’d never have anything to do with you if he knew what kind of person you are,” I shout, spitting at her and trying to pull free of her grip.

“How fortunate that you showed up today, when he’s busy helping the wolves who are actually deserving,” she says, almost cheerfully. “But you’re right—as long as you’re around, he might never really give up on you. And I can’t risk losing the Alpha now that I’ve gotten him at last.” Her eyes are wild, as wild as the storm billowing outside the door.

I wrench my arm out of her grasp at last, raising my palms toward her. “Okay, you can have him. I lost. I don’t even want Axel. Just let me go, and I’ll never see you again, I promise. I’ll disappear with the triplets.”

I try to sidle around her to get to the door, but she shoves me backward. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“I’m not?” I manage to squeak. “What are you going to do to stop me?”

“My god, you’re dumb.” A grin forms on her face, but she’s an ugly person under the surface beauty. Even I can see that. “What do you think I’m going to do? Obviously I’m going to kill you and dispose of you in the rising water. What else would I do?”

I swallow hard, my heart racing as I meet her cold, evil eyes. She really means it. I’m about to die.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Axel

Something is wrong. I can feel it somehow, even though Luna hasn't sworn into the pack, so we don't share the pack bond. But we still share some other bond, a curse that ties me to her no matter how much I deny it. My wolf frets inside me, sure that something is not right.

I sigh and try to focus again, piling sandbags along the edge of Kato's backyard to keep the water at bay. Luna finally got it through my thick head that she's with them now, not me. She wants nothing to do with me. She's got three thugs protecting her, and even though they're worthless wastes of wolf skin, they're not going to let anyone touch her. They'd rip anyone's head off who tried. It's a miracle they put up with me as long as they did. If I'd understood how things were, I would have walked away before. But I listened to my wolf, and I sure as fuck suffered enough for it. I don't need to go running to her house now. I never want to set foot in that place again.

But the little voice in the back of my mind keeps telling me something's wrong.

I reach through the bond I share with Ama.

Ama, can you check on Luna? I haven't made it to a few houses at that end of the street. Stuck at Carina and Kato's a few more minutes.

Sure thing, boss. I knew you hadn't, and I took care of the last houses. Teamwork. Right, baby?

Thanks.

I should be relieved, but something still doesn't feel right. After a few minutes, I reach through again.

Did you see Luna?

Yes. She's fine.

Despite her reassurance, I can't concentrate. I can feel something's amiss, and even though Ama talked to me, she had her shields up, preventing me from exploring her thoughts at all. I only got words, and words are cheap. All wolves can protect their privacy, and ordinarily, I wouldn't question it. But when it involves Luna...

The nagging thoughts about Luna's well-being persist. I still trust my wolf intuition, and what my intuition tells me right now is that Ama is lying, and Luna is in trouble.

I can't fight the unease any longer—I've got to check on her. I call out to Kato and Carina, who are slinging sandbags down the line, and then I hit the road.

The windshield wipers are useless as I power up the street, which is already doused with a half-foot of water. It's only going to get worse. Palm trees are bent double, as if their trunks are made of putty, and a piece of flying tin narrowly misses the truck as I power through the storm.

When I get to Luna's, I leap out of the front seat and race up the walkway to her house. Pounding on the door yields nothing. Opening the door and yelling for Luna, for anyone, is equally fruitless. Is she out with her biker outlaws? Where would they possibly go in this storm?

I head back to the truck and drive as quickly as possible, given the wind and the rain slamming against my vehicle. I skid to a stop in front of my house. The driver's side door, caught in a sudden gust, nearly rips from its hinges as I throw it open. I race inside, my wolf on full alert. Something is wrong *here*.

I burst through the front door to see Ama holding Luna's body pinned to the floor, a knife pressed to her throat. Both women are bloody and banged up like they've been duking it out for a while. Ama's more muscular, and she's used it to her advantage, straddling Luna's back and gripping her hair with one hand, holding the blade with the other.

My wolf explodes out of me so fast my clothes are torn to shreds, pieces of fabric flying across the room.

"I'm doing this for us," Ama shrieks. "So nothing will come between us again!"

Fuck that. We were never together in the first place.

Getting our physical needs met and joining in a partnership are two separate things. As usual, Ama has skewed the facts.

Fangs bared, I leap, claws poised to take Ama down. My teeth land on the

arm wielding the knife, and Ama screams, shifting into her wolf skin. I rip her front leg away from Luna, and the knife clatters to the ground. Luna rolls away, taking herself out of harm's way instead of trying to help and becoming a distraction or a liability.

Smart girl.

Ama cries out as I crunch down on her bone, grinding through muscle and tendon and snapping the bone. She snarls and snaps at me, trying to gain purchase on my neck. But she's diminutive compared to me, no match for her Alpha. She betrayed me—worse, she hurt my precious Luna. Without a second thought, I go for the kill strike, closing my teeth over her carotid artery and ripping out her throat. I drop her body to the floor and turn to Luna, blood dripping from my jaws.

I shift and scoop up my mate, who's huddling on the floor next to the sofa. Adrenaline pumps through me, and I feel like the king of the world, the most powerful wolf that's ever lived. I throw Luna down on the couch and dive on top of her, my mouth claiming hers roughly.

She gives a surprised little moan, her hands cupping my face and pulling me down, kissing me back with fierceness and desperation.

"I'm sorry," she pants out between kisses. "I'm sorry I ever chased you away. If I'd known you'd run to the arms of that vile woman, I'd never have let you go."

I draw her knees open and slide up between them, moaning when my bare cock rubs against the heat between her thighs. Every cell in my body aches with need.

"She's nothing," I say. "Just a hole to fill to pass the time."

"What about me?" Luna asks, grinding her hips up against mine.

"You're my mate, my *True Mate*, my everything," I say, reaching down and wrenching her jeans down so hard they tear like mine did when I shifted. I push a finger into her tight, slick little hole, and she whimpers with pleasure, biting at my lips, scratching my neck, and bucking against me.

"Then show me," she manages, dropping back on the couch.

"Oh, I'm about to," I say, grabbing my stiff cock and lowering it to her entrance.

"Did you fuck Ama here?" she asks, closing her knees around my hips.

"What does that matter?" I growl. "You let the triplets pass you around like a fucking whore."

"If she means so little to you, then show me," Luna shoots back. "Fuck

me on her body.” She thrusts her finger at the dead wolf across from us, lifeless next to the wall.

I draw back, shocked at her gruesome request. But my wolf roars with approval, wanting this primal need to be filled—victory and lust twist together into one urge as I snatch up Luna and carry her to the body of my Second. I killed Ama for her, and she’s making me prove I don’t regret it.

I don’t. Not for a second.

I lay Luna down on the fur pelt of the wolf body. Its dark eyes are now clouded over like fog obscuring midnight, and she stares into the beyond. Luna takes a few sniffs and then rolls over onto her hands and knees. She looks over her shoulder at me, a wicked grin on her face. “I’ll lick her blood,” she says. “You fuck me.”

The scent of her arousal is too intoxicating to let this moment pass. She sways her hips from side to side as she invites me to mate. I bend and run my tongue through her cunt, sweeping up and down her wet folds and tasting my mate, her scent made just for me. My wolf roars for me to claim her, and hers cries out in answer. I kneel up behind her as she lowers her head, lapping up the blood spreading across my hardwood floor.

The sight is enough to nearly make me wolf out again, but I hold him back as he howls to mark and claim our mate again. But I don’t hesitate and go slow this time. She’s no longer the scared little virgin I first claimed upstairs. She’s a woman who’s had multiple partners at once, one who knows what she wants. And her wolf says she wants to be plowed like a slut. I grip her narrow hips and thrust inside her, and she cries out. I answer by fucking her hard and rough, the dominating rhythm making her moan each time my hips hit her ass as I bury my cock to the hilt in her sweet, wet pussy.

She looks over her shoulder at me, her mouth streaked with gore, and I feel the knot swell at the base of my cock, the painful stretch as it enlarges. I flip over so Luna is on top, letting her ride me, her pale legs folded as she moves up and down. I watch the muscles in her ass flex and my cock sliding into her snug little hole until I can’t bear it. Grabbing her leg, I swing it over me, turning her until she’s facing me. Her eyes widen at the way my cock hits every place inside her. I slam up into her from below, loving the way she looks, so feral and bloody, a warrior who conquered her enemy.

Or at least I conquered her. Luna is my prize.

“Luna,” I growl. “Fuck, I love you.”

She leans down, wiping her hand in the blood before streaking it across

my chest like a reminder of what I'd do for her. "That's right," she says. "You love me. Only me. Whose pussy do you belong inside?"

"Yours, Luna. Your pussy is mine, and I'm about to fucking destroy it."

"Yes," she moans. "And your cock is mine. All mine." Her possessiveness drives me to the edge, and I slam up into her as hard as I can. She squeals as I impale her, the knot stretching her until her eyes grow wide with alarm and she's gasping for relief. She rakes her nails down my chest in the throes of passion, drawing blood from my skin.

"So take all of it," I growl. "Even my knot. It's made for you." I pump into her harder, even when I hear the door open and feel the presence of other wolves. This is my claiming, and nothing but death will stop me. I slam into her until I think her fragile body will shatter with the force, but I don't let up. I thrust into her harder, stroking her slick core with my cock until her juices run down my balls and she writhes helplessly on top of me.

Her movements get wilder as she realizes she's pinned, that she can't move with the knot stretching her so good. I flip her over and grind deeper, filling her to the brim with every inch of me, watching her pant through the pain and pleasure to find her climax.

"Yes," she cries, her knees opening and closing, her hips grinding up against mine as I crush her down into Ama's body until I feel the wolf bones snapping beneath us. "Oh, yes! Come now, Axel. Breed me. Please!"

I wait until she's milking me, sucking me with her core in the throes of orgasm before I release inside her. My cum shoots into her, my wolf soul filling her with each wave of cum pouring into her tender center. I raise my head and roar with my wolf, and she howls with her own relief her legs wrapped around me and her body jerking with spasm of pleasure, her cunt stretched so tight it aches around the knot of my cock that's lodged inside her. Finally, she falls back in a whimpering heap of bliss, trembling all over as she submits to my claim in front of her three watching lovers.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Luna

I'm still humming with the bliss of orgasm and the satisfaction my wolf feels at being claimed by Axel when I look up and see three hulking shapes standing in the doorway.

"Oh," I cry, scrambling up right on Ama's dead body.

Axel sucks in a breath, and I realize he's still knotted up inside me.

"What are you doing here?" I ask the triplets.

"We got worried about you," Ethan says. "We thought something might have happened to you."

"And now we can see that something did happen to you. *He* happened to you." Warrick steps through the doorway and charges toward us as if he's going to fight with Axel again. I wince when Axel pulls the swollen base of his cock from me, stepping in front of me to block Warrick's path.

"Wait," I cry, leaping to my feet and darting between the two men. "Axel saved my life."

Warrick halts, eyes the dead wolf, and then turns to us. His gaze sweeps my bruised, battered body, covered with bumps and scrapes. "What happened?" he demands.

"Ama tried to kill me," I say, rushing my words so he won't attack. "She wanted Axel and said I was in the way. She tried to kill me, but Axel killed her instead."

Warrick, Callan, and Ethan all turn to my Alpha, and their eyes shutter.

"I see," says Callan in a monotonous tone. His arms hang limply by his sides. Water drips from his fingertips, continuing its journey from his raincoat.

"When Ama said Axel was hers... I didn't like it," I admit. "I like that he

defended me. I like having him around.”

“So, you got back together with him,” Ethan says, scowling.

“No, you don’t understand. I like *all* of you.” I hold out my hands, palms up, beseeching them. Something creamy and warm trickles down the inside of my thigh, tickling my skin.

Ethan’s gaze drops to my legs, then Callan’s, and then Warrick’s. I shift side to side, uncomfortably. “Look,” I say, trying to distract them. “Y’all know how lonely I was with Mama in the swamp. Now that I’m grown, I don’t want that. We can all get along—make each other laugh and make each other dinner and sex each other. What’s the harm in adding one more? Axel invited us all into the pack, and if we’d joined, he would have known I was in trouble from the start today. We can all be mates, can’t we?”

Three sets of jaw drop open, and they stare at me like I’ve grown whiskers or horns in my cheeks.

“What are you saying?” Axel asks.

“I didn’t like the fighting between these brothers, and I don’t like it between you and them, either. I don’t want to cause nobody pain. Let me make it up to you—all of y’all.”

“How are you going to do that?” Callan asks.

“You have no idea what you’re asking us to do, Luna,” Warrick says, looking past me at Axel. “We’ve been hating this asshole for a fucking decade.”

“And how’s that working out for you?” I put my hands on my hips and try to swell up my chest like they do. It must work, because they all drop their gazes to my chest.

Callan lets out a snort, and the barest of smiles curves his lips.

I flash him a smile and then turn back to Warrick. “Who’s it help to be at odds all the time? Axel said you could join the pack. He did his part. Now it’s time for you to do what’s best for your pack of three, too, Daddy.”

“She has a point,” Callan says.

I love him even more for his support.

“I don’t know,” Warrick says, scratching the back of his head. “Old grievances die hard.”

A curious silence fills the room while outside, the storm rages on. Shutters slam against the window frames, the wind sings in the rafters, and rain pours and pours. I step toward the brothers, sidle between Callan and Ethan, and lace my fingers with theirs.

Warrick studies me with an indecipherable expression.

“Let’s all accept each other and get along.” I squeeze Callan’s and Ethan’s warm hands.

“Agreed,” Axel says, straightening and managing to look imposing even though he’s smaller than the other three and not wearing a stitch of clothes. “Let us let the destruction of Ama serve to herald a new day in the Jacksonville pack. And to remind everyone what happens when you hurt Luna.”

He stares down the others, and for once, I understand. He’s telling them they better do what I say, even though I’m the submissive wolf here. Because if they don’t get along, that hurts me, and he’ll hurt whoever does that. He’ll do as I wish, and they better do it, too.

Ethan clears his throat. “Thanks for saving her life, man.”

Callan grunts in agreement.

Warrick crosses his beefy arms over his chest.

“You’ve got to quit getting yourself into life and death messes,” Callan says to me.

“I second that,” Ethan says.

Warrick continues to shoot daggers at Axel with his eyes.

Axel ignores him.

“Come on, please?” I say, dropping the hands I’ve been holding and clinging to Warrick’s beefy, tattooed bicep. “Let’s just try it. If it doesn’t work, we can try something else. What’s the harm?”

“I’ll try it,” Ethan says behind me.

Warrick frowns at him.

“Count me in,” Callan says. “I’m not losing Luna.”

Warrick continues to glare.

“I’ll do it on one condition,” Axel says.

“Here we go,” Warrick growls. “I was waiting for some negotiation coming from you, Alpha.”

“I like to be predictable,” Axel says coolly.

“What do you want?” Warrick demands.

“I want you,” Axel says, matching Warrick’s stance. “I need a new Second in Command, and I can think of no one finer.”

I stand there blinking in surprise, and everyone else looks just as shocked.

“How much power will I hold?” Warrick says, scratching his scruffy neck.

“Second to only me,” Axel says smoothly. “When I’m not here, whether dead or simply away, you’re in charge.” Axel appears calm and unruffled, and I admire him even more for it.

“Huh,” Warrick says.

“Of course, the pack doesn’t expect a dictator. That won’t fly,” Axel continues. “But you’re a powerful man, Warrick. I believe you can guide with fairness and adherence to rules if given a chance.”

“What do you think, Warrick?” I say, practically wriggling like a wolf pup.

He regards me, and his eyes soften. “Would that make you happy?” he asks gruffly.

“Would it ever!”

“I’ll do it for you,” he says. “If that’s what you want, baby girl.”

I’m practically glowing as I watch Warrick step toward Axel and shake his hand.

“I accept your offer, starting immediately,” Warrick says.

“Thank you, Warrick,” Axel says, giving his hand a firm shake. “It’ll be an honor to rule the pack with you.”

I whoop for joy, and Ethan picks me up and kisses me hard. I can’t believe we finally did it. We’re all united. Maybe we can all finally have what we want at last.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Luna

Warrick, Ethan, Callan, Axel, and I sit around Axel's kitchen table, drinking beer and talking, trying to ignore the storm gathering strength outside and hoping it won't be a big one.

Warrick and Axel are already talking pack strategy, Axel filling in the new Second about pack laws. Even though Warrick can't officially start until we're sworn in, Axel sharing the details is a sign of trust that goes a long way. Instead of growling and snapping, Warrick is soaking it up like a sea sponge. It's good to see them working together instead of tearing at each other's throats.

Callan nudges me under the table with his feet, bringing my attention to him. He gives me a smile and a wink that makes my heart flip, then takes a swig of his beer. My whole belly fills up with warmth. Ethan squeezes my hand on the other side. I want to stay this way forever, but a loud banging on the front door interrupts.

"That doesn't sound good," Axel said, pushing up to his feet. "Must be an emergency for someone to leave their house in this."

As soon as he opens it, a male voice starts speaking like he's hopped up on six cups of coffee. I catch snatches of the conversation like, "...the baby is sick," and "water pouring in."

"Slow down, Borris. Take a breath. We'll be right there to help. Come in out of the rain while we get our weather gear on," Axel says calmly.

"You've got to hurry, man. My baby..." says Borris, a small, nervous-looking guy I vaguely recognize from around pack territory. His raincoat is sopping, and the hat on his head flops around his skull so he has to keep pushing it up.

“Borris, meet our new pack members, Warrick, Ethan, and Callan. And, you know Luna, right?”

Borris freezes in the foyer, eyeing the brothers like they’re bog beasts. “Aren’t they...?”

“Probably,” Axel says, cutting him off. “But now they’re allies, so let’s get you some help.”

“And she’s the one you brought to the barbecue?” Borris says, looking utterly confused. “Your mate.”

“Yes, that’s her,” Axel says after pulling on a raincoat. “Boys, let’s go save Borris’s baby. She and her mama are trapped, and they’ve got a leak flooding the house.”

“On it,” says Warrick, rising.

Callan and Ethan stand, too, heading for the closet where Axel is pulling out rain gear.

“There’s a rowboat in the back, next to the shed. You go get it, Warrick. Callan and Ethan, gather some buckets from the shed. Luna, you’ll be in the rowboat as we head to their house, down the street a few blocks. The boys and I will wade.”

“But...” I protest, not wanting to be babied.

“No, butts. We need to keep you safe,” Axel says, yanking on waders and heavy rubber boots. He tosses me one of the orange life vests I saw earlier. “Get that on, too.”

“Just do it,” Callan says, zipping up his raincoat. “You’re important.”

I flush with cozy feelings at their care. And I’m so damn proud of them for working together. But I hate to be treated like a wolf pup.

I hustle to get all my rain gear on, too.

And then we all exit into the howling storm.

The water’s up to the men’s knees as they wade down the street, and cars are pushed sideways on the road. The streetlights are still flickering intermittently. The men keep the rowboat steady as the wind whips spray across the top of the once-street, now more like an inlet.

I grip the sides of the rowboat with one hand and use the other hand to keep my hat on my head. The gusts want to whisk it away.

Finally, we reach Borris’s house.

Warrick pulls the rowboat up to their front porch, where water sloshes between the cracks in the boards. He ties off the boat and helps me out of the rocking vessel onto the porch. “See? You still get to use your waders. We just

can't have you drowning on us."

"Wife's in the dining room," Borris says, hurrying inside, babbling all the way. "The water pushed our credenza in front of the door. It's a heavy piece filled with dishes. Now it's jammed against the door. I tried to get her out. We had to board up the windows before the storm, or I would have helped her out the window."

"It's okay," Axel says, clapping him on the shoulder. "Shit happens in these storms, and this one is definitely stirring the shit."

As we clamber into the house, the electricity goes out, plunging us into near darkness.

"Shit," Warrick mutters.

"When it rains, it pours," Callan says.

"Anyone bring a light? A lantern? Anything?" Ethan says.

"Fuck," Axel mutters. "I gave them all out earlier, except for a couple I keep in my truck. Borris, can you get to yours?"

"It's, uh... It's in the dining room with my emergency light. At least my wife's got 'em."

I can practically hear the shame and regret dripping from his words.

We stumble in the dim interior, since the hurricane's made it nearly dark as night out, and the windows are boarded up. The baby's wails compete with the whistling wind as we feel our way through the house, relying on touch and instinct to find our way. My eyes adjust to the absence of light, and I make out shapes and use my wolf senses to find my way. Despite my instincts, the whole black-out thing combined with this howling hurricane gives me the heebie-jeebies. Every slosh of water against the walls outside, every creak in the floor, each exhalation has me jumpy.

"The room's over here," Borris says from somewhere to my right.

"Let's get her out of there," Axel says.

"Honey?" Borris calls through the door. "I brought help."

"Hurry!" his wife yells. "I'm scared. We're sitting on top of the dining room table."

The baby's screams grow louder.

"You think if we work together, we can push the credenza out of the way?" Axel says to Warrick.

"Piece of cake," Warrick says, cracking his knuckles. "Callan and Ethan, you go low. Axel and I will go high. Let's move this motherfucker." He stands before the door, places his palms flat, and widens his legs. Axel stands

next to him, matching his position.

Callan and Ethan position their shoulders against the door, crouched between Axel's and Warrick's spread legs. Water has begun seeping across the floor, leaking from under the dining room door as well as the front door.

"On three," booms Axel. "One, two, *three*."

They grunt, straining against the door as it gives a couple of inches.

Small waves slosh against Ethan's and Callan's knees on the floor.

"On, three," Axel commands again. "One, two, *three*."

They get a few more inches of space in the door.

"One more shot, and we got it," he says. "Ready?"

The other men nod.

"One, two, *three*," he roars, as if priming himself for the ultimate exertion.

This time the door opens wide.

Warrick, Axel, Ethan, and Callan move away from the door. Water rushes out, since apparently the dining room is more flooded. Water drips from Callan and Ethan as they stand. The drips echo into the water sloshing up to their ankles.

Borris rushes into the room as much as one can run while splashing through water in the dark. I can only hear their happy reunion.

"Get the rowboat ready, Luna," Axel says. "We've got to get the woman and baby to safety."

I feel my way through the wet house and make my way out to the porch, where I untie our waiting vessel, proud that they gave me a useful job this time. The men emerge from the house, bumping and feeling for me to make sure I haven't washed away. The water on the porch is at least a foot high now.

"Are you okay, Luna?" Warrick says.

"Fine, fine." I repeat the words, but I'm anything but confident. Every hair on my body is standing at attention.

The woman and her baby clamber out the front door, ushered by Borris.

They climb into the boat.

"Luna's wading with us," Warrick says, wrapping a thick arm around me and pulling me close.

"Luna?" Axel says, checking on me as he takes the rope from my hand. "Everyone ready?"

"Where are we going?" I ask.

“Mischka’s mamas. She’s got a two-story. We’ll all wait on the top floor if we have to,” Borris says.

“Let’s go, then,” Axel says.

We guide the rowboat a couple of blocks down the street as the wind screams and rain tears at us. We have to rely entirely on sound to guide us. The squeals and scrapes of heavy metal alert us to vehicles being pushed in our way. Objects fall with thuds and waves. Things whistle past my head, but I keep my thick hood up, as Axel instructed.

I wonder if the little shack I built in the swamp has been washed away yet, and I get a lonesome feeling in my heart. By the time we arrive at our destination, my senses are on overload. Borris helps his wife and baby from the boat, offers his gratitude, and guides his family into Mischka’s mama’s home. When they’re swallowed up into the house, we turn to go.

“Back in the boat you go, Luna,” Warrick says.

“I’m not a baby. I’ve been taking care of myself my entire life,” I protest, but firm hands land around my waist.

“You’re my baby girl, and I’m not letting anything happen to you,” he says firmly.

“Just get in,” Callan says, sounding anxious.

“Hold the boat steady,” Warrick says as he hefts me over the lip and places me securely on the seat.

Maybe he can sense the unease, too.

We slosh along in this surreal wildness of nature that beats at us like it longs for our destruction along with its own. It’s too much work to yell over the noise of the weather tempest, so we don’t try.

Something’s about to go wrong—I can feel it in my bones. The storm is moving toward a real hurricane at any moment.

“Callan! Ethan!” I yell.

“What?” they call back in unison.

“Just checking.” I wait for a pause and then call, “Axel!”

“Present and accounted for,” Axel calls back.

“Good!” I yell as the wind howls. “Warrick?”

“Quit worrying, baby girl. We’re all tough guys,” he says. “We’re all hanging onto the boat.”

I can’t seem to stop my heart from trying to escape from my chest, though. The storm does its best to splash water into my little vessel.

“The boat’s fixing to sink,” I yell.

“Shit,” someone calls, but I can’t tell who it is.

Again, hands grope for my waist and heft me out of the boat. Now we’re all forcing our way through the storm, heads down, fighting against the spray and the surge, hoping we don’t get hit with any flying debris.

“We’re here,” Axel calls.

I stop on what feels like the sidewalk, huddling together with the triplets. Axel opens his truck, and the tiny overhead light makes a weak attempt at offering us some light. He grabs flashlights from the cab of his vehicle. “I’ve got a couple lights I keep in here for emergency breakdowns.”

He hands one to Warrick, one to me, and keeps one for himself. He shines his beam at his house, scanning over the roof that’s wobbling in the wind. “Shit,” he says. “My house isn’t going to be spared this time.”

The water level at his house is almost to the top step of his porch.

“Let’s head over to my place,” I call. “My house is on higher ground.”

“I’ve got to grab a few things from inside,” Axel says. “I won’t be too long. Get yourselves and Luna dry before we all drown in this deluge.”

“No way, man,” Ethan says. “We’re gonna help. Stop being a heroic prick.”

“I just got to secure the place,” Axel calls. “I’ll be out to help in a few minutes.” He plods his way up the porch steps, lit by the struggling beam of the flashlight.

“Need help?” I call, weirdly desperate to be near him.

“Stay with them,” Axel yells back. “You’ll be safer out here!”

A sudden vicious gust of wind blasts through the street, and we all throw our arms up to protect our heads. A loud bang and a clatter compete with the wind’s screams.

“What happened?” I cry, training my feeble beam at Axel’s house. The roof’s now missing, carried away by the hurricane, probably halfway across town by now.

“Oh, no,” I cry, staggering through the water toward the house, desperation filling my body “Axel’s in there!”

Callan grabs my shoulders, yanking me backwards. “Luna, no! Look out!”

We both stumble against the other two as another blast of wicked wind nearly flattens us. We cling together, but the next second, I hear a loud roar, like a crashing wave but ten times bigger. I whip back around, only to see nothing but a pile of rubble where Axel’s beautiful house stood. His home

has been utterly destroyed—with him inside.

Return to the Pack

Book Three

Chapter One

Luna

The Jacksonville pack's Alpha might be dead. The latest in an endless string of hurricanes is blowing through the city with relentless fury, taking Axel's home to the ground with him inside.

With a scream, I throw down the sandbag I'd been carrying and race toward the debris.

The wind catches a piece of the siding and whirls it toward me like a deadly guillotine.

"Look out," Callan cries, launching himself at me. We crash to the ground, barely escaping having our heads chopped off by the sharp metal edges of the siding.

We sink under the cold, churning water around us, only to be yanked back up by Warrick. I inhale a lungful of air as my head leaves the water.

"Let me go," I shout as the wind blows my words into the air. "We've got to save Axel!"

"I just saved your life, baby girl," Warrick growls. "I'm not going to lose you now."

"Thank you," I call over my shoulder as I dive toward the rubble of the fallen house.

From what I can make out in the gloom of night, Ethan and Callan are already pitching aside lumber, broken windows, dishes, and other things that once occupied Axel's house.

Each of their flashlight beams provides weak light in the blackout that just plunged Jacksonville into a hellish nightmare. All around me, gusts of wind hurl the remnants of other houses through the air.

I expect to see humans, cars, and people's pets flying through the air at

any moment.

My three lovers charge forward, holding their flashlights between their teeth as they work, frantically trying to find Axel in the floating debris.

I join my triplet lovers, working side by side with them. We tear apart the piles of what was once a perfect home but is now nothing but an unrecognizable jumble of housing material.

My mouth isn't big enough to get a good grip on the flashlight, and it falls into the wreckage a minute later. "Shit," I cry, giving up on finding it and screaming for my last mate instead. "Axel! Axel!"

Ethan looks up at me, his face owl-bright in the glow of the flashlight, pausing in his quest to find Axel.

"He could be drowning in there," I cry, waving my arms frantically.

Ethan sets to his task with more fervor, tearing away the bits, leaning into the wind, and searching for Axel.

We all pitch in with renewed vigor. Axel might be alive, and we'll all risk our lives to find him if he is.

This is so not fair. After warring with one another in animosity, we finally made peace and agreed to work together as a family. And Warrick agreed to be Axel's Second in Command. We'd just begun getting along when the storm hit, and now it's all been ripped away.

I toss aside a piece of siding when I touch something clammy and soft. *Is it...? Could it be?*

"Y'all," I yell. "I think I found him!"

The triplets surge in my direction and help me uncover the rest of him. We work quietly but swiftly until Axel's entire body is revealed.

I step back a second, unable to face what might be my biggest heartbreak of all. I spent most of the last few months hating Axel and then loving him but pushing him away. We only reconciled tonight, and now...

"Is he... Is he dead?" I whisper.

Warrick crouches, gets his arms underneath Axel, and lifts him from the water and into the pounding rain. "Check him out, brother."

Callan places his fingertips on Axel's carotid artery. "I got a pulse," he says with a grim nod. "It's faint, but it's there. Let's get him out of here."

My knees buckle, and I practically fall to the ground I'm so relieved.

Ethan places his hands on my shoulders to steady me. "Easy, girl. Let's go."

We make our way to what once was the front of the house. Luckily, the

little rowboat we used to trek to the pack member's home in our rescue effort is still affixed to what's left of the porch railing.

Warrick gently lays Axel in the boat, and we all push through the horrible storm. "We've got to get out of the city," Warrick yells over the wind. "Our place is on higher ground and less likely to be flooded. We'll go there to take shelter and see to Axel's injuries. No way can we drive from *here*—the water's too deep."

"And then what?" I shout back. We can't carry Axel while in wolf form, not when he's out cold.

Warrick grins. "We hotwire a human's abandoned vehicle and drive it home. I got no problem with that. Any of y'all?"

"Nope," we all say in unison.

If there's anything that Warrick holds dear, it's trouble and lawlessness.

I hold Axel's hand while we slog up the street. It's cold but when I grip his wrist, I can sense a faint pulse.

Making our way out is grim business. Houses everywhere are destroyed. The city's really taking a beating. The wind continues to rage and howl. If I weren't so worried about Axel, I'd be scared for all of our lives.

After about a twenty-minute walk, moving as quickly as we can with the force of the wind pushing at us, we get to a place where the water is only up to our ankles.

"Let's take this truck," Warrick shouts.

I feel a little funny about that because Mama always taught me that we couldn't take from others to help ourselves. But the house is flattened, which means the occupants have either left or they're dead, so I nod along with the others.

Warrick and Ethan head to the tiny truck and fiddle around inside the cab. A few minutes later, the engine roars to life.

"Axel needs to be in the cab where it's warm," I call. "I'll sit next to whoever's driving, and then you can rest his head in my lap. Of course, he'll have to be scrunched up, but at least he'll be warmish."

"You drive," Warrick says to Callan. "It's a one-seater, and I barely fit. We might need weight in the back if this little pickup has rear-wheel drive, anyway. I'll ride in the bed with Ethan."

Callan gets behind the wheel, and I slide in next to him.

Warrick maneuvers Axel's limp form into the seat, with his head on my thigh. He reaches for something behind the seat and retrieves an oily, grimy

blanket which he drapes over Axel's body.

Axel looks so pale that I want to cry. I run my fingertip across his cool skin.

Please live, Axel. Please, please, please, live.

Once the other brothers are situated in the bed of the truck, Callan pulls the truck away from the collapsed house. The truck rocks back and forth with the wind. The tires spray water on the side of the truck even when we go slow, getting Ethan and Warrick more drenched than they're getting from the downpour.

When Callan has inched his way out of town, he presses on the gas pedal, and the speed picks up a little. The windshield wipers are on full tilt, but the rain obscures our vision as fast as the wipers clear it.

"Fuck," he mutters, peering through the wall of water.

"Ditto," I say.

Axel groans.

"Axel!" I run my palm over his cheek as his eyelids flutter open.

He gives me a blank-eyed stare, and then his eyes close down again.

"Axel, my love," I say. "My Alpha. Are you with us?"

Axel says nothing. His skin now looks a ghostly yellowish-white.

"He's probably in shock, Luna," Callan offers. "The best thing we can do for him is to keep him as warm as possible."

Although I don't really know what shock is, it sounds serious. So I lapse into silence for the duration of the terrifying ride to the boys' home.

When we arrive at their dwelling, I'm relieved to see it intact. The storm rages, but the trees offer some protection from the gale force.

Before Callan even has the truck parked, Warrick and Ethan leap out of the truck bed.

Warrick opens the passenger door and extends his hand to me. I take it and slide my rump from the seat.

He wraps his arms around me for a brief but tender embrace. His skin feels chilled to the bone, and he's a sopping mess, but the hug is more welcome than he'll ever know.

When he releases me, I step to the side so he can retrieve Axel.

"Callan, support his head and shoulders and scoot him toward me," he orders. "I don't want to just yank him out."

"Good call," Callan says. "We don't know the extent of his injuries. Be as gentle as you can but move as quick as you can, too. There's a golden hour to

meet for medical trauma, and we're well past that. His life hangs in the fates' hands."

They move as swiftly as they can with their precious cargo, and before long, Axel is in Warrick's arms.

Warrick hurries through the rain to the house, where Ethan stands holding the screen door.

"Put him in my room," Callan says, glancing at me.

When I lived there, he gave me his room. Now, he's giving it to Axel, our Alpha.

I stay beside Warrick, who steps over the empty beer cans and fast food wrappers cluttering the floor. Looks like since I moved to town, the boys are back to their old swamp dog ways. Warrick lays Axel on the unmade, messy bed like he's a porcelain doll who might shatter.

Right now, nothing matters except his well-being. I huddle next to Axel, clueless as to what to do next. Callan hustles into the room with his medical bag. He snaps his fingers and points at Ethan. "Get rubbing alcohol and bottled water, stat."

"On it," Ethan says, hustling out of the room.

"Can you get a blanket, Luna? This boy's skin is near ice."

"You got it," I say, grabbing the blankets from the floor next to the bed.

Callan retrieves a set of weirdly curved scissors and starts cutting Axel's pant leg from the ankle.

"What are you doing?" I say.

"We strip 'em, then we flip 'em. We don't got time to gently peel Axel out of his clothes. We already lost way too much time getting here." He makes the last snip at the waistband. "You peel the clothes away as gently as you can while I keep snipping."

I nod, thankful for more to do than watch. I pry back Axel's jeans to see a swollen bulge, mid-thigh, along with extensive bruising.

"Shit," Callan says, glancing at Axel's leg.

"What?" I say, alarm cinching down on my heart.

"Looks like a nasty break. Okay, done with this side. Keep going." He moves alongside Axel's body until he can get to his sopping shirt.

Ethan returns with the supplies Callan requested and lays them on the bed.

I gently tug the wet clothes away from Axel's skin. His other ankle bears a similar swelling as his opposite leg. More bruises mar every square inch of

his legs.

Callan kneels beside Axel and palpates his body.

Ethan uncaps bottles and hands them to Callan as requested. Warrick tears from the room to gather ordered supplies from Callan's sharp instructions.

Callan tucks the blanket around Axel's torso as he gets to work splinting his leg and ankles.

The room blurs all around me as whispers fill my head.

Luna...

I frown, glancing around to see where the whispers are coming from.

Everyone is focused on Axel.

Luna...

What? I move my lips silently, mouthing the word.

Luna...

I think Axel's the one saying my name.

As activity continues all around me, I fell into a semi-trance.

Axel's got a hold on me, more potent than our previous True Mate ritual bond.

The ferocity of the bond scares me. And yet, it draws me like a moth to a flame. I seem bound to follow it, even if I burn to a crisp in the fire.

Chapter Two

Luna

It takes a few days of constant care to keep Axel from falling over the edge into the unknown world of death to join Mama. I don't think I could take losing another person I love. Luckily Callan's been in and out of Axel's room every few hours over the last few days, changing bandages, applying some gooey salve to Axel's scrapes and bruises.

Sometimes I clean Axel with a basin of warm water and a washcloth, lovingly caressing his ravaged body with the cloth. But for the most part, I watch over him to make sure he still breathes.

Outside, the wind still howls and constant rain drenches the land.

Callan, Ethan, Warrick, and I barely say a word to one another as day falls into night and night yields to dawn. If I eat, I don't remember eating. If I sleep, I barely track it—I'm too caught up in this strange connection I share with Axel. Nevertheless, his whispers continue to fill my head.

Don't leave me, Luna. Never leave.

I won't, Axel. That's the past.

I don't think I'm gonna make it... The void is calling to me.

No, Axel, you can't leave us! You have four wolves waiting for you and an entire pack to lead. And me...

I cuddle into him and hold him close.

Finally, at dawn after five days of rest, Axel rolls over, looks into my eyes, and smiles.

A flood of elation fills my heart. "Axel! You came back to us."

His eyes drift closed, but the smile remains. He draws a trembling stroke along my cheek and down my neck. "You didn't leave," he says in a rasp.

"No," I say, unable to think of anything clever to add. "I never will."

Axel opens his eyes once more with a groan and pushes himself up to prop his torso on the headboard. “Well, fuck... That hurt.” He chuckles weakly. “Even laughing hurts. Did I break my ribs?”

“A few. And you broke your femur and your tibia. I learned those words from Callan.” I beam proudly at my Alpha, and he nods, looking as proud as I feel.

“You’ll be a regular medic with him around.”

“You okay?” I ask, squeezing his hand.

“When the house came down all around me, I thought I was a goner, that’s for sure.” His eyelids drift closed again.

“Can I get you anything? Water? A beer?”

“‘A beer,’ she says... What a good nurse you are.” Axel chuckles again. Then, opening his eyes, he directs them at me. “I am hungry, in fact. Thirsty too. Can you fetch me some food and water?”

“Anything,” I say, eager to serve my Alpha. I hurry out to the kitchen where Warrick sits, smoking.

“Good news,” I say.

“It must be if you’re smiling. Haven’t seen much of that pretty smile of yours lately.”

“Now I got something to smile about,” I say, unable to keep the grin from my face.

The corners of Warrick’s lips curve upward. “Tell me the good news,” he says, tapping the ash from his cigarette into a chipped white bowl. He takes one last pull on the cigarette.

“Axel’s awake!” I grin like I just discovered Mama’s risen from the dead. It ain’t Mama, but it’s the same to have someone else I love come back from the brink.

“Is he now?” Warrick stubs out his smoke and gets to his feet. “We’ll have to check in with my medic-minded brother, but you probably shouldn’t give him too much food. He hasn’t eaten for days.”

“But he’s a wolf,” I say this triumphantly, like being a wolf conquers all.

“Right,” Warrick says, striding toward the fridge. “And wolves, like anyone, can yak up a quickly consumed meal after days of hunger.” He opens the door and peers inside. “We got some duck stew here. Maybe a bowl of that to start.”

“Where are Callan and Ethan?” I glance into the front room. “I want to tell them, too.”

“They’ll be back shortly. They just took the bikes out for a ride. They were getting in my hair. It was more of a demand than a request.” Warrick chuckles in his deep, throaty voice—it’s more of a gravelly growl.

The wind batters against the back of the house, rattling the screen door against its hinges.

“When do you think this blasted storm will end?”

Warrick glances toward the back door. “It’s bound to ease up soon, maybe today. Already dying down.”

The sound of roaring motorcycles fills the air.

“I’ll check with the boys and see how things are looking in Jacksonville.” Warrick hands me the duck stew. “Dish him up some stew. If he finishes it, tell him to wait a bit before wolfing down more.”

“Got it.” I nod and reach for a bowl in the cupboard. I use it to scoop some savory soup, licking the dribbles off the side of the bowl. I grab a spoon and head back to the bedroom.

Axel’s sitting at the edge of the bed. “How long have I been out?”

“A few days,” I say with a shrug. “How you feeling?”

“Good as can be expected, which isn’t great. But I’m alive.” He flashes me a wan smile.

I hand him the duck soup and the spoon.

He lays back on the bed, as if he’s too exhausted to even sit. I slide onto the bed next to him, taking the bowl into my lap. I take a spoonful and lift it carefully to his lips. He hesitates, like he’s unsure if he can give me that kind of rule of him. But then he opens his lips, letting me feed him like a baby. My heart hammers in my chest with each bite. I feel powerful and needed and wonderfully loved as I feed him, as if it’s what I was always meant to do.

We don’t speak a word the whole time, but something weighty fills the air, a charge that makes my pulse scamper like a swamp rabbit.

Right as he finishes, Callan, Ethan, and Warrick tromp into the room, interrupting whatever was happening. I quickly busy myself with licking out the bowl.

“Axel,” Callan says, medical bag in tow. “Looks like you made it out of the woods.”

“I seem to have,” he says. “Thanks to y’all.” A warm smile curves his lips, and he directs his attention at each of us in turn.

“We didn’t have anything better to do,” Ethan says gruffly. “This damn storm has kept us all cooped up in here.”

“Happy to provide some distraction,” Axel says with a wry smile. Slowly, like an ancient man, he rises.

Callan retrieves his stethoscope from his medic bag. “Easy, man. You’ve been more or less in a coma for the last few days.”

“Yeah,” Axel says, sort of sit-falling onto the bed. “I’m a little dizzy.”

“You probably need water. So get Axel a bottle of water, Ethan,” Callan says.

Oh, dear. I forgot the water. I chew on my lower lip.

Axel seems to sense my guilt. “That stew was damn delicious. Did you make it?”

I shake my head. “No. I’ve been by your side day and night.”

He holds out his arm, and I just about dive into it, so grateful to be curled against his side. After kissing the top of my head, he says, “Thanks, y’all. Truly. I’m grateful to still be alive.”

“Of course,” Warrick grunts. “If I tried to take over the pack, they’d tear me limb from limb. They don’t even know I’m your Second. Although... That could be fun.” He cracks his knuckles and grins.

“Oh, they know, I can guarantee that,” Axel says. “Pack bond. News travels fast, even in a storm. Speaking of storms....” He turns his attention to the window, which for once isn’t being hammered by rain. “Has it passed?”

“One sec.” Callan fastens his blood pressure cuff around Axel’s arm and inflates it. Next, he affixes the stethoscope’s diaphragm to Axel’s inner arm and slowly lets the air out. “Blood pressure’s good. Okay, now you can ask questions,” he says, draping the stethoscope around his neck.

“Weather’s dying down,” Ethan says. “Callan and I just got back from a ride on our motorcycles. Clouds are dissipating here and toward Jacksonville. They’re moving south, back where they came from.”

Axel nods. “Any news come in while I was out of it?”

“Nah,” Warrick says. “Nobody was leaving their houses in this.”

“We should probably head into town and check it out—see who needs help,” Alex says.

“With the strength of this one and the damage we saw on the way out of town, a lot of people need a lot of help,” Warrick says.

Axel nods again. “Good man.”

“*Great Second*, you mean,” Warrick counters. “I don’t take my responsibilities lightly.” A somber expression falls upon his face.

“I knew you were the man for the job. Let’s go.” Axel tries to stand but

falls back on the bed again. The mattress frame springs creak in protest.

“Easy there, Alpha,” Callan says. He grabs Axel’s wrist and places his fingers, feeling for his pulse. “You need to take it easy. We’ve worked too hard to get you to this point. You’re not going anywhere until you’re ready.”

“I can’t just lay around here. I have a pack to take care of,” Axel protests.

“You *can*, and you *will* stay put. Listen to Callan. He’s the expert here,” Warrick says, crossing his arms over his giant chest. “You can use your pack bond to let the others know you’re alive. We’ll do intel on who needs what. We’ll give you a full report when we return.”

Axel groans but says nothing, his face pale and miserable.

“We’ll leave our baby-girl here to keep you company,” Warrick says, nodding toward me.

I’m as eager as anyone to get out of the house. But I smile gamely at Warrick. “Sure thing, Daddy. I’d love to keep Axel company.”

“Before you go, I’d like to make a request,” Axel says, assuming his Alpha dominance. It shines in his eyes and the tilt of his head.

“What is it, Alpha?” Warrick says, fully locked into his role as Second.

“Y’all really stepped up to the plate and came out swinging. I couldn’t be more impressed or proud to have you as a part of the pack.” Axel nods at each man.

Callan, Ethan, and Warrick all stand tall, their pride evident.

“You, too, Luna,” Axel says. “As soon as possible, I’d like to swear you all into the Jacksonville pack in an official ceremony. We’ll stand before the others and declare you, Warrick, as my Second, and you two, Callan and Ethan, as pack members. If the other pack members see you working on their behalf for the next few days or weeks—whatever it takes to start the process of repairing the damage and getting everyone housed—they’ll be happy to embrace you.” His jaw is set in a way I’ve grown to admire.

This is why he’s Alpha—he wears leadership like he wears his own wolf skin. It’s as natural to him to lead as it is to breathe.

The brothers nod.

“As for you, Luna....” He holds out his hand to me.

I take it, savoring the warmth coming from him, ecstatic that he’s alive. Electrical sparks shoot between our hands, reminding me of the special connection we share.

“I’d like you to join the council of decision-makers,” Axel says solemnly, still working even if he can’t physically return to his role just yet. “You’d be

an excellent addition to the pack. You've got fresh ideas, a level head, and you're one of the fiercest, most loyal wolves I know."

I consider his request as all eyes are trained on me. Looking out the window, I stare at the trees still bending and swaying in the wind. Finally, I turn back to Axel and say, "Thank you for your offer. But I must respectfully decline."

Axel's shoulders sag slightly.

I squeeze his hand. "I'm honored you'd even consider me, and I could try it if it's what you order. I'll obey my Alpha and my Daddy Warrick. But if you're giving me a choice to do what I want... I want peace in our own home. Y'all can work on making peace with the pack or the vampires or whatnot. I want to help us all work together as a team."

"We are a team," Callan says, sinking onto the bed beside me. "You saw that during the hurricane."

"I know." Words lodge in my throat as I think of my dead mother and all I've been through in a short amount of time. "But in truth, I'm not interested in any kind of leadership positions. I was a lone wolf until recently, and I'm still getting used to having y'all around. I'm not ready for the pack to look to me. I don't think it's ever going to interest me."

"She is a submissive," Warrick reminds Axel, who still looks doubtful. To him, titles and positions of power are an honor, but that's because he's a dominant. I have no interest in any of that.

I extend my hand to Ethan. He takes it and lifts it to his lips, kissing my knuckles.

"Let's continue to work on peace at home," I say. "I'm sure there will be enough challenges ahead to keep us all busy, inside and out of our family."

In my gut, I sense the truth of my words.

This is only the beginning of what's to come.

When the triplets are gone, I lie down beside Axel and throw my leg over him. "How are you feeling?" I ask again. "Are you still hurting?"

"My wolf's taking care of whatever's left of my injury," he says, his hands circling my waist in a possessive hold. "How's my little mate?"

"Worried," I say, toying with the front of his shirt. "I thought I'd lost you."

"Was that a bad thing?" he asks quietly.

"Of course," I cry, squirming to get closer. It's not close enough, so I climb on top of him, laying my small body over his long one. "I still feel our

bond. I was in agony all week thinking we wouldn't have more time together."

"Me, too," he says, squeezing me closer.

I part my legs when I feel his cock stiffening under me. "Do you have enough strength for this?" I whisper against his scratchy chin.

"I always have the strength to fuck you," he growls in response.

I pull up the front of my skirt, a garment Ethan bought me. Now that I know the joys of what he calls "easy access," I may never wear anything else.

Axel's big hands palm the backs of my thighs, and he pushes his hips up against mine and moans low in his throat.

I reach between us to free his cock, which is now stiff and straight. Just feeling it so hot in my palm makes wetness spring to life between my legs in preparation for his entrance. I scoot up enough to position him at my opening, then sink my pussy down slowly onto his bare cock.

"Luna," he groans, his hands tightening on my hips. "You feel so good."

"I know," I say, beginning to rise and fall on top of him, reveling in the power my body has to bring this dominant Alpha to his knees. I ride him until we're both panting for breath. When I feel his knot forming, stretching me open in a way only a True Mate can, I cry out and come hard, nearly blacking out when I feel his hot seed spurting into my core over and over.

When we're done, I flop down beside him, cuddling close and glowing with happiness. My Alpha is healing, my Daddy is happy with his position in the pack, and my two other lovers are content to share me as well. With them by my side, nothing can go wrong.

Chapter Three

Luna

The city of Jacksonville is ravaged by the storm. The triplets and I spend the next few weeks trekking back and forth to the town. Axel joins us once he's well enough to do so.

Foul-smelling ankle-deep water still fills the streets, but the level has receded enough to drive Axel's truck to town. Still, we wear thigh-high waders once we step from our vehicles. We've worked our fingers to the bone, repairing roofs, boarding up windows, using sump pumps to drain basements of water, and other tedious but valuable chores. The work's been good, though, establishing the brothers and me as helpful members of the pack.

At first, we were regarded with suspicion or curiosity or both. But when the pack saw how hard we all work, they eased up on their doubts and worked side by side with us to put their homes to rights.

The water isn't too high near Axel's former house, though it's an irreparable wreck. Axel doesn't bat an eye at the wreckage. Instead, he gives more thanks for his life having been spared, then turned to me and says, "Let's check on yours."

Next, we drive by my home, which still stands but is flooded. At least there's more left than the debris that lay where Axel's house once stood.

When the heavy work slows down, Axel and Warrick keep going into town to work with the pack on details while Ethan and Callan start looking for odd jobs to pay something they have called bills. One morning, I wake to find everyone gone but Callan.

"Where's the others?" I ask, stretching and yawning as I enter the kitchen and pour myself a cup of coffee from the pot.

“Ethan got a one-man job in town, and the others are taking care of some pack business,” Callan says, rinsing his plate and setting it in the rack. “Guess it’s just you and me today, pet. Want to eat on the porch?”

I take a plate of food they set out for me and my coffee and head to the porch where Callan sits down to roll a smoke. It’s a sultry day today, so I’m wearing short shorts and a tight lavender t-shirt to match my hair. I sit on the swing and stretch my legs into the sunshine.

Callan licks his lips as he eyes my legs, then lifts his gaze to my face. “I thought I’d go looking for herbs in the woods today. I need to stock my medicinal supply. Reckon you want to join me? Wouldn’t hurt to have someone around here who knows what’s what in case I ever get hurt.”

The thought of trekking through the woods with Callan floods my heart with joy. Each night, by the time we get back from town, we’ve all been too exhausted to hunt or do anything besides collapse into bed and fall straight to sleep. My lips roll between my teeth as I study Callan, wondering if he’s also thinking we might use this alone time for more than learning. “That sounds like a great idea,” I say. “We’ve been working pretty steadily for a couple of weeks, anyway. It would be nice to have a quieter day with just the two of us.”

“There’s still more work to be done in town,” Callan says. “But we have to take care of ourselves, too.”

I hope he’s feeling what I’m feeling, that we’re both horny and in need of a good fuck. But I can’t tell yet. I’m not as good at reading people as the triplets are, having so much less experience in my life. Mercy on the Swamp Dogs, but I hope it’s me. I could use a roll with all of them after being too busy for more than a quick kiss or two for the past few weeks.

After I eat and Callan finishes his cigarette, he gets a backpack together and tells me it’s time to set off. “I brought some food, water, tools for gathering specimens, even a blanket for when we need a recess from plant life.”

A smirk crosses his handsome face, and a flame of desire licks between my thighs like Axel’s tongue when he gets me going.

“Okay,” I say, as if I’m only thinking about herbs.

Callan studies me with a playful expression. “What’s going through that bright mind of yours?”

I shrug. “Plantlife. What else could I be thinking of?”

He adjusts the backpack into position with a laugh, throws his arm over

my shoulders, and we proceed into the woods with sure, bare-footed steps.

As we trek through the squishy bog, stepping around swamp grass and ducking around the Tupelo trees, my soul is filled with contentment. Sure, we just endured an immense tragedy. Axel lost his house, and we almost lost Axel. But together, we made things right. Life these days is so different from the isolation in which I was raised.

Callan's eyes are trained on the ground, scanning for whatever it is he's looking for. A twinge of disappointment twists my insides that we haven't immediately gotten physical.

"There we go...." Callan points at a cluster of low-growing green-leafed plants dotted with dainty purple flowers. "Let's get some of that. That's Pennyroyal."

"Pennyroyal," I repeat. "What's it used for?"

He taps his lips. "This one's an insect repellent, antiseptic, stimulant, antispasmodic and for bowel disorders, helps with skin eruptions, and pneumonia.... And it's also used to stimulate a lady's moon cycle."

Callan stoops and plucks a few sprigs of the plant. I crouch next to him, taking a whiff of the fragrance emitted by the plant. "That smells good."

"Doesn't it? Pennyroyal is a member of the mint family." Callan smiles at me, then says, "Open up my backpack and get out a plastic bag, will you, pet?"

I do as he asks.

He fills the baggie with Pennyroyal, stands, and hands it to me. I put it back in the pack, eyeing his strong neck and shoulders. Damn, but he's sexy.

He throws his arm around me again, and we trek through the rain-soaked swamp. Once more, his eyes scan the earth instead of me.

The day isn't going like I wanted, and I start to pout.

"Oh, look," he says, sounding excited. "Here's some Shepherd's needle. Let's get some for supper."

"Have we had this before?" I ask, trying to be as interested as he is.

"Most people think it's nothing but an invasive weed, but actually, it's pretty damn tasty," he answers. "It can also be used as a pain reliever, but the kind of pain my brothers' come home with, well... We generally need something stronger than Shepherd's Needle."

Yet again, he crouches and plucks a few handfuls. I root around in his pack and retrieve a small brown bag. Once I pull it free from the knapsack, I hand it to him over his shoulder, letting my arm brush against his neck.

He turns his head back and forth, rubbing against my arm. “You feel good. I love your soft skin.”

I’m instantly aroused, my knees pinching together to relieve the aching need building between them.

Callan stuffs the plant inside the sack and hands it back to me.

After placing it in his backpack, I let my hands caress his hips and tight butt. “You feel good, too.”

“Sweet Jesus, Luna. I’d hoped to get a few more plants picked before getting distracted.” Rising to stand, he turns and draws me to him. “It’s been hard to keep my hands off of you lately. You just grow more beautiful every day.” He presses his hands against the sides of my cheeks and lowers his mouth to mine.

His kiss is electric, sending tingles through my bloodstream. I shove my hand inside his shorts, pleased to feel the rigid heat throbbing into my palm.

“Oh, fuck, Luna,” Callan says, withdrawing his lips from mine.

The soft snap of a branch snags our attention.

We both pause and listen.

“It’s probably a deer or something,” Callan says, lowering his head to kiss me again.

His mouth is sweet and soft as he nibbles my lips.

A branch snaps closer to us.

We both still and lift our noses in the air, scenting to determine who’s out there.

It’s a wolf, but it doesn’t smell like any wolves we know.

“Shit,” we say at the same time, staring at one another.

Suddenly, Callan’s eyes go wide. “Run,” he yells.

But his words come too late, as an enormous half-crazed wolf tears from the woods and slams into me. He drags me to the ground and seizes my neck between his sharp fangs.

Callan shifts and is on him in a heartbeat, but even Callan looks diminutive next to this beast.

Stars appear before my eyes as Callan slams into the wolf, tearing him away from me. All I can hear are the snarls of two wolves—Callan’s and my enemy.

Finally, in a show of strength, Callan manages to rip the wolf’s head off. I bring my hand up to my own throat, and it comes back bloody.

Callan shifts back to human, then scoops me in his arms and races toward

the house.

The other wolf lies still in the bog.

“Stay with me, Luna. It’s not too bad this time, you hear?” Callan chides as I bob up and down in his arms.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I say weakly.

“That’s right. You’re not going anywhere.” Callan sounds breathless as he powers us out of the woods and into the dirt driveway. He throws open the screen and races through the house to lay me on the bed in his room.

“Ever consider turning your room into the local medic clinic?” I weakly quip.

“Ha,” Callan says. “At least you have your sense of humor.”

He palpates my neck.

I wince.

“Thank the devil, he only nicked your carotid.”

I just want to close my eyes and drift away.

Callan opens a small, rectangular plastic container from his medic kit, which he grabbed on the way in.

“I’m going to have to stitch this up, pet,” Callan says, regarding me with soft eyes. “But you’ll be just fine. It’s just a scratch. We have this kind of thing happen all the time. It’s why I’m so good at it. Lots of practice.”

I nod. “I don’t feel too bad.”

“This’ll hurt,” Callan warns. “I can give you some whiskey, or we’ve got something a little stronger for emergencies.”

I shake my head. “Just do it.”

“Take the drugs, Luna,” he advises, pushing my bloody hair away from my face.

“No. I want to be like you guys when it comes to pain,” I say fiercely.

“Then you’ll definitely want the drugs,” Callan says. “Come on, pet. We all know how brave you are. You’re our warrior princess.”

As Callan threads his needle, I consider. My neck throbs like a bitch. “Okay, then. But just a little.”

I try to smile, but it turns into more of a grimace. I take the pill Callan hands me and wash it down with the water. Then, a minute or two later, Callan gets to work.

I’m feeling all drifty and chill, and the next thing I know, I’m waking up and it’s evening outside the window and I hear voices outside.

“What the fuck happened?” Axel demands.

“Another wolf attack,” Callan says, their footsteps coming closer. “Big motherfucker. His irises were like black holes.”

“Shit,” Warrick says, stepping into the room with the others. “Fucking drugs and the beasts who use them. Sounds like the one that got her the night she came back here from Axel’s.”

“I’m going to speak to some elders about the wolf,” Axel says. “Same as the last wolf who attacked Luna, they seem to be some mutant variety. There were a string of attacks like this when I was a kid, killed a number of our members. I’ll see how they dealt with it then, and we’ll do the same now.”

“Maybe Ama is sending them for me from the Afterworld,” I mumble, eyes closed.

“She’s not that smart,” Axel says, sinking onto the bed beside me. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. We’ll take care of this. No one hurts our mate and gets away with it.”

My heart swells with warmth. He didn’t say *his* mate. He said *their* mate.

Chapter Four

Luna

When I struggle to consciousness again, I'm snuggled between two warm bodies. Turning my head this way and that, I'm pleased to find Axel on one side and Callan on the other. I pat my neck. It's all bandaged. It hurts, but I know what can distract me from the hurt. I wiggle against Callan, remembering what we were about to do when we were interrupted by the attack. If anything, the denial makes me even more ready to mate than I was then. It must be from going without it for too long.

I turn on the side opposite the wound and run my hands along Callan's muscular torso.

In the dim light of dawn, he stirs and reaches for my hand, drawing it to my lips without opening his eyes.

I squirm against his hip, pushing my heat against his thigh.

"We never finished what we started, did we?" he asks, his voice low and rough with sleep.

"No, we didn't," I whisper, hoping not to awaken Axel. I gently tug my hand out of Callan's grasp and let my fingers roam. His body is warm and solid, and just touching him makes my heat throb with wetness.

I run my hand down his hard, muscular abs and over the front of his pants. His stiff cock throbs into my hand, and he groans. "I could come with a few quick strokes, Luna. Take pity on me."

"I sure don't want you to come in my hand." I push to sitting, climb on top of Callan and straddle his thighs. My sleep-tangled hair falls on his chest as I lean over to kiss his neck. My nipples spark to life as they rub against the hair on his torso.

He reaches down to grab my hips. "Damn, pet. You feel so hot."

I position my mouth over his and softly kiss his lips. His jaw—like the rest of the guys’—is lined with several days stubble. The sensation of the coarse hair against my soft skin drives me wild. I deepen the kiss, letting my tongue flicker in and out of his mouth.

He moans and sucks on my tongue.

An extra set of hands begins to caress my back and leg. Axel’s awake—yum.

Panting, I grind my wetness against Callan’s rigid length.

He hisses and stills my hips with his strong hands. “Easy, pet. I don’t want to come before I’m even inside you. Fuck, you smell good.”

“You smell that, too?” Axel murmurs. “Like candy.”

Although his right leg and left ankle are bound in plaster casts, he continues to stroke his hand up and down my thigh, pulling my knee further open so I can sink down on Callan.

When I glance over at him, his free hand is working his stiff shaft while he watches me ride Callan.

The sight of his straining cock makes me want to howl. I feel like I’ll never get enough of these guys. Unable to hold back, I lean over and give the head of his cock a quick suck. He groans and lifts up, pushing into my throat. His free hand tugs aside my pajama shorts, fingering my sopping pussy. He pumps a finger into me a few times while I bob up and down on his cock, licking the salty tip.

“Luna,” Axel says, his voice firm.

“Mmm?” I answer around his girth.

“Sit up,” he says. “I want to see how you take it from these men.”

“What?” I ask, lifting my head. A string of saliva connects my mouth with his cock, and I wipe my chin and stare up at him.

“I want to see that little pink pussy stretched open and taking every inch of his cock,” Axel says, his eyes hooded with lust. “I want to see how tough my sweet little mate is, if she can take a rough pounding from these outlaws.”

His words have my juices sliding down my thighs and over his fingers. Callan growls and drags me forward. Axel holds me open while Callan grips his thick length and drives it deep into my juicy core.

I cry out with bliss at the delicious stretch, and Callan lets out a low growl, deep in his throat. “Fuck, Luna. Your pussy’s so fucking wet today.”

I slide up and down and grind my clit against his pubic bone. “You feel so good,” I say, dropping my head so my hair trails along his chest.

Callan seizes a handful of my hair and draws my face down to his. He practically devours me with his lips.

I start to moan into his mouth. I'm going to come so hard I think I'll explode. Finally, I wrench my mouth away from him and dig my nails into his chest. "Callan," I cry. "Oh, Callan, I love you so much."

"Fuck her harder," Axel commands, and Callan grabs my hair and wrenches my head back, devouring my throat while his hips slam up into me from below, fucking me so hard I see stars.

"Yes," I scream, reaching for Axel. He shoves his cock into my hand, and I pump it as Callan pumps into me with crushing force until I'm forced over the edge. I scream out my wordless ecstasy, coming in color, sound, and light, pulsing all over Callan's bare cock.

He lets loose, too, and cries out my name as his liquid heat spurts into my center again and again. Hot, wet, and sticky liquid rains down over my hand and thigh as Axel lets loose with his own orgasm, a roar tearing from his lips. We're all riding an electric wave of bliss.

Aftershocks roll through all three of us for a few minutes. I'm too dazed to move. Finally, I roll off of Callan and collapse between them. I run my hands over each of their hard bodies as they massage my breasts and nuzzle my shoulders and neck. Callan finds my slick thighs and rubs our cum over my skin, first Axel's and then dipping into my pussy to gather our release and mix our scents on my skin. The fragrance makes my wolf purr with pleasure inside me, whining for more. She's already anxious for another round, but the guys both doze off.

We all slip into a drowse at last. When I wake up again, Callan is gone, and the smell of bacon taunts me, making my tummy growl.

I roll over, expecting to find Axel next to me, but he's gone, too.

The crumpled bedding smells like yummy sex, and my wolf growls to come out and play. I should feel sated, but I could go a few more rounds, so I roll off the mattress, hoping to entice someone into more play.

Clad in a short nightie and panties, I saunter into the kitchen, drawn by the smells of whatever Callan is cooking.

He stands at the stove while Axel, Warrick, and Ethan are seated around the kitchen table, wolfing down pancakes.

"Morning, sleepyhead," Warrick says, patting his large thigh.

I pad toward him and settle onto his knee. I kiss his stubble-covered cheek and breathe him in. "Hey to you, too, Daddy. How's everyone feeling

this morning?”

“Apparently not as good as you three,” Ethan says with a wink. Sitting across the table from me, he picks up a piece of bacon, leans over, and holds it in front of my mouth.

I take the tasty meat between my teeth, savoring the taste of crisp, salted pork.

Callan sets a plate of sourdough pancakes in front of me, and Axel scoots the syrup in my direction. I remember the sticky syrup of our cum when he rubbed it into my skin last night, and a shiver of longing runs through me.

Warrick nudges the butter toward my plate. “The real question is how are *you* feeling?” He gently fingers my wet pussy through my panties.

I slide my knife through the butter and spread it on my flapjacks. “I feel good,” I say with a sigh, squirming against his hand. “Especially when you do that, Daddy.”

The men all side-eye each other and shift in their seats.

“I thought we took care of your needs at dawn,” Callan says, sitting beside me. He pours a healthy dollop of syrup on his pancakes and then drizzles some on mine. Then, he forks a bite of pancake and holds it before my mouth. “Not that I’m going to deny you more.”

I take the bite he offers, chew, and swallow the delicious morsel. Warrick tugs my panties aside and strums a finger back and forth over my clit. I sigh and close my eyes, savoring the food and the sensation of his rough finger on my delicate, swollen flesh at once. “I’m in heaven,” I sigh through the food.

“Good, baby girl,” Warrick says. “We’re right here with you.”

“And determined to keep you safe and satisfied,” Axel says, shoving his empty plate aside. He leans back in his chair, his hungry gaze fixed on me now that he’s filled his other appetite.

“We’ll keep her satisfied alright,” Warrick growls, circling my swollen clit with his fingertip and making me squirm on his thigh.

It’s so cool to witness the camaraderie and cooperation between my men.

“Yeah, about Luna’s safety....” Ethan eyes me and licks his lips. “Did you find out anything about the attack yet, Axel?”

“Yeah,” Axel says, reaching for a toothpick from a small, white container in the center of the table. He tucks it into the corner his mouth, his nostrils flaring as he watches me eat while Warrick torments my pussy under the table. “Not much, but a bit of info. One of the elders, a guy named Gordon who you’ll meet soon enough, said he in the old days they fought off a group

of wolves who mutated from feeding on human flesh. You know and I know we're not cannibals. We don't eat other humans."

"Except pussy," Ethan says with a wink at me. "I'll eat any pussy, human or otherwise."

I moan and grind against Warrick's hand as he fingers my slick folds, teasing my entrance with the tip of a finger.

"We also know the powers that come from this act," Axel says, only casting a disapproving glance Ethan's way.

"I've eaten heart," Warrick says. "I'll eat the heart of my enemy any damn day."

Axel nods. "That's part of what makes you so powerful. And a wolf who eats more than that, who regularly feasts on human flesh... It's like a steroid for a human. Pumps up a wolf to be unnaturally strong, aggressive, and oversized."

Warrick lifts his chin, clearly ready for a confrontation, but Axel seems unworried about Warrick's small acts of cannibalism. Pride for both men swells inside me, and a wave of wetness drenches Warrick's fingers. He slowly slides one inside my heated pussy while I eat. I try not to make a sound, since they're all acting like everything's normal. I close my eyes and savor the sweet pancakes as I take another huge bite, sucking the syrup from the fork.

"Do you think Ama organized the mutant wolves before she died?" I ask, ignoring Warrick's slick finger pumping into me. "Maybe she had backups in play in case the first one screwed up."

"Like I said last night, I don't think she's that smart," Axel says. "She was wily, but not a strategic planner, and these wolves aren't a pack. They're lone wolves, and she wasn't dominant enough to organize them."

"That thing was a huge-ass motherfucker," Callan says, picking up his now empty plate and licking it clean. "Thank the devil for giving me strength to take it down before it took Luna away from us. We should head back to check he's dead, though."

"We'll do it right after breakfast." Warrick drums his fingers on the table while his other hand works a second, thick finger into my opening. "But why would anyone be after our girl? Ama's gone, and no one else could wish her harm."

"I sure don't have the answer to that question." Axel tosses the toothpick on his plate. "But I hope we can suss out some more answers before one of

them gets to her.” He turns to face me. “No way can you go out alone, Luna. Not until we figure out who’s after you and why.”

His piercing blue-eyed gaze tangles with me, and I shiver as Warrick’s fingers move in a slow, sensual circle inside me while I hold the gaze of our Alpha.

“Damn straight,” Warrick growls. “You’re to be with us at all times. No exceptions. You can’t even go out in the woods to pee, got it?” Warrick slides his free arm around my middle, fiercely protective, pinning me while he thrusts his fingers into my dripping pussy with renewed vigor.

“All my freedoms are being taken away again,” I say, sinking into his chest and panting out little gasps of breath with every word.

“We have to keep you safe,” Axel says, nodding. “But you’re not alone anymore, little mate. You’re with a pack now. I’ll spread the word among the other members. We’ll all watch out for you. That’s what happens when you’re part of a pack. You’re being protected, not losing freedoms.”

“Thank you,” I say, lolling back against Daddy Warrick’s chest and rocking my hips against his hand. “You’re the best men a woman could ever have. I’m so lucky.”

The guys grow silent, and the only sound is the wet, sticky sound of my pussy being fingered.

Finally Ethan shoves back from the table. “For fuck’s sake, spread her legs and let me feast on that sweet cunt,” he says. “We can all smell what you’re doing.”

Warrick pushes back from the table, still holding me on his knee. He spreads my pussy lips, exposing my slick, pink inside to the other three men. Their eyes all lock on me, their nostrils flared. But it’s Ethan who drops to his knees, grips my knees, and pulls them open as wide as they’ll go. The others suck in a breath, and Ethan dives in, latching onto my exposed pussy, sucking greedily and thrusting his tongue into me, fucking me with his mouth until I come so hard I soak his beard and can’t move a muscle afterwards.

Chapter Five

Luna

The thought of being guarded at all times by Axel and the triplets should send me packing—but strangely, it doesn't. It comforts me. I've been weirdly clingy and want them around me at all times. I don't understand why I'm feeling this way. I'm also insatiable in wanting them in my bed at night. I *need* them with a ferocity I've never experienced before.

And, oddly, I'm less inclined to go anywhere. Maybe it's because I was severely attacked twice now and almost lost my life to whoever wants me dead. Whatever the reason, when Warrick stomps through the back door, lines of stress drawing his eyebrows together, I immediately hurry toward him, abandoning my kitchen cleaning duties.

"What is it? What's wrong?" I ask.

Instantly, his features grow blank, and I know he's got something to hide.

"Where have you been?" I sidle up to him, desperate to be close to him and draw strength from him. "What is it, Daddy Warrick?"

"Why do you think something's wrong? Can't a man walk through the door with a frown on his face? I was checking on my bike. It needs a tune-up." He smiles and throws an arm around me, guiding me to the front room where Ethan, Axel, and Callan hang out. They're listening to some head-banging metal music from the last century.

They love to listen to music like this, claiming that the music created well over a century ago, possesses an edginess and fierceness not found since.

"Hey, assholes," Warrick says, removing his arm from my shoulder and turning down the volume so he can speak.

Instantly, I miss his warmth and the safety of his big body next to mine. This clinginess that's come over me feels so foreign. Maybe it's from losing

Mama, and now that I have a new family, being afraid I'll lose them, too.

"I need to talk with you for a sec, Axel. Actually, all of y'all," Warrick grumbles.

"What about me?" I ask.

"You stay put, baby girl." Warrick kisses the top of my head. "This is just some guy shit I need to talk about. It's all aimed at keeping you safe." He smiles at me, and the corners of his eyes crinkle in his sun-tanned face. "We'll be right back."

The boys tromp towards the back of the house, disappearing into Warrick's room and closing the door behind them, effectively shutting me out.

I step toward their restored stereo equipment and turn the volume even lower, keeping my wolf ears pricked so I can maybe hear what they're talking about. Then I pick up a few clothes from the floor and wander into the laundry room, which is right next to Warrick's room. When we came back here after the hurricane, the place was a wreck, but Axel must have had them clean it up, because it's just regular messy now. The beer cans and bottles are kept to a minimum, anyway.

The murmur of my men's voices sounds like bees, but I can make out some of the words.

"Couldn't find the motherfucker," Warrick says. "But there's a blood trail. He didn't get far, guaranteed."

A shiver launches up my spine. *Are they talking about the wolf who attacked me? Is he still after me? Did he live?*

My hands begin to shake.

"I did see the telltale tracks of a big, ol' gator near where you said the body was located, Callan," Warrick says.

As quietly as I can, I lift the lid of the washing machine and drop the clothes into it.

"Ha!" Callan says. "Maybe Frank had himself a tasty meal."

Frank's this ginormous alligator who lives in the swamp nearby. He scares the shit out of me, but if he ate the remains of that wolf, Frank's my ally, for sure.

I reach for the laundry detergent, but once I turn on the washer, the sloshing sound drowns out their voices, and I can't hear any more.

Damn it.

I sigh and head to the kitchen, where a few plates are stacked in the sink.

I've just washed the last dish and set it in the cupboard when Ethan and Callan appear.

"Where are Warrick and Axel?" I say, carefully folding the dishtowel and hanging it over the little towel bar on the inside of the cupboard.

"Heading into town to check on some pack business. It's an Alpha and his Second bonding moment." Ethan laughs.

Alarm pricks at my skin. "What are they going to do in town?" I sidle up to Ethan and stroke my palm up and down his biceps.

Ethan slides his arm around my waist and pulls me close. "Oh, they're going to speak with the pack, gather some supplies and weapons... Shit like that."

His warmth radiates into my body.

"What are you and Callan going to do?" I ask.

He and Callan exchange a wicked look.

Instantly, my core floods with heat, easing the worry I feel about two of my lovers heading into town.

"We're going to keep you company. How does that sound?" Callan steps toward my other side, and together with Ethan, they guide me toward the bedroom. "Thanks for cleaning up our shit. You don't have to do that, you know. I'm happy to do the cleaning and let you rest your little paws."

"I know," I say, practically vibrating with desire.

"How's your neck?" Callan's gaze drops to my throat.

"My wolf has healed most of it. But I'm worried about Axel and Warrick heading into town, especially if they're planning to fight a giant wolf."

"Don't you worry about us. We're all strong guys. We can take care of ourselves just fine," Callan says, his gaze sweeping my body. "And you."

"I could use the distraction," I admit in a low, throaty voice.

Ethan chuckles.

I glance down, pleased to see the bulge in his shorts. My gaze slides toward Callan, who sports a similar outline.

"Distraction is *exactly* what we had in mind," Callan says, once more exchanging a look with his brother.

Whatever unspoken thing they were communicating, it has my pussy tingling with desire as heat rushes to my core.

"Want to play a game, Luna?" Callan asks, mischief flashing in his eyes.

My brow furrows. "A game? What kind of game?"

"Let's call it 'bad wolf,'" Ethan answers.

“Bad wolf?” My brow furrowed even deeper. “What kind of game is that?”

“A fun one,” Callan says. “You’ll like it. And, if you *don’t* like it, just say so, and we stop.”

I sit down on the edge of the bed. “How do we play?”

“I’m going to be the teacher,” Ethan says, rummaging around in one of the drawers in the bedroom.

“The teacher?” I say. *This game is confusing me, and we haven’t even started.*

“I realize you never went to school like me and my brothers did,” Callan says. “I’ll play the teacher’s pet.”

“What does that mean?”

“The favorite one,” Callan says, grinning.

I nervously pick at the bedspread. I thought we were going to fuck, not play games that I don’t understand.

Ethan turns around, and he’s got a pair of glasses balanced on his nose.

The effect makes me laugh. “What are you doing, Ethan?”

“Are you talking back to me again, Miss Wolf?” He’s holding a ruler in his hand, and he smacks it against his palm.

“I am? I was just asking a question.”

“There’s that smart mouth again, Miss Wolf. Callan, would you take off Miss Wolf’s clothes? I think she needs some discipline.” Ethan’s expression turns stern.

“Discipline?” I squeak.

“Bad wolf.” Ethan sits on the wooden chair in the corner.

Callan steps toward me. “Get up.”

“Okay.” I stand.

“Come over next to me and face the wall. You’re a bad wolf.”

Am I a bad wolf? I shuffle toward the wall next to Ethan and stare at the plaster.

Callan removes my t-shirt and shorts in a rather perfunctory manner. He leaves on my red lacy panties, a gift from Ethan. But I’m getting more excited about the game now that I’m being undressed.

“There, Teacher,” Callan says. “It’s done.”

“Place your hands on the wall, Miss Wolf,” Ethan says.

“Okay,” I say. Excitement grows inside my belly and core as I position my hands along the white-painted surface. My hair drapes over my shoulder,

covering my right breast, and I feel a surge of the powerful sensation I get when they watch and want me.

“Spread your legs,” Ethan commands.

I widen my stance and peer over my shoulder at my sexy biker lover, now in a pair of glasses that make him a teacher.

Ethan scoots his chair closer and draws the wooden ruler up and down my inner thighs. He hisses in a breath as I arch my back at the sensation of the smooth pine against my sensitive skin. Then, he lightly smacks my ass with the ruler.

It surprises me, and I wince.

“You’ve been a naughty, naughty wolf,” Ethan says.

Warmth spreads across my butt cheeks as he smacks me on the other side.

The rasp of a zipper meets my ears.

Ethan’s pulling his rigid erection from his shorts.

Another zipper rasps.

I glance over my shoulder.

Callan’s jeans fall to the ground, and his cock bobs against his belly.

“What would you like me to do now, sir?”

I’m starting to get the game—we’re pretending to be someone we’re not—and a swirl of heat coils up my spine.

“Stand on the other side of her,” Ethan says.

Callan moves into position. “Ready, teacher.”

Ethan runs the edge of the ruler along my crack. “So, talking back to me—you’ve been doing that a lot, Miss Wolf. I’m going to have to spank you.”

“Yes, teacher,” I say. “I understand.”

“Good girl.”

Another smack—this one harder—hits my behind. I arch into the sensation. The sharp sting makes me gasp, but wetness floods my pussy when he spanks me again.

“Have I made myself clear on this issue? No talking back,” Ethan says.

“I don’t think so,” I whisper, swaying my hips back and forth, wanting more the same way I want more of Warrick when his huge cock is hurting me in the best way. “I’m going to talk back to you again. I can’t help myself.”

The next stinging blow makes me cry out.

Callan twists my hair, and pain fills my scalp, too. There’s something so satisfying about this pain, though, just like Warrick’s roughness in bed.

“Tweak her nipples,” Ethan demands.

With his back against the wall next to me, Callan's hands land on my breasts and squeeze. Then, he takes my nipples between his strong, calloused fingers and rolls each one into a tight bud.

The ache sends me soaring. I writhe into his touch, bringing my knees together to ease the ache between them.

"Stand how I told you," Ethan growls, whacking me again, even harder now. My bottom throbs with heat, as if my skin is burned. I whimper and spread my legs again.

Callan's warm hands caress my inner thighs. His fingers slide between my legs, pulling my panties aside and gliding up and down my folds. He sucks in a breath and growls low in his throat. His touch is such sweet relief, I want to cry. My pussy throbs with each stroke of his rough fingers.

Ethan growls, too, and another stinging blow lands on my skin. My body's on fire, caught between the intensity of the ruler and Callan's hands, teasing my breasts into a painful ache of need and then dipping into my panties again. I start to reach for Callan, but Ethan slaps me harder.

"Did I tell you to move?" he growls.

"No, sir."

"Hands against the wall until I say so." Ethan rises and places the measuring device on the chair.

I'm trembling with need as I stand in the perfect place, sandwiched between two of the strongest, most powerful mates. I can smell their arousal, the scent of sweat and musk of desire on them, and I want to scream with wanting them. Palms pressed into the plaster, my legs open wider as I writhe in place.

Ethan rubs my ass with sweet, tender caresses while ducks between me and the wall and sucks on my nipples.

I moan in pleasure.

Ethan uses his hand to slap my backside.

His palm stings my raw skin while he pushes his cock against my hip.

"I think you've earned your reward now, Miss Wolf," Ethan says. He withdraws and crosses the room to the bed.

Already, I miss him. I turn my head to see where he's going.

He plunks on the edge of the bed. "Come over here and sit on my cock, facing away from me. Then suck my brother's dick at the same time."

Saliva fills my mouth as I step toward him.

He turns me to face Callan, grabs my hips, and positions my wet folds

over his rigid erection. Then, he guides me down his length.

We both groan as he fills my slick pussy to my depths.

Callan watches for only a moment, then grabs my hair and pulls me forward. He guides his cock into my mouth and begins to pump into me while Ethan thrusts into me from behind.

My ass feels inflamed from the whacks of the ruler and the slaps. But the stretch of Ethan's cock stirs me into an ecstatic frenzy. I seize Callan's cock with one hand and finger his balls with the other. Completely overwhelmed with sensation, I suck Callan and fuck Ethan.

We're all groaning and grunting with pleasure, the animal noises only fueling my heat and making me frantic for release as the room is filled with the scent of our arousal.

I can't hold back, and I start to come in a writhing cascade of ecstasy. I moan around Callan's cock, and he grips my head, and his hips pump wildly as he lets go into my mouth.

Ethan takes his cue and roars his release, hot streams flooding into my ecstatic core until we're one giant blur of bliss.

Afterward, Ethan pulls me onto the bed, and he, Callan, and I snuggle into a tangle of sheets and bedding.

I'm so happy, I could cry. But somehow, I still want more. I can't get enough of these men, of the life of contentment and joy we're making out here in the swamps together. Maybe it's possible to find happiness again after Mama, after all—and more than I ever had with her, more than I ever dreamed existed in the world. I fall asleep between the brothers, my spirit soaring with fulfillment.

Chapter Six

Axel

Standing in a circle of pack members in the clearing at Creebay Creek, I give them the news—Luna’s been attacked again. Her life is in danger, and I need their help.

A few trees ripped from the earth and tossed on the ground lay scattered around us. The storm has passed, though, leaving us in a sultry heatwave. Sweat drenches my skin and pastes my clothing to my body. I wipe the dampness from my brow and continue. “The attack was brutal and unprovoked. She and Callan were out in the woods picking herbs, nothing to warrant such an attack. We’ve got to get to the bottom of this and find out why Luna is a target. And we’ve got to protect her. Are y’all willing to help?”

All around me heads nod in agreement.

“Absolutely,” Adolpha says. “She and those triplets worked hard to repair my roof.” Her gaze flits toward Warrick, who stands by my side.

A few of the others murmur their assent.

“You’ve got it, boss,” Borris says, his arm around his wife, who holds their little girl. “I don’t know what I would have done if you all hadn’t come to my and my wife’s rescue.” He tugs her closer and kisses the top of the child’s head.

For one brief, fleeting second, my chest clenches at their sweet family. I wonder if I’ll ever give Luna pups, and a pang of restlessness stirs my insides. I’d like nothing more than to plant my seed inside my mate and start our own family. I haven’t been able to get her out of my mind—nothing has worked. If anything, my intense bond with her has only grown stronger until I’m completely consumed. Seeing her wrecked and bleeding again brought

out the most intense protective feelings I've ever had.

Warrick nudges me out of my fantasies as he addresses the group. "Whoever these wolves are, they're freaks. They're enormous and vicious, some sort of mutant wolves. Somehow they've been genetically altered to beast-like proportions. Maybe hopped up on goblin blood or..."

A few of the elders glance at each other, and I wonder if they're thinking about the same thing they told me—the unthinkable, unspeakable act of eating human flesh.

"But your brother managed to kill the one who attacked Luna, right?" Borris says.

Warrick's expression looks grim as he speaks. "He honestly doesn't know how he managed. He figured a burst of adrenaline gave him the strength he needed."

I cross my arms over my chest. "But what if that hadn't happened? Luna would be dead, and we'd be devastated. We've *got* to keep her safe. She's my mate." Rage rocks my soul at the thought of losing Luna to those crazed wolves. I already lost her once, and I won't do it again. "Right now, we've made her swear to not take a step out of the house unless accompanied by one of us, but that's obviously not a permanent solution."

"Where are you staying now that your house is destroyed and her house is still surrounded by water?" Adolpha asks.

"We're all out at our casa," Warrick states, matching my stance. "Our area didn't suffer the same damage as your street."

Adolpha scratches her head. "You're a ways out, and yet the beast-wolf found her. Do you think they were seeking her, or could it be a coincidence? Maybe they were just hunting in the woods and happened on her."

"It's the second time this has happened," I admit.

Like a lightning bolt, the sudden appearance of a vampire blurring into the center of the circle surprises everyone.

Borris's wife shrieks and clutches her little girl close.

Another vampire blurs into the clearing, and then another and another. Soon we're surrounded by the bloodsuckers.

And then all hell breaks loose as the vampires attack.

"Get to the truck," Borris shouts to his wife.

"Get the kids to safety!" Kato, my sentinel and also a parent, calls to his mate.

The rest of us shift into wolves and launch into the fight.

We're all tearing at one another's throats when another vampire—the bloodsucker known as Drake—blurs into the clearing and shouts, "Why are you destroying us? You broke your agreement."

There's a pause in the fray, and I shift into my human form.

"What are you talking about?" I demand. Giving away pack land to get Luna back from the vampires may not have been my most brilliant move, but I'm a man of my word. I always keep my agreements.

"You gave us land, and now you're killing us," Drake says coldly as he walks in a slow circle around me.

He's a big man, at least six foot six, but I'm not intimidated by him.

"Why would we do that?" I glance at the others of my pack, who now stare at us.

Blood stains their fur and faces.

The vampires we've been fighting gingerly feel their wounds. One of them runs his tongue along the inside of his mouth before spitting out a tooth. He gives a derisive snort and glares at me as if I'm the one who took out his tooth.

"Because you're all a bunch of animals," Drake says, coming to a stop before me and drawing himself up. "We can't trust you."

His bespoke suit clings to him like a second skin. The way he holds himself makes him look like royalty. For all I know, the asshole is the vampire prince.

"I may be a lot of things, but I'm not a liar," I growl. Blood drips down my cheek. I wipe it away with the back of my hand. "I gave you that property fair and square. Why would I turn around and kill you?"

"Tell them." Drake's hand sweeps toward Evan, one of the other vampires.

Evan, the asshole who took Luna before, bares his fangs. "We were attacked by wolves midday when we were all in repose. Then you same lying mutts attacked the humans we keep as food. Several of them are now *dead*." He spits a mouthful of blood in the ground near my feet.

My brow furrows as I turn my attention toward my pack.

Several shake their heads, and another shrugs, indicating they don't know what the vampires are talking about either.

"We didn't do shit," I say, directing my attention back at Drake. "I have full knowledge of my pack."

"Liar," Evan snarls.

My body stiffens, and I'm about to launch at his throat when Drake reaches out his hand to touch Evan's shoulder.

"Let him speak," Drake says.

"When did this happen?" I demand.

"Over the last couple of days. We figured you're all desperate to get your land back since the storm took out many of your homes." Drake's eyes appear as cold as glaciers as he looks down his nose at me.

"And that speaks to the reason it couldn't have been us—our pack is all consumed with repairing and restoring the houses that the storm destroyed," I reply. "When would we have time to murder you or your food stock? Not to mention we have no quarrels with humans."

Drake's hands land on his hips. "Are you saying there's a rogue pack in the land?"

My skin prickles at the reminder of the wolf who attacked Luna. "I don't know," I say slowly. "I've been too busy dealing with the storm to stay abreast of other packs. Kato?" I nod at my sentinel, the spy of our team.

Kato's excellent at what he does, but he might have been too busy to have noticed other wolves in our territory. He pushes back his long, raven-haired mane from his face. "I've seen nothing. Since the storm has abated, I've patrolled the area when I could find the time, but I haven't seen any rogue wolves."

I lift my hand to my face and stroke my jaw. It's got to be those mutant wolves, and not only are they brutal, but they're sneaky, leaving no trace of their presence. "A mutant wolf attacked one of our own," I admit to Drake. "It was larger than any of our pack members, hopped up on some kind of drug, and brutal. It was the second attack on her life—she's the one who you caged." I lean toward Evan, rage in my eyes, remembering how I had to negotiate with the only thing I had left to get her back—by giving up pack land.

Drake's eyes narrow as he studies me. "Why should I believe you?"

"Why shouldn't you believe me? Have I done anything to make you not trust my pack or me? They weren't happy I gave you our land, yet they respected my wishes and left you alone. And yet, *you've* been the ones who have infringed on the boundaries of the land. Before the storm hit, the pack told me they've spied you in our land." I'm seething, but my demeanor is calm as I gaze into Drake's lifeless eyes. "Maybe it's *you* who haven't kept to your agreement."

Evan and the other vampires shift side to side, eyeing one another out of the corners of their cold, dead eyes.

Drake glares at them. "I'll speak to my clan. But that still leaves the issue before us. Who are these so-called mutant wolves?"

I make a quick toss of my head toward Kato, indicating he approach.

He steps toward me, his eyes inquiring. "What would you like me to do, Alpha?"

"Take time off the repair and restoration project. Get some of the others to help you scout around. We've got to find out who these wolves are and what their intention is. The bloodshed has to stop. We've got enough on our hands to deal with without having to worry about new enemies."

Kato nods.

I turn back to Drake. "We're going to get to the bottom of this. Those wolves concern us all. They're coming for Luna, my mate. And I won't let that happen."

Chapter Seven

Luna

Something is throbbing between my legs when I awaken—steamy heat, and a desire so strong I could move mountains to get it. It's not what I *want* to wake up to. I long for one of my lovers, some of my lovers, *all* of my lovers. And even then, I know it won't be enough.

What is going on with me?

Eyes still closed, I pat the tangled sheets on either side of me. There's no one here. When I drifted off to sleep, I was nestled between Callan and Ethan, and I was somewhat sated. But now I feel as if I haven't mated in years.

I'm sweating, so I kick the covers off and run my hand across my belly, ribs, and breasts. My skin feels like scorching silk. Touching myself makes me even hotter, so my hand finds its way between my legs, where I touch and caress the liquid heat between my folds.

The distant sound of the screen door thwacking, followed by footsteps, has me on the alert. My hand stills in the wet slit between my legs.

Which one will come to fill my need? I open my eyes and prop myself up on my elbows.

The footsteps come closer.

I sit up and thrust out my chest as an invitation to whoever's about to enter.

Axel strides in the room, his head tipped back slightly as he sniffs the air. A delicious, feral expression crosses his chiseled face, making him look ten times more handsome than he already is. A slow smile forms on his face, and he licks his lips. "Well, isn't this a glorious day?" He whips his t-shirt over his head, revealing ridges of muscle.

It's then I realize he's bruised, scraped, and bloody.

"Axel! What happened?"

"It doesn't matter," he says. "It's nothing, just a scrape." His hands find his belt buckle, and he yanks his belt free.

"It looks like you need medical care," I say, rising onto my knees.

"What I need, my darling mate, is right in front of me." His jeans fall to the floor, and his buckle clinks against the hardwood. "It smells like you're in heat, and I'm ready to put a hundred pups in your sweet belly. This must be why you've been so eager to mate, to stay home and make a home. You're nesting."

I blink, stupefied. So, this is what it feels like to be in heat. Throbbing with desire so strong I could start a forest fire with it. I should have remembered from the time it happened before, but it's been so long, and I had no one to satisfy me then, so it was more torturous than pleasant.

Eyelids lowered, I crawl toward the end of the bed on my belly, my wolf eager to show her submission to our Alpha. "Am I?"

"As sure as I can smell, you're ready for breeding," Axel says, taking a long, deep sniff as he approaches me. His heavy, thick cock bobs with each step. He reaches for my head and massages my scalp with solid and sure fingers. I moan and lap at the head of his cock, practically whimpering with desire to have it inside me.

As he caresses me, I rub my cheek against his muscular thigh, letting my lips skim along his shaft. "I'm listening."

"The question is...."

"Yes, Alpha?"

"Are you ready to produce an heir?" His hands move down to my back, where he kneads and massages.

Sweet swamp dogs, if I could purr, I'd be purring strong. "Yes," I say, shivering with pleasure.

"Then I'm going to breed you," Axel says as his hands move around to cup my breasts. He tweaks my nipples, and slick trickles down my thighs. "You're preparing to have a baby, and I'd be honored to father our children."

I don't know why but this statement has me all gushy inside. I slide my cheek across his thigh and nuzzle his balls with my nose, inhaling the musky heat radiating from him.

"Fuck, Luna," Axel breathes. "If I didn't want to shoot my seed inside of you, I'd come all over your face right now."

“I don’t mind, as long as you come inside me afterward.” I grab his thick erection between my hands and fit my mouth over the swollen head. Sucking, I hum and moan with desire.

“Fuck yeah,” Axel growls as his hands find my scalp again, rubbing and caressing. “I’m going to fill you with so much come you can’t hold it all.”

I work his cock with my mouth and my tongue, so hungry I could scream. My hands grow slippery from my saliva and his pre-cum, and they glide up and down his stiff length.

Axel cups the back of my head and stops my slide and glide. “Get on your back, my love. I want to worship my True Mate like the goddess she is.”

“I want that, too,” I say, releasing my grip. I pivot on my hands and knees and arch my rump toward him.

“Oh, yes,” he says, sliding his finger along my wet silk. “Just like that. You’re so beautiful, Luna. Your body is my heaven.”

He spreads me open and drops to his knees beside the bed, his mouth latching onto my pussy. He sucks the nectar from me, moaning and lapping up every drop. When he plunges his tongue inside me, I cry out, my body electrified as my walls clench in spasms and an orgasm wracks my body. Sweat breaks out over my skin, and I cry out his name, bucking and pushing my bottom against his face.

He groans and gives one last suck before standing. He spreads me open and thrusts deep inside my dripping pussy. “My turn,” he growls, gripping my hips and slamming into me again.

It feels so good I can’t even think, and helpless moans and whimpers escape as he pounds his thick, bare cock into my thirsty core.

“Touch yourself,” he says, seizing my hips. “I want you to come hard on my cock when I knot up inside you.” He doesn’t move, but I can feel him quivering inside of me.

Grabbing a pillow from the head of the bed, I position it beneath me and press my right cheek into it. It smells like me, Callan, and Ethan. *Pure bliss*. I draw in our scent, rest my shoulder on the soft mattress and reach for my clit. Fingering myself, I start to moan as pleasure shoots through me.

Axel grinds his hips, slowly thrusting in and out while his fingers dig into my skin. His cock pulses with each thrust. “Is my little mate making herself feel good?” he murmurs.

“Yes,” I breathe. The feelings pouring through me are exquisite, and I find I want to ride them, ride the wave of sensation without falling over the

edge. My mind expands into a slow-motion drift. I can't believe it's possible to feel this good. My wolf is howling with bliss, with joy, with the strength of our connection. Even with the True Mate bond severed, she never stopped believing we were meant to be. Now we both believe it, and so does he.

I know Axel feels it, too. We're caught in the sensations of his bare cock owning every inch of my throbbing heat, riding a river of ecstasy so wild and free it could unravel us.

I'm aware of sounds, of Axel's soft grunts each time he thrusts into me, the songbirds outside the window, distant laughter like my other men are nearby, the comforting knowledge that we're all home, where we belong. And then there's the slick slide of Axel's cock as it claims me over and over again.

As I circle my clit with my fingertips, the sensation builds. I can feel Axel's cock expanding inside me with each thrust as his knot forms, stretching me until I can hardly take it. I want to milk this moment of glorious presence with Axel. We've become one driving need, and I can't tell where the boundaries of him and I are. There are none. We are one.

"I'm stuck," Axel growls. "I've fully knotted inside you. You're going to have to come to release me."

The feeling of pleasure continues to build as I feel myself stretched to the brink around the thick, fist-like knot at the base of his cock. When he tries to pull back even a bit, I shriek with pleasure and a little pain. I'm so full I think I'll tear open, and it's so sweet I can't help the tears that stream from my eyes as pure erotic energy streams through my system.

"Fucking come," Axel growls. "Come for your Alpha, my little mate."

Axel's thrusts have ceased, but I can feel his thick cock throbbing inside me.

My fingers circle around and around my swollen bud, faster and faster, until I explode. An animalistic cry pours from my throat as I let go around Axel's cock, my walls gripping him in their greedy hunger. He roars and bucks, calling my name as his seed bursts from him, planting deep inside me where they belong.

Another wave hits me, and hot fire shoots up my spine. I lose all sense of time and place. We're a cosmic explosion, exploding stars, one big mystery moment of fulfillment. Dimly, I'm aware of collapsing onto the mattress, with Axel falling with me, still inside, his knot holding us together.

We roll to the side and spoon, with his arm draped around my chest,

making small strokes against my skin.

We lay here for quite some time, savoring the moment of mutual orgasm. I feel his knot begin to shrink again until at last he draws back and slips out of me.

“I think I put a whole litter of pups in you,” he murmurs at last, sliding a protective hand around my belly.

“What are you talking about?” I say, rolling over to face him.

His eyes look soft and inviting as he gazes at me. “You’re so beautiful, Luna.”

“Are you saying you’re ready for more?” I say in a low, sleepy voice. “Because I sure am.”

Axel rubs his scruffy chin against my shoulder. “I can certainly oblige you,” he says, and sure enough, I feel the stirrings of his arousal. “But the others might be jealous.”

“Why would they be jealous?” I throw my leg over his hip and push my pussy against him.

“Because I just planted my flag first,” he says, laughing. “It’s a guy thing. We always like to be the first to claim the mountain.”

“Oh, so now I’m a mountain?” I say, tweaking one of his nipples with my fingers.

“You’re going to be soon enough. Your belly will grow with my baby inside.”

“Will it?” I say, looking down at my flat abdomen.

“Yes,” he says, and an adorable expression lights up his face.

Outside the window, the brothers’ voices grow louder, like they’re approaching the house. The tromp of their footsteps along the sand and gravel gets me all hot and bothered again.

“And will your seed be the victor?” I say, stroking his biceps.

“It’s hard to say. I’ll breed you until it happens, though,” Axel says, rolling me onto his back.

The backdoor squeaks open and bangs shut, and footsteps fill the house.

“They’re going to smell your heat, too.” He grabs his stiffening cock and slides it up and down my crack. “They’ll want to breed you as well.”

“They will?” I spread my legs wide.

“We all will,” he says, his eyelids fluttering closed as he continues to stroke. “They’ll breed you the same way I did. There’s no mistaking the scent of a woman in heat, and we’ll all make sure you have pups. Between the four

of us, you'll be fat with babies, alright.”

“Did I hear the word ‘heat?’” Callan calls from just outside the room.
I’m going to have so much fun making babies with them all!

Chapter Eight

Ethan

“Time to make some babies,” I yell, pushing past Callan and heading for the bedroom. The scent of Luna’s arousal fills the whole damn house.

Callan and Warrick are right behind me, stripping off their clothes the same way I am. We burst into the bedroom to see Axel grinding into Luna.

When he hears us, he rolls off her and grins at us, his cock standing proud and slick with Luna’s juices. “I got here first,” he says smugly. “My seed has already been planted.”

Luna’s legs are spread, revealing her dripping pussy to the rest of us. It looks swollen and needy, practically begging us to fuck her, and the smell makes my head spin, my wolf roaring to leap out and fuck the tarnation out of her.

“It only paved the way for my seed,” I say, leaping onto the bed next to Luna.

Luna lets out a squeal and a giggle.

“Which will pave the way for mine,” Callan says, jumping on top of me.

“Y’all all know whose seed is the biggest, the baddest, and the strongest,” Warrick gruffs, shoving between us all.

“Which one of us is the Alpha here?” Axel says, but he’s grinning as he scoots over, tucking an arm behind his head and watching us kissing and licking and touching our little mate. She may not be our True Mate, but she’s our treasured mate, the one we chose and our wolves chose, and we worship her body with ours.

I can’t wait to breed her, to watch her swell with a litter of pups, to hold our child in my arms. The fierceness of this thought surprises me. I can’t say I’ve longed to be a father before. If anything, I wanted nothing to do with

fatherhood since we were raised by a bastard. I know all my brothers feel the same way—about our father, and maybe, about being a father to Luna’s progeny. But with her, everything is different.

The moment this sweet, innocent little whisp of a girl walked into our woods, our lives changed, and there’s no changing back. We wouldn’t go back if we could.

“I’m next,” I say, staking my claim and moving between Luna’s thighs. My dick’s rigid and ready to stake our claim—me and my wolf both.

“Want to bet?” Callan says, jostling my shoulder.

“Boys, boys, you can all get a turn,” Luna says. She spreads her legs wide and pushes her hips up, an invitation that shuts us all up as we stare at the juicy offering.

“And that’s my cue,” Axel says, rolling off the bed. “I’ll stand guard to ensure that no mutant wolves are sniffing around.”

“Maybe they could smell her heat was coming,” I offer. “Maybe that’s why he attacked her.”

“That’s the last thing we need—a mutated wolf catching the scent of Luna in her hours of need and coming for her again,” Axel mutters, pulling on his jeans. “I’ll watch. You fuck.”

“Damn straight,” Callan says. “If our mate has a need to be quenched, that’s our job.” He turns Luna’s face toward his and plants a hungry kiss on her lips.

Axel departs, and we all engage in a free-for-all fuck fest. A wolf in heat is the definition of insatiable, and I know she’ll keep needing us to breed her until her heat subsides in a few days. Until then, we’ll all fuck her until we’re raw and she’s so sore she can’t walk straight.

I’m up for the challenge.

True to her word, Luna gives us each a turn to shoot our loads in her sweet pussy. Warrick goes first, but Luna doesn’t neglect us. She jerks us off while Warrick drills her into the bed. I fuck her next, riding her with a fury until she comes hard again. I keep dipping down to taste her succulent lips, overwhelmed with the love I feel for this wolf who is barely more than a pup herself, but who can take the most brutal poundings from all three of us.

At last, Callan’s patience wears out, and he’s overcome. I’ve barely finished squeezing the last drops of cum into her scalding pussy when he yanks me off her, flips her over, and drives into her hard and fast from behind. She moans and writhes and gasps, and Warrick shoves his cock into

her mouth, already hard again from watching us fuck her.

I'm already getting hard watching my brothers take our mate from both ends. When Callan's done, Warrick and I pounce and share her between us this time. We keep fucking until Luna taps out, and then we fall into a sweaty, exhausted pile. I don't know how much time has gone down, and I don't really care.

We lie about in the aftermath for a while, dozing peacefully until Warrick rolls from the bed and pads from the room. I'm sure he's going for a smoke.

Callan's on his back with his arm thrown over his face, and Luna's settled on her belly between Callan and me with her eyes closed.

"Are you asleep?" I ask, stroking her side.

"Not yet," she says in a sleepy voice. "But I'm so tired."

"We definitely tired you out," I say, crawling up to prop my head on a pillow. "You'll be up and ready for more in the morning, though. A wolf in heat... The devil himself couldn't be more greedy."

"I'm greedy?" she asks, her lids fluttering open.

"In the best way," I say. "I fucking love it. And don't worry, we'll sate you all day and night until you're so stuffed full of cum you can't help but get pregnant."

Callan snorts out a laugh.

I coil a lock of Luna's hair around my fingers. "Have you thought about where we're going to live?"

"We're living here," Luna says, lifting her gaze to mine. "Can't we stay here?"

"Sure," I say. "We don't have a problem with you and Axel here, but if it was tight when you lived here, it's even tighter now with the two of you."

"What are you saying?" Luna says, a frown marring her features. She crawls up next to me and snuggles into my side.

Callan rolls over and hooks his leg over hers. "We were talking about it earlier when we were outside. We need bigger digs."

"Bigger digs?" Luna asks.

"Digs is another way to say house," I explain as I tuck my arm under her head and pull her close, kissing the top of her mussed hair.

"Can we build on this land?" Luna asks.

"We have the land to do that, sure," I say. "But Axel won't want to live this far from the pack. Now that we're in, Warrick won't either. And you'll be more protected if we're living near the pack. That way they can watch out

for you, and you don't have to have an escort when you leave the house. They'll know the moment an outsider steps onto pack land, and they'll come to your defense."

As much as I like living out here, Luna's safety is the most important thing. And once she has pups, keeping them safe will be at the top of the list, too.

Luna places her palm on my belly. I can practically see the wheels turning in her head.

Warrick strides into the room with a cigarette balanced between his fingers. He perches by the open window and blows a stream out through the crack. "What are y'all talking about?" he asks, a frown creasing his brow. "You look serious."

"We were talking about what to do when Luna's with child," I tell him.

Warrick chuckles. "The swimmers of four potent males are all duking it out right now, vying for dominance. One of us will fill her womb this heat." He takes another drag from his smoke. "I'm sure it will be mine."

"Asshole," I say. "It could be any of us."

"Hey, Alpha," Warrick calls out, pushing the window wide.

"Yeah?" calls Axel's voice from the edge of the woods.

"Get on over here," Warrick calls through a lungful of smoke. "There's a serious talk going on that you need to be a part of."

A minute later, Axel props his forearms on the windowsill. "What's up?"

"We need a bigger house for all the pups Luna's going to pop out," I say. "No way can we all live here." I extend my hand to Warrick, indicating I want a drag of his cigarette. I quit years ago, but every once in a while, I still get the urge.

He hands it over, and I bring it to my lips and inhale, taking a long, deep draw before handing it back. A stream of blueish smoke leaves my lungs, and the nicotine buzz fills my bloodstream.

"So, what are you thinking?" Axel says.

"There's no fucking way I can live without these assholes," I say, nodding at each of my brothers. "We're a family, you know?"

"And us?" Axel asks, raising a brow.

I shrug. "Yeah, you're right. Maybe you're family now, too."

The only people I've ever called family are Warrick and Callan. Now, I'm claiming Luna and Axel as part of my tribe.

Axel nods. "Even though we all joked about who gets the rights to claim

fatherhood to Luna's child, it doesn't matter which one of us gives her pups. We'll all be the fathers."

"Fuck yeah, we will," Warrick growls. "All I care about is that our baby-girl's needs get satisfied, and she gets what she wants."

"Same here," Callan says, opening his eyes.

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Axel says. "As long as we're all in agreement as to who got there first." He winks, and a cocky grin splits his face.

"Fuck off," Warrick says, but he's grinning, too. He grinds his cigarette out on the windowsill and flicks it outside.

"We haven't heard from you, Luna. What are your thoughts?" Axel asks, gazing at her with the same soft gaze we probably all have right now.

Luna stretches her toes and gives a big yawn, her body still flushed with the afterglow of all the orgasms we gave her. "I want to be a family more than anything."

"Me too," I say, squeezing her to my side.

She looks at each one of us in turn. "I don't ever want us to fight again about anything. We've all had our upsets with our first families. Do you think we can agree to be the loving families none of us ever had?"

I don't know about the others, but the way she regards us with all that innocence she carries makes me all choked up. It's like someone stuck a candle inside my ribcage. "I'm down with that," I say gruffly.

Her eyes start to mist over. "Thank you," she whispers.

"Same here," Callan says, and she trains her gaze on him.

"I'm in," says Warrick, tipping his chin at us.

"Then we're all in agreement," Axel says. He pushes away from the window. "Let's make it official. As soon as you're out of heat, let's perform a commitment ceremony in front of the pack. We'll get it all out in the open and get their blessing. Hopefully."

"We will," Luna assures us, her voice sleepy even as she rolls over and arches her back, pushing her ass against me to show me she's ready for another round.

Damn if I'm not the happiest guy in the world as I oblige her.

Chapter Nine

Luna

What a week it's been! I don't think I've moved from the bedroom once, except to pee and shower. Callan even brought me my meals in bed, with each of my men taking turns feeding me and waiting on me hand and foot, since they insist my only job for the week is to get a baby in my belly. When I'm not eating or cuddling with my four mates, I'm engaged in various forms of what Ethan calls 'sexual satisfaction.'

The mating urge has me in its grips for a solid week, and I can't say I don't enjoy being fucked every which way by my four strong, wild wolves until I beg for mercy, and then doted on in turn. They keep feeding me and encouraging me to work up my stamina so they can all go again, sometimes taking turns and sometimes all pouncing and pleasuring me at once until I feel so good I think I'll die. I feel like some sort of demon who can never get enough, who wants nothing more than to suck the lifeforce out of her men through their cocks and into her womb.

But not one of them complained. They were all too happy to feed my hungry womb with their seed over and over again, even propping my hips up on pillows afterwards to keep it from running out.

By the time it's over, a new bond hums between us. I can sometimes even sense the invisible threads that bind us all together—we're well and truly a family.

Today, I'm stepping away from the house with all my men by my side. Now that my heat's abated, Axel made arrangements for a pack ceremony to swear us all in as official Jacksonville pack members. Additionally, Warrick will be sworn in as Axel's Second in Command.

As I sit in Axel's truck, snuggled between him and Callan, a sense of

contentment I've never experienced before settles over my being. The sun is shining, the storm has passed, and we've survived. More than that, my heat brought us all together, and now we're well and truly bound as a family. I'm proud of my role in it, proud that I'm the one who ended the feud between the outlaw triplets and the pack, and proud that my heat got the triplets and Axel so comfortable with each other, as it's hard to be standoffish when you're all naked and bumping up against each other.

Warrick and Ethan are behind us on their motorcycles, ready to ride. They exchange a nod at one another, and then each man pulls on either side of the truck.

Axel turns to look at Warrick through the open window.

"Is that the fastest you can drive, old man?" Warrick yells, his long hair whipping behind him.

It's going to take me days to comb out the tangles in his hair, but neither of us will care, although Warrick will surely pretend to be grumpy about it.

"Who you calling an old man?" Axel calls back, gunning the truck.

"We're calling you old," Ethan hollers from the other side of the truck, through Callan's open window. He recently cut his hair short, nearly to the scalp, so no tangles for him. "You drive like my grandpa when he was stoned."

He lets out a laugh as he slows the bike to a crawl, falling behind. Then, in a burst, he leans on the throttle, and he's by our side again. The roar of their engines sends a thrill through my spine, and the smell of the exhaust makes me feel free, like I do when I'm on the bike with one of them.

Ethan looks through the cab at Warrick, and they each exchange another nod.

Then, in unison, they roar in front of us, leaving us in the dust.

"So that's what we're playing at, is it?" Axel grumbles. Then he floors the gas pedal.

I let out a squeal, but in truth, I love being wild and free with my men. The swamp blurs as we speed along the dusty road, with Warrick's and Ethan's taillights ahead.

"Flash your tits at them," Axel says, giving me a mischievous grin.

Callan chuckles and pulls me up onto his lap. When we get close, I lean my head and torso out the window, lifting my t-shirt to reveal my pale breasts with their nipples still red and raw from all the sucking they got over the past week. I swear Warrick and Ethan are going to get in a wreck when they start

to swerve, staring hard at me in their rearview mirrors.

I'm laughing so hard I nearly fall out the window. Callan's hands firmly clutch my hips, keeping me inside as his body quakes with laughter.

Warrick falls back next to Axel's windows once more. "You've got an unfair advantage in your truck, Alpha."

"Secret weapon," Axel says with a smirk. He rests his hand on my bare thigh as I settle between them again, and Warrick and Ethan fall back behind the truck again.

When we arrive at the clearing, the other pack members are already there and are prepping the fire pit for a barbecue. But my gaze lands with a jolt on the one person I'd hoped to never see again in this lifetime—Elder Amexaryl.

Looking as frail as ever, like she might blow away if the wind catches her, Elder Amexaryl stands among the other older members of the pack. She's the old crone who severed the True Mate connection between Axel and me. In so doing, she left my heart a shredded, bloody mess and the True Mate mark which had appeared during our bonding ceremony nothing but a faded scar. It's still that way, and it will never glow with the moonlight magic that shows the world that I belong to Axel and he belongs to me.

"What's she doing here?" I hiss at Axel, my wolf whining down in her belly at the sight of the offending elder.

Axel winces and casts a guilty look in my direction. "She's our ceremonial elder. Only she can perform the ritual of a pack bond."

"She's the one who severed our connection, Axel. She *broke* me. And now you want her to welcome us into the pack? Oh, no. Take me home." I wish I weren't sitting between two strong men, or I'd have bolted for the woods already. My wolf is crying to race away in fear at the reminder of how dangerous the elder is to us.

Warrick, who's parked his bike next to Ethan's, strides toward the truck. "Is there a problem?" he demands, eyeing my face with concern through the driver's window.

"I'll say." I lift my hand and stab the air in the elder's direction. "She's the one who broke our True Mate bond. And supposedly she's the one who's going to forge the pack bond between us all."

Warrick studies Axel. "Is this true?"

"I'm afraid so," Axel says, appearing glum. "She's a revered elder in the pack. Magic runs through her veins. She's conducted all ceremonies in the pack since before I was a pup."

“And you didn’t think to inform Luna?” Warrick rests his hands on the sill of the window and glowers at Axel.

“No,” he growls back. “This is how the pack works. Sometimes, we do things we don’t like for the sake of others. An Alpha most of all.”

“Let me handle this, baby girl,” Warrick says to me. “Wait here.” He casts one more glare at Axel before striding toward the elder while I try to shrink inside the truck seat.

“Not your best move, Alpha,” Callan says.

“Shut the fuck up,” Axel snaps, but his expression looks wretched. He turns to me and pierces me with his aquamarine eyes. “I’m sorry, Luna. Honestly, it escaped my mind, what with everything that’s gone on of late. And she’s a part of the pack. It’s not her fault that I had her perform that ceremony.”

“I don’t like her,” I say in a quavering voice. All the pain of this past year floods my body, erasing this last joyous week of bonding. It’s as if a fire of hurt burns through me—a fire that I thought I’d extinguished. It burns up my heart and my wolf soul at once.

Several paces off, Warrick and the elder are having what looks like a heated exchange. Some of the other pack members have stopped their preparations and are staring at them. Finally, Warrick leads Elder Amexaryl in our direction.

“I don’t want to talk to her. Don’t make me talk to her,” I say, seizing Callan’s arm.

“Just hear what she has to say,” Callan soothes.

My heart’s beating so fast as the elder reaches the truck, I think it’s going to shoot from my throat and my wolf shoot from my skin. Still clinging to Callan’s arm, I clutch Axel’s hand, too, needing even more reassurance.

Elder Amexaryl peers in the window as her wispy gray hair billows about her head, caught by the breeze. Her pale, almost white-colored eyes feel as if they’re probing my soul. “Child,” she says in her quavering voice. “Would you be so kind as to step out of the truck? It seems we have a few things to discuss.”

“No!” I blurt and bear down on Callan’s arm and Axel’s hand.

Elder Amexaryl steps back as if I’ve agreed and waits for Axel to open the door.

He extricates his hand from my grip and slides from the front seat, holding his hand out to me. *He’s* a good pack member, respecting the rules

and order of the pack system.

I'm not. I press into Callan.

“Go on, Luna. We’re here to protect you. No one lays a hand on my mate or I’ll rip her head from her body myself,” he assures me in a low growl.

The ghosts of past pain nearly split me in two. I shake my head. “I don’t want to.”

“Luna. Do as requested,” Axel commands, still holding his hand out to me. But he doesn’t use his wolf dominance to force me, and I hold onto the relief in that. He could make me obey, especially because the pack is here to witness my rebellious behavior, but he lets me know he trusts me so he doesn’t have to. My wolf trusts him, and she urges me to obey our Alpha like a good wolf. “If you don’t like what she says, we’ll make other arrangements.”

“Are you just saying that to get me out of the truck?” I ask.

“No. I give you my word,” Axel says, his gaze as open and unguarded as the sky above him.

With trepidation, I reach for his hand and let him tug me out of the vehicle. I grip his hand and haul him with me to step before the elder. As I study her, my wolf notices she doesn’t look so tough. We’re young and healthy. We could take her.

The corners of her lips curve in her wrinkled face as if she can read my thoughts. “Child, my role in this pack is to do as I must... Nothing more, nothing less. It’s a role passed down through generations. My mother, and my mother’s mother, and her mother before all shared the same gift.”

“You almost *destroyed* me!” I cry, unable to hold back the howl of pain my wolf feeds my heart at the reminder of the anguish we experienced at her hand.

“I didn’t do that. Your Alpha did,” she says, her gaze moving from me to Axel and back.

Axel’s hand gives mine a reassuring squeeze. He said the same—that it’s his fault, not hers. But I love him now. I forgave him. The pain remains, though, at least a part of it, like the scar on my arm that reminds me of what he did.

“I’m here to rejoin you in a new configuration,” the elder says. “It won’t be like before, as you’ll never be True Mates again. But you can still be a part of the pack, and one day, you and Axel can be mated if you wish.”

“You can’t take the others away from me!” I feel just like a child wailing

at Mama because she spanked me.

“Nor would I ever—unless you declared your intention to be mated to one of them.” Her gaze appears timeless like all her fore-mothers speak through her.

By now, the other pack members have gathered around us. Kato, Adolpha, Borris, his wife and child, and others solemnly witness our exchange. The elder leads us to the center of the clearing, and the rest of the pack forms a circle around us, their faces solemn as they wait for our induction. The breeze picks up into a gust that blows leaves, sand, and other debris into the air.

“Do any of you desire to be less than a fully bonded member of the Jacksonville pack?” she asks, turning her head to gaze at Axel and the triplets.

The brothers all shake their heads and come to stand beside me.

In a loud, clear voice, Axel says, “I was a fool before. I have paid my penance, and I’ll continue to pay it through lifetimes to be mated to Luna. She is my soul. It is my honor to welcome her and these men into our pack, to share what we have equally as we do with all members.”

“This bond shall serve you well, Luna, dear,” Elder Amexaryl assures me. “Once it is done, you and the rest of the pack shall be as one. You’ll share a telepathic bond. Each of you shall know when the other is in danger. Each of you shall know when the prey has been spotted or when the other is needed. You will not need words to communicate.” She pauses, and the air around us stills as if waiting for my answer.

The words lodge in my throat, however. I can still feel the sting of the past slicing through my heart. I don’t ever want to experience their rejection again.

“I understand you are being hunted,” Elder Amexaryl says, reaching for my hands.

I let her enfold them in her warm, papery touch. Instantly, a deep sense of calm flows through me. “Yes,” I say. “I am.”

“The beasts that hunt you are evil. They’re no longer wolves but aberration to the species.”

The word “evil” is like a punch to the gut, and I try to yank my hands away from Elder Amexaryl.

Her fingers harden into claws, not letting me go. As she does this, I’m filled to overflowing with a kind of strength I’ve never before experienced. I

feel as powerful as all of my lovers combined, and I know this strength comes from the pack... Joining together gives us all the power of many.

Elder Amexaryl holds me in her steady gaze, letting the preview of what I'll have fade. "If you choose to accept, this bond will be protect you in case of further attacks, more necessary now than ever. It's your choice if you want to be a member of the pack, though, Luna. All you have to do is say yes."

The wind picks up again, and it seems to swirl around us, embracing us in a sphere of magical possibilities.

Say yes.

The words seem to flow into my brain from Axel, and my wolf calms, eagerness building inside her where fear and loneliness and distrust have resided all my life.

We accept you. We're ready.

These words flow from Axel, but somehow I know they're flowing from the pack, the only way they can reach me—through my bond with Axel.

"Then, yes, yes, yes," I say, and my heart swells as my wolf dances with happiness. I sweep my gaze at each pack member. "Please accept me into your pack. Accept us all."

"I accept," Kato says, raising his fist high.

"As do I!" Aldopa states, lifting her fist into the air.

One by one, each pack member states their assent.

I'm buzzing with energy, buoyed by this sense of community I've never had before.

"It is done, child," Elder Amexaryl says, touching my forehead with her fingertip. She bows her head slightly and withdraws.

All around me, there are whoops and cheers. Hands clap me on the back, arms embrace me, and I feel folded into the pack, welcomed with open arms.

Then Elder Amexaryl repeats the performance for Callan, Ethan, and then Warrick. At the end, she goes on to swear him in as Second in Command. Then there are more hugs and cheers. When the congratulations cease, and people start to drift toward the fire pit to get the meat on the grill, Axel pulls me aside.

"What is it?" I say, gazing at him. My heart swells with love for the wolf-man standing before me. He is well and indeed my mate, even if our marks no longer glow. The bond of the pack only confirms it.

"I'm so proud of you, Luna." He looks at me with a fire in his eyes I've never seen. He takes my hands in his, and our gazes tangle.

“Are you?” I say, my heart pitter-pattering in my chest.

“Extremely. And...” He licks his lips and swallows. “I’m so in love with you, I can barely breathe at times. I don’t care if we have a True Mate bond. You’re my mate, as I am yours. It’s always been this way. I believe my wolf spirit has returned to Earth, again and again, countless times, to find you and be with you.”

Tears of joy fill my eyes. “I feel it, too, Axel. Maybe we were scared of the bond when we did it before. Maybe you had to sever the bond to prove that it’s real and true and right.”

His eyes are shining as he listens to me. “Maybe,” he says in a choked voice. “I’ll never stop regretting that I hurt you, though. I’ll never stop making it up to you. Not in this lifetime or the next.”

I can’t believe how happy I am to be bonded with the pack, with the triplets, with Axel. And yet, in the back of my mind, there’s a tiny whispering voice of warning that tells me our family’s bond will be tested. I can only hope we all make it through the test intact, because I have a feeling we’ll be adding one more to our family soon.

Chapter Ten

Callan

“Fuck this shit,” I say, staring at the dump of a house before us. “This place is a rat-infested dump. Wait, a rat-infested dump would be better than this shit-hole.”

The two-story derelict house, built on stilts to survive a flood, is so severely in need of repair inside and out that it should be condemned. It’s surrounded by palm trees that managed to survive the hurricane—they’re the nicest looking parts of this property. Across the street, lumber and debris float in Goblin Creek. It’ll take months for the waterways to clear the remnants of houses the wind scooped into its greedy paws. Golden Glade Street, where most of the pack lives, is even worse, or we’d just rebuild where Axel’s house was. Luna’s is too small, and ours is in no way built to accommodate a child.

The mealy-mouthed property owner of the house on Holiday Lane shifts side to side on his spindly legs. He’s not a pack member, just one of the many humans who take advantage of the Jacksonville pack however they can. In this case, it’s by charging an exorbitant amount of money for a house that should have been blown away by the storm of a couple of weeks ago.

He starts to say something about how low he can go, but I stopped listening to him when we stepped from the truck. I throw my arm around Luna and guide her back to my bike.

Her face is a study in disappointment. I hate to see that look on her face, and I’ll do anything to change it into one of happiness. “The next place will be better—you’ll see.”

I hand her the helmet we insist she wear when riding on the back of our motorcycles. While we could give a rat’s ass about motorcycle riding laws,

she's precious cargo.

"This is the fifteenth house we've looked at," she whines, frowning as she dons the helmet. "They're all either too expensive or falling apart like this place. We'll never find the right place that accommodates all of us. Let's just go home. I'm tired and hot."

I hesitate for a moment. There's got to be something I can do to turn that frown into a smile. The day is like a wet blanket we can't throw off, though, so she's right about that part. The heat's making us all grumpy lately, but I have a feeling Luna's hormones have something to do with it. Which means we need to get a baby-friendly house, stat.

An idea surfaces, and I snap my fingers.

"What?" she asks, swatting away a handful of mosquitos.

"I'll tell you back at the house." I swing my leg over the bike and grab the handlebars.

"Will I like it?" she asks, clambering on the back. She wraps her hands around my midsection.

I wrap my forearm over her arm, hugging her to me. "I think you will," I say before powering up the engine. I guide the bike onto the street, and we're away.

Back at the house, I hold Luna's hand as we stroll toward the porch. I love having a mate—strike that—I love having Luna as my mate. Sharing her with my brothers and Axel might seem funny to an outsider, but it's natural for us. I've been sharing women with my brothers all my life, so it makes sense when we find one worth keeping, we all get to enjoy her. Adding Axel wasn't even odd for us, since we're used to sharing. Maybe to him it was, but to me, it's like we're all made to be together.

Entering through the screen door, we find the others sitting around the kitchen table. Empty plates sit before them, and they're all talking about some shit or another.

"Any luck?" Axel says to me, popping the last bit of a taco into his mouth.

"Not a bit of luck, but an idea hit me." I release Luna's hand, and she wanders toward Warrick, who pats his lap in invitation.

"Did it hurt?" Ethan asks, smirking. He lifts the bottle of beer before him to his lips and empties it.

I flash him my middle finger, pull a chair out, turn it around, and straddle it.

“What’s your idea?” Axel says, leaning back in his seat. He casts an assessing gaze at Luna as if to make sure she’s still here, still intact.

“You’re the pack leader, right?” I say, resting my arms on the chair back.

Axel frowns at me and nods, waiting to see where I’m going with this.

“So, shouldn’t you be given some extra privileges, like your choice of land to rebuild on? We’re finding nothing but rundown houses or expensive bullshit homes. We can’t live in a dump with a baby, and we don’t need to break our backs to afford something with a pool only a rich prick can live in.”

I know I sound like my dad right now, but it’s the truth.

“A pool might be nice,” Luna says, who’s snuggling into Warrick’s arms. “I like swimming.”

Axel’s head cocks to the side like he’s contemplating what I just said. “You’re thinking to build?”

“Yeah,” I say. “That way, we could give Luna the perfect house that meets everyone’s needs. Room for all the pups we want to raise, on a piece of land where they can run and hunt, not on Golden Glade, where it’s in town. A wolf should be able to roam.”

Axel tips his chair back and stares up at the ceiling. His eyes have clouded over, so I know I’ve hit on something worth considering.

“There’s a perfect clearing in the old hunting grounds that was deeded to me when I became Alpha. I never needed it since I already owned the house in town, and I wanted to live among the pack,” he says.

“Let’s go out and take a look at it today,” I say, sitting tall, excitement winding through me. “We can start making plans to build right away if we’re all in favor.”

Axel huffs out a sigh. “There’s a problem.”

“What is it? Septic? Electric? Putting in a well? We can find someone to do all that.” My stomach growls, and I realize Luna, and I haven’t eaten all day. “You hungry, Luna? I’ll fix us supper.”

“You finish with your talk. I’ll make us some tacos. Is there any leftover meat?”

“The wolf whose lap you’re sitting in ate the last chunk.” Ethan hops to his feet. “I’ll make you two some spaghetti.”

We’ve all taken to jumping up in service when Luna needs anything. She’s our mate, carrying one of our heirs, after all. That’s the only job she needs to be doing right now.

“Thanks, Ethan,” she says, flashing him a heart-melting smile.

We've all turned into pussy-whipped versions of our badass selves since Luna arrived, but none of us are complaining. When the pussy's that good, it's worth it.

As Ethan heads to the cupboard for noodles, Axel says, "It's not as simple as that."

"What's the complicated part?" I scratch the back of my head. "We make plans, we build it. How hard is that? Does our Alpha not know how to get his hands dirty?"

Axel doesn't rise to the bait. Instead he blows out a long breath of air and crumples his paper napkin into a ball. "It's part of the property I gifted to the vamps."

"Shit," Warrick says.

"Oh, Axel," Luna says, her lavender doe-eyes going wide. "You did that to get me back. It's my fault."

"It's not," he growls.

"Fuck," I say. "Can we get it back?"

Axel's face pulls into a scowl. "Since the vampires attacked us the other day, what's your best guess to the answer to that question?"

"Yeah, that's a negative," Warrick says. "We barely calmed them down. They think we're killing off the humans they use for feeding stations. No peace negotiations happening there anytime soon." He lowers his head to nibble Luna's neck.

She arches her back and makes a humming noise that arouses my cock. I remember what it felt like when she hummed around my dick this morning.

Dragging my attention back to the conversation, I say, "So what are our options? Is there another piece of property we can use?"

Axel rises from the table and begins stacking dishes. With his arms laden, he heads for the sink. "There are, but none like that. That would have been perfect, our own little paradise on pack land, but away from prying eyes."

"Away from the nosy pack gossips hearing us make Luna scream every night," Ethan says with a grin, running his hand over his beard.

"Well, we need to find something," I say, casting him a dark look. "Can you imagine all of us crowded into this house with a baby to boot?"

"And what if she has twins or triplets?" Warrick asks, lighting up a cigarette.

"Then double or triple shit," I say.

We're going to have to find a solution. We want nothing more than

Luna's happiness. None of us want to be stepping on one another's toes living here or trekking through diapers filled with baby shit. We're already overcrowded with the five of us living in a two-bedroom house. Add in a few pups underfoot, and we'll be murdering each other for population control.

Chapter Eleven

Axel

After Callan and Luna eat, the triplets go to the garage to fiddle with their bikes, leaving Luna and me in the kitchen. I've got something to say to Luna but damned if I can't seem to get the words out.

While she does dishes, I head to the fridge to grab a beer. Before I get there, I wrap my arms around her from behind and draw her into my chest.

"Mmm," she says, leaning into me while water drips from her glove-covered hands. She's taken to wearing gloves to clean dishes because that's what Callan does. The only reason Callan does it is to keep the motorcycle grime and grease from smearing all over the dishes, but none of us are going to complain about Luna keeping her hands soft.

She's so damn innocent, I get a surge of protectiveness inside just thinking of her.

I kiss her neck and release her, heading for the fridge. I grab a cold one, twist off the top, and step back to my seat at the kitchen table.

"Want help?" I ask before sitting.

"You could dry the dishes," she offers sweetly.

"Sure thing." I bolt to my feet. We all treat Luna like royalty now that we've all done our part to hopefully produce an heir. "Where are the towels?"

She lets out a giggle as she stacks a pan in the dish rack. "You don't know where the kitchen towels are?"

"Why would I?" I start pulling out drawers, finding nothing but cutlery, dishes, bowls, and other kitchen stuff.

"We've lived here long enough for you to know where the towels are."

"That would imply that I've helped with the dishes," I say with a smirk. "That's your and Callan's thing."

“Ethan helps sometimes.” She scrubs at the pan used to cook the meat. “There are five of us now. It’s a big job.”

“Warrick and I don’t do the domestic duties.” I pull out another drawer and find a stack of fluffy white towels. “We assume other responsibilities, like making sure you’re safe and bred.”

I step behind her and bite the side of her neck gently, wrapping my arms around her and resting my palms over her belly.

She places the last plate in the rack and leans back into me with a sigh of pleasure.

“To be continued,” I murmur against her sweet skin before stepping away and getting busy drying the dishes.

“Why not now?” Her lips form an adorable pout.

“I’ve got to do the dishes,” I say, reaching for a plate. “And you’ve got to put them away when I hand them to you.”

A frown skitters across her face, but she grabs the plate I hand her, dries it, and dutifully places it on the shelf.

We work like that in silence as I muster up the courage for my question. Out of the corner of my eye, I glance out the window.

The three triplets are making their way back to the house.

It’s now or never time. I pitch the towel on the counter and turn to her, taking her hands in mine and staring deep into her beautiful eyes. “Marry me, Luna.”

“Marry you?” Her eyebrows raise high. “Okay, I guess.”

“Do you know what it means to get married?” I ask, confused by her lack of enthusiasm.

The screen door bangs open.

“Married,” she says thoughtfully, tapping her lips with her fingertips.

“What’s this about marriage?” Warrick says, wiping his hands on a shop rag as he strides into the kitchen.

Callan and Ethan trail behind him. “Who’s getting married?”

“Axel and I are!” Luna says brightly.

“What the fuck?” Warrick says, coming up to me and shoving me backward.

“Hey,” I shout and shove him back.

“Real smooth waiting for us to be gone before you made your move with Luna,” Warrick growls. He hauls back his arm as if to slug me.

“Stop!” Luna cries, seizing Warrick’s arm. “No more fighting,

remember? We can all get married if you tell me what marriage is.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Ethan snarls, approaching Axel with rage in his eyes. “Marriage is a commitment between two people. Axel was hoping to separate you from us.”

Luna sidles between us and extends her arms between my chest and Ethan’s. “I said *no fighting!* You all agreed to share, so we’ll share. Let’s all get married.”

Warrick, Ethan, Callan, and I eye one another uneasily.

“It’s never been done,” Warrick says, shooting daggers into my eyes.

“I don’t care if it’s never been done,” Luna says. “That’s what you said about us all being mates with me, too. Did that stop us?” She folds her arms across her chest, and damn if she isn’t the most adorable spitfire of a woman who ever existed.

My gaze is still locked with Warrick’s. Using our pack bond, I telepathically communicate with him. *She’s right. The pack accepted it. The world will just have to deal with it, too.*

His bushy eyebrows launch high on his forehead as if he’s unused to such subtle communication.

A light, bright silvery voice cuts into our stare-down.

“I love you,” Luna says, her eyes pleading. “I love all of y’all. No one more than anyone else.” A pretty smile spreads across her face, and she studies us each in turn, as if to get our reassurance that we all love her, too.

“About this marriage business...” Warrick says, still appearing to simmer.

“I’m so in love with this woman I can’t and won’t exist without her,” I say flatly. I’m not one who does big emotions easily, but for Luna, it’s worth it. “I didn’t intend to separate her from the rest of you. I only meant to secure our commitment with a proposal. It didn’t cross my mind to ask permission because I wasn’t doing anything wrong. If she’s having a baby, one of us should make an honest woman out of her, and it makes most sense for it to be me. I’m the Alpha, and being the Alpha’s wife gives her most status and protection. She can have as many mates as she wants.”

Luna scoffs. “While I do love each and every one of you, I think I’m at my limit. Four lovers are plenty.”

Laughter breaks out among us, easing the tension.

“Still,” I say. “Someone’s gotta marry her, and it might cause some disturbance in the pack if we all tried to claim her as a wife. I mean...Luna

and her four husbands?”

Shaking his head, Ethan pulls out a longneck for himself, then looks to his brothers.

Warrick and Callan lift their chins in assent.

Ethan tosses each a bottle of beer.

They catch them and twist the tops off. Foam bubbles out of the top, shooting all over their hands as they swig their beverages.

Callan pulls out a kitchen chair and settles into it, and the rest of us follow suit.

“It’s up to Luna,” Callan says. “If she wants four men, she gets four men, as long it’s us four.”

“I agree,” Ethan says, resting his bottle on the kitchen table. “We’ve all fucked tons of women and didn’t worry about public opinion even when we shared or passed them around, club whores and shit. Why should we worry about it now? Anyone who wants to give her shit can come talk to us.”

I don’t like him comparing my precious mate to a motorcycle club whore, but Luna doesn’t seem to notice. She picks up a tortilla chip from the half-empty bowl on the table and nibbles at it. “What does this marriage business entail? Why do I need to do it for a baby?”

“It’s a sacred bond between a woman and a man,” I say. “Someone officiates the ceremony and others bear witness—typically the pack, in our case.”

“Would that official person be Elder Amexaryl?” Her nose wrinkles up.

“Are you okay with that? Because, if you’re not...” I start, intending to let her know I’ll grant her any wish, even if I have to travel far to find the right officiate.

She holds out her palm. “We can use her. We made peace at the ritual with the pack. I understand now that it wasn’t her intention to harm me in any way. She was merely performing her role within the pack.”

Newfound wisdom and radiance emanate from Luna and, as I regard her, I feel myself falling deeper in love with her, as I do each day. “Are you sure?” I ask, reaching for her hand.

“I’m positive.” She takes my hand and laces her fingers in mine.

“I think you might be right about one thing. There might be pushback from the pack,” Ethan says before glugging down some beer.

“Tough shit,” Warrick says. “When have we ever given a shit about gossip? We rule the pack. We can do whatever we want.”

“Especially you,” Callan says to his brother.

Warrick nods his shaggy head. “I’d just as soon pick my teeth with the bones of the gossipers than let them spoil my mood about a decision made in the privacy of our own home. If our baby girl wants her pussy pounded by four rough bikers every night, that’s her business and our business and no one else’s.”

Though I’m not as rough as these outlaws and wouldn’t phrase it quite that way myself, the sentiment he just tossed out into the room feels right. As I sit in this kitchen, cramped with the triplets and Luna, I can’t help but settle comfortably into the rightness of the five of us together. I never in a million years thought I’d share my mate with three other men. Hell, less than six months ago, I never even thought I’d *have* a mate, and I sure as fuck wouldn’t have let these assholes touch her.

But if Luna wants to marry us all, I’m not going to stand in her way. The only thing I care about is being with her, now and forever. No one’s going to snatch her away from me—not these rebels, and not any roving, mutant lone wolves. We’re bound together as mates, and soon we’ll be bound by marriage. If she’s bound to three other men, that doesn’t make our connection any less real. If that’s what makes her happy, I’ll buy their fucking rings myself.

Anything for my Luna.

Chapter Twelve

Luna

Five people living in a house meant for two men is tight. Even before I moved in, Callan and Ethan had to take turns using their room or a mattress on the floor. We all feel crowded, and at times it gets to us, no matter how much we love each other. We each have to wait our turn to use the bathroom.

I like to take a bath, sometimes by myself. But my four men also need showers, and there's never enough hot water to go around. Just last night, Warrick came in from the garage. He'd been working on his motorcycle, so he got to use the shower as soon as I was done with my bath. Axel said that *he* should get the shower before Warrick since he's the Alpha.

That didn't go down well with Warrick.

When things like that come up, tempers flare. I make sure to ease the tension in bed with plenty of pleasure for all, but I can't help thinking Callan's right. We need a bigger house if we're going to be adding more people to it, even tiny people.

On the bright side, the closeness has brought us, well, closer. We don't just fuck anymore. Axel says what we do is called "making love." All I know is that it's a rich experience I have no words for. I don't care what it's called—mating or fucking or making love. It's all amazing.

This morning I woke up surrounded by three big bodies, some of them snoring. Warrick always exits to his own room, saying he needs room to spread out.

I can't help but smile—I love these guys. And today, Axel and I will see Elder Amexaryl set the marriage ritual, whatever that entails, in play.

I extricate myself from the pile and head to the kitchen to make breakfast.

After breakfast and cleanup, Axel and I make our way to his truck, hand

in hand. He seems especially happy as he opens the passenger door for me.

“You’ve got a bright smile on your face today,” I say, hopping into the cab.

He leans forward and kisses me. When he withdraws, he says, “How can I not be with you by my side?”

Then, he closes the door and rounds the bumper to his side of the truck. We travel in the truck to find Elder Amexaryl’s place. It’s situated as deep in the swamp as I used to live, though it’s outside Bogbeast Waters and still in wolf territory. It’s in an isolated and remote region, with only the alligators for companionship.

Axel parks the truck in a clearing surrounded by Tupelo trees. Some of the leggy trees rest in swamp water. Lily pads and bright green duck grass float in the water. The watchful, unblinking eyes of a couple of alligators track our movement. We pick our way through the bog to find a house on stilts with a deck right at the edge of the swamp water.

Elder Amexaryl sits outside with her slender legs dangling in the water. When she sees us, she climbs to her feet with the grace of an antelope, surprisingly agile for one so old. Her colorful dress settles around her ankles, and she waves, calling, “Go around to the back of the house. I’ll meet you there.”

We nod and head to the door facing the forest. Painted gourds and plants in terra cotta pots line the wooden walkway to her house. Lizards skitter out of the way, disturbed from their late morning slumber. At the front door, creepy-looking gray sculpted creatures hang menacingly from the corners. Water drips down their sides like they’ve taken a dip in the swamp.

“Those are my gargoyles,” Axel says when I shudder. “They scare off evil and channel rainwater out of their open mouths.”

“They’re not real, are they?”

“Don’t think so,” Axel says, peering through a small circular hole cut in the door.

One of the creatures turns his head to look at the other.

“Axel,” I say, tugging on his arm.

“What?” he says, looking down at me, but he’s interrupted as the door swings wide.

Elder Amexaryl smiles at us and opens the door. She seems much more relaxed in her home environment than she does when she’s on duty, performing her job. “Come in, come in,” she says, pushing on the screen

door.

When Axel steps into her home, one of the gargoyles leaps onto the floor. I let out a yelp.

Axel tenses and whips around, jumping in front of me protectively.

“Rex!” Elder Amexaryl scolds. “Stop scaring my guests.”

The creature leaps back into position on his corner of the door.

“Those two are Rex and Ralph, my pet gargoyles,” Elder Amexaryl says. “They’re actually shifters who live in these swamp waters. But for a regular meal, they can be coerced into doing the role they were born to do.” She wags her finger at them. “You be nice to pack members—you know the difference between pack members and unwelcome intruders. Shame on you.” She turns and leads us into her cozy, colorful dwelling.

Axel and I stand near the worn couch until she gestures for us to sit, and then we take our seats.

“I hear you need my assistance again,” she says, settling into a rocking chair. She begins to rock in a slow, hypnotic rhythm, causing the floor and the chair to creak.

“Yes,” Axel says, leaning forward. “I’d like to marry Luna.”

I clear my throat and cast a look his way.

“Actually,” he corrects himself. “Callan, Ethan, Warrick, and I would like to marry Luna.”

“I see,” Elder Amexaryl says, continuing to rock. “This is a most unusual request.”

“It may be unusual, but it feels so right,” I blurt, afraid she’ll deny us our request. “I love them all. I can’t imagine life without any of them. I can’t choose!”

Elder Amexaryl nods, leveling me with her pale gaze. Then she turns to Axel. “And you’re content with this, Alpha?”

“Yes. Luna is my heart. I learned by my foolish actions that it stops beating if she’s not a part of my world.”

I give him a side-eye and reach for his hand. “Can Axel and I...can our True Mate bond be restored, also? I think it still exists. I’m sure I ran away before the bond was completely severed. That’s why we still love each other.”

Axel gives me a look of love that makes my wolf feel like warm, liquid sunshine. But there’s pain behind that gaze like he still carries the shame of severing our bond.

I turn to Elder Amexaryl. “I still feel the bond. I know it’s there. Our True Mate bond lives in each of our hearts.”

Elder Amexaryl studies me, compassion radiating from her gaze. Then, she shakes her head. “No, child... I’m sorry. The True Mate bond was truly severed.”

I shake my head. “It can’t be. We, Axel and I... We weren’t ready to accept it, but it still exists, I know it does.” I take Axel’s hand. “We are bound, and nothing can sever that. Even when we were apart, we ached for each other.”

Elder Amexaryl pats the air in front of her. “Be still, child. No need to get agitated. I can’t change the past or the truth. You and Axel are mates. But the magical bond we severed through ritual is gone. *Nothing* can destroy your love, though. That is a choice you can make every day. The connection you share goes deeper than fate. It’s in your heart.”

I scoot closer to Axel, and he puts his arm around me, pulling me close. I’m so happy to hear her say this that I could cry.

“Your mother and father were True Mates.” Elder Amexaryl stares as if she’s looking into the beyond. “Your father was a good man. It broke your mother to lose him.”

“I know,” I say, a bitter smile forming on my face. “I lived with Mama’s broken self. As soon as I came of age, I cared for her as *her* mother. Now that I’ve felt the bond severed, I know how it could destroy a person.”

“But you’re stronger than her,” Axel murmurs.

“I never knew what it was like to be cared for until joining the triplets.”

Elder Amexaryl reins in her gaze, returning from wherever she traveled in her mind. “You have suffered great tragedies, Luna.”

Curiosity bubbles in me, filling my head with questions. “Were you there? When my father died, I mean?”

She nods her head, causing her whitish hair to swirl. “Such a tragedy.”

“I never understood it,” Axel says. “How could the entire pack turn on one of our own?”

“Is that what you heard?” One of Elder Amexaryl’s eyebrows rises high on her forehead. “I could use some refreshments. How about you?”

Her odd invitation in the middle of a conversation gives me pause. I glance at Axel, who mirrors my perplexed stare.

“Water, I guess, sure,” I say.

“Sure. Some water would be great,” Axel agrees.

When Elder Amexaryl disappears into her tiny kitchen, Axel and I look at one another.

“That was abrupt,” he says.

“I wonder what she doesn’t want to tell us?” I say, a frown creasing my forehead.

Elder Amexaryl returns bearing three glasses of water with herbs floating in each one. “Here you go,” she says, handing one to each of us.

We each sip our drinks, waiting for her to explain.

She finishes the entire glass before speaking. “Your father wasn’t killed by the pack. He was murdered by maneater wolves, the kind of which is hunting you.”

Shock pins me to my seat. “Maneater wolves murdered my father?”

“That’s right,” she says. “Your father fought valiantly, but the mutant wolves were too strong. The pack rallied together to beat back maneaters, eventually chasing them off. We haven’t heard of them for years. Until now.”

Chapter Thirteen

Luna

Elder Amexaryl's words slam into my belly like a missile. I can't believe it. All those years living alone with my mother, taking care of her, dodging her attempts at my life when the voices in her head took over, all her rants about not trusting the pack, not trusting wolves... It was all a lie. She poisoned my mind against being able to trust a living soul, when the truth was, it wasn't the pack at all. It was maneater wolves who killed my father.

And the same aberrant mutant wolves that are hunting me, murdered my father.

Why would she deny me a life with the pack? How dare she ruin my life this way? Was it just her addled mind mixing up mutant wolves with the pack? Or generalizing the danger and in her paranoia believing all wolves were dangerous?

Elder Amexaryl looks at me, concern creasing the corners of her eyes. "I'm sorry, child."

"Did she know it was one of those mutants who took my father's life?" I say, sure my skin has drained of color.

"Yes," the elder says, nodding. "She knew."

My limbs begin to tremble as it sinks in. The walls seem to shrink, and suddenly, my clothes, this house, everything seems too tight. I bolt to my feet and race for the door, my wolf bursting forth.

"Luna! Wait! What's going on?" Axel calls.

I let out a howl, shoving open the screen door and bursting out in my wolf skin.

Rex and Ralph leap from their positions in the corners of the door and scamper away.

I charge down the dirt driveway, heading for the woods, for somewhere I can clear my mind.

“Leave her be,” Elder Amexaryl says from what sounds like far behind me. “She needs time to process.”

“But...” Axel protests.

“No, Alpha. Don’t follow her,” Elder Amexaryl says in that voice of hers that could make you slit your own throat, the one even an Alpha must obey.

Shifting, I run as fast and as far as my legs will carry me. I propel my body beneath branches and over stumps. I swim through ponds and streams, heedless of my surroundings.

Once I come to a stop, I throw back my head and howl. “How could you do this to me, Mama? How could you keep me all to yourself? You knew the entire time it wasn’t the pack who betrayed you. It was the same bastards who are hunting me now.” I fall to my knees as sobs break through the rage. I feel betrayed by my mother and by the entire pack. Most of them must have been alive to tell the tale when I emerged from the woods and entered their world.

The stillness of the woods seems to cradle me in its arms, rocking me. I curl into a ball the same way I used to curl in our ramshackle shack, feeling alone and too young to care for my mother. Eyes squeezed shut, I listen to the birds fluttering about in the trees. Insects crawl across my skin, tickling me. But being alone like this, the way I lived every day of my life out in Bogbeast Waters, now feels foreign. I have people who care about me now. Axel, Ethan, Callan, Warrick—even members of the pack care for me. Despite my mother’s foolishness, I’ve come to know and appreciate pack life. I know what it’s like to be part of a loving family.

The soft pad of wolf feet pricks at my ears. *Is it one of those murdering wolves?* I scramble out of my curled-up position and set my senses to high alert.

But the wolf who emerges from the trees is a welcome one—Axel, come to comfort me.

Tail wagging, he trots across the leaf-strewn forest floor to me and licks my face, my ears, my neck, my muzzle. I roll over, presenting my belly to my Alpha.

Three more wolves pad through the underbrush, and I wriggle to my feet and trot towards them. It’s my pack—Callan, Ethan, and Warrick, joining Axel in consoling me.

Once we've loved one another in that joyous manner that wolves share. When they're done, we all shift back into human form.

"That pack bond let us know Luna was in distress," Callan says. "The others heard it, too, so we took off as fast as we could to find you."

"Your call came through as clear as a bell," Warrick states, grinning at me.

"Being in a pack is beneficial to all wolves," Axel says from his position by my side. "Lone wolves too often get into trouble—like these maneaters."

"So, what it is, Luna? What's causing you so much grief?" Ethan says, smoothing my hair away from my face.

"It's my mother," I say, my lip trembling a little. "She lied to me all these years about who murdered my father."

"How so?" Callan asks.

"Those horrible freak wolves killed him, not pack members," I say.

"Whoa," Callan says. "Seriously?"

"It's true." Axel nods his head. "Elder Amexaryl just told us."

"Why would she think to tell us now? Why didn't she say something before?" Warrick says, scratching his scruffy beard.

Axel shrugs. "The pack apparently beat the maneaters back. Maybe she hoped it wasn't true—that they're back."

"I feel so betrayed," I say, scooting closer to Callan. Leaves and sticks are digging into my rump. Being a wolf in the woods is so much easier than being a human with our too-soft skin.

Callan lifts me onto his lap. "You can't change what's passed, Luna. You know that. She made a mistake. We all make mistakes. She's no longer around to make amends—that's the bitch part about death. You'd better hope you make your peace before you cross over because you might not get another chance." He leans over and kisses my cheek.

"Is there anything good you can remember about your mother?" Ethan asks.

"No," I say, without thinking twice.

"Nothing?" Warrick says, sitting directly across from me. "I mean, we can relate to not having the best stories to tell about our upbringing, but I can remember a time when Mom and Dad took us hunting. We were all pups. It might have been our first hunting lesson as a family. And you, Ethan, your legs wouldn't cooperate with your body, and you kept stumbling. You fell over logs, rocks, everything... Dad kept pulling you to your feet by the scruff

of your neck.” Laughing, he points at his brother.

“Did not,” Ethan says with a scowl.

“Yeah, you did,” Callan says, joining Warrick in the slide down memory lane. “And then you got obsessed with your tail and chased it around and around. Been chasing tail ever since.”

“Hey,” Ethan protests.

Callan laughs. “Warrick and I just sat and waited for you to finish. Finally, Mom grabbed you by the neck and shook you to your senses.”

Warrick grins. “We didn’t catch anything that day, but we sure had fun.”

Ethan reins in his raucous laughter and wipes his eyes, looking at me. “See? If we three can find something pleasant in that shitstorm of an upbringing, you can too, pup.”

A sunbeam pokes its way through the branches and warms my head. I scratch at the dirt with my fingernails, thinking of the past. “I remember after a hurricane, when the waterways were filled with crap, people’s belongings and whatnot, Mama took me on a collecting trip. The goal was to find useful things for our house. We found a watersoaked loveseat floating in the swamp and dragged it out of the water and let it dry in the sun for a few days before hauling it home.” I wrinkle up my nose. “It always smelled funny, but it was a comfy place to sit and eat sometimes. We had fun that day.”

Callan smiles and squeezes me to him, rubbing his beard against my shoulder.

Another memory pops to the surface. “Oh! And there’s the time we chased dragonflies through the meadow. The dragonflies would land on my back or my head and hang tight. Mom would race over and snap at them, but they were too fast. They just flew into the air and took off. That was one of Mama’s good days. She didn’t have the moods that day.”

Sudden sadness drips over my fleeting good memories. “The good days were seldom. Mama was a mess inside. She often fell into nightmares, screaming and thrashing about how evil wolves were and crying to protect me from them. ‘You can’t take my Luna!’ she’d scream. ‘You can’t have her.’”

Callan strokes my back, now warm from the sunshine. “Maybe she got the mutant wolves all mixed up in her mind with the rest of the pack, and she was trying to protect you from them. Her mind must have warped over losing her True Mate.”

I glance over at Axel, whose face is stony though his eyes are deep with

sadness. He and I—we went nuts when our True Mate bond was broken. I could have ended up like Mama. Maybe I would have if I hadn't found these men to save me from that fate and love me back to life.

“Don't you go there, you two,” Callan says, his gaze shifting between Axel and me. “You grew from that moment. We all did.” With a somber gaze, he lets his attention drift to his brothers and then to Axel. “We're a family now. We're a pack. No one's letting Luna run off in the swamp with that pup in her belly.”

“Never?” I ask, my voice small.

He gives me such a warm gaze my chest fills with joy. “I love you, Luna. I love you like I've never loved before. I don't think I've ever loved a woman before... Not even close. Not if I compare it with what I feel for you.”

Emotion clogs up my throat. “I love you, too.” I let my gaze linger on his beautiful eyes before turning to face Warrick. “And you...I love you, Warrick.”

Warrick clears his throat and nods.

“And, you, Ethan. My heart is full of love for you.”

Ethan blinks rapidly and nods. “I love you, too, Luna. You know that,” he says gruffly.

“And you, Axel,” I say. “You're right. We've searched for one another through time. We just didn't know we needed to find these guys, too.” My heart is bursting right now with all the love I feel for my mates.

“You'll turn us into saps, girl,” Warrick says in his gravelly voice.

“Pups like you,” Ethan chokes out.

I laugh, unable to hold back my emotion. “Speaking of pups, I want our puppies—our kids—to grow up happy and free, without fear. Our children should be raised in the warmth of the pack with lots of playmates. Promise me, y'all. Promise me we'll make that happen. Let's not let what happened to me or to you three with your mean dad... Let's not let that happen to our own children.”

Callan gets to his feet and places me on mine. The others rise, too.

Warrick pounds his fist against his palm. “We've got to hunt ourselves some motherfucking mutants and send them into the ground. Then, and only then, will I consider you and our pups safe, Luna.”

That's when I realize where they all found me just now—running blindly, without reason, I made my way back home, to the swamp just outside the triplet's house.

Chapter Fourteen

Axel

I need some space from our cramped living conditions, so I head to Creebay Preserve to meet with the vampires the following evening. For weeks now, I've been torn between my pack responsibilities and that of my heart. First, dealing with my own stupidity over severing my True Mate bond took its toll on me. Then, trying to atone for my mistakes and fix what I'd destroyed captured all of my attention. The hurricane distracted us all. And then, when Luna went into heat—well, I don't need to mention what direction my drive went during that fan-fucking-tastic week.

These thoughts nearly send me back into the house for more of my Luna, but I think she's busy with Callan right now, so I wrench my mind back on today's task and climb into the truck.

It's a beautiful day in Florida today, transforming into a perfect evening. The sun is dipping toward the horizon, painting rippling clouds in shades of red and fiery orange, and the temperature hangs in the mid-eighties. I hope to get back in time for a turn with Luna in the sultry still of the night.

With the window open wide and my arm resting on the frame, I accelerate and zip away from the triplet's home, heading for pack land.

Half an hour later, I park near the clearing, exit the truck, and forge my way through the woods to the land I gifted the vampires.

As I pass the area on which we should be building a home for Luna, my belly tightens. I'm still pissed at myself for giving that piece of property in particular to the vampires. But what can I say? I was desperate to get her back. I'd have given anything, and I did—I gave away the place we could have built the perfect place to raise our children and live comfortably with the triplets.

“You can’t change the past,” I grumble under my breath as I trek across the damp earth.

In the distance, I spy a building in construction. When I get closer, I pause, taking in the grandeur of what will soon be the vampire’s chief domain. It looks like a sweeping three-story mansion will quickly occupy this section of the preserve.

A strangled growl leaves my throat. “What an idiot,” I mutter. “I could have done better than to give them all this land.” Huffing out a lungful of breath, I stride in the direction of the three small cabins they presumably occupy.

A whoosh sounds and two vampires blur before me, blocking my path.

“This land is private,” Drake says as his body becomes opaque.

“As in, *you* can’t enter,” Evan says, stabbing my chest with his finger.

I shove away his hand, wincing at the jab that’s certain to leave a bruise. “I come in peace. I have news for you.”

“What kind of news?” Drake says. “Have you found our feeding stations?”

“No,” I say. “Is there somewhere we can sit down and do this in a civilized manner?”

Drake and Evan eye one another. I know tapping into the vampires need to appear the most sophisticated of the supernaturals will get me where I need to go. They think we’re a bunch of hot-headed animals, and they’re not wrong, but wolves have brains, too..

Drake gives a subtle lift of his chin to Evan, giving him the go-ahead to speak.

“Those wolves attacked again last night,” Evan says. “They ransacked my house, so my dwelling isn’t up to the standard we’re used to. We wouldn’t dream of seeing guests in the shambles that remain.”

“They attacked again?” I demand, the hairs on my head, neck, and arms prickling in alarm.

“Yes,” Drake says. “And since you gave us your word, it isn’t you, we haven’t yet destroyed any pack members.”

“We wanted to,” Evan says, puffing out his chest.

“Evan,” Drake says in a low, menacing voice. “We spoke of this.” He places his hand on Evan’s shoulder, and Evan’s stance softens slightly.

“I know with certainty who’s responsible—it’s those mutant wolves I told you about,” I say, matching Evan’s puffed-up stance. No one’s going to bow

up on me and intimidate me.

“So, what are you going to do about it?” Drake says in a heart-chilling voice.

“What am *I* going to do about it? I’m doing all I can,” I say, throwing out my arms. “They’re not a part of my pack. What are *you* going to do about it? You should be able to destroy them without pack assistance. You certainly have no qualms about attacking *my* wolves.”

Evan looks down and shifts side to side. “We’ve tried.”

Drake’s nostrils flare.

“What happens when you try?” I ask, crossing my arms over my chest and narrowing my eyes.

“Those fucking wolves are monsters,” Drake says. “They’re impossibly strong and sneaky, too, for a beast so oversized. Somehow they managed to sneak up on us twice now.”

“Don’t you leave guards to watch?” I ask.

“We’re not used to having to resort to such fearful tactics,” Drake says, looking down his nose at me.

“And we need our repose,” Evan says.

“Ah,” I say, nodding. Vampires don’t do well in daylight, after all. Wolves prefer to hunt at night, too, but we don’t have to. And we certainly defend our land at all hours. “Well, you might start resorting to such *fearful tactics*. You might find them useful if you frame it differently in your mind. Like, *these giant, dangerous maneating animals are roaming the woods, murdering everything in their path for reasons unknown, and we need to be watchful.*”

“Don’t push me, mutt,” Drake threatens.

“Pushing? What I’m doing is *warning* you. Giving you a heads up to let you know what we’re all dealing with.” My fingers coil, taut and ready. Vampires and wolves are always at each other’s throats.

“Thanks a lot,” Evan mutters. “We might thank you more if you controlled your kind.”

I rein in my frustration. “Look, these fuckers are our *enemies*. They’re not our kind—they’ve mutated from eating human flesh. And they’re your enemies as well as mine. At the very least, we could do everything in our power to stop them, if not by joining forces, then separately.”

Drake gives me a chilly gaze. “We’ll take your words under advisement.” He offers a subtle tilt of his head in Evan’s direction, and they fade from

view.

“Vampires,” I mutter, rolling my eyes. Then, I turn to head out of their goddamned territory inside *my pack’s* preserve.

I love the feel of the night as it blankets me with its soothing darkness. All my senses grow acute. In human form, they’re still dumbed down, so I shift into a wolf. This way, I can smell everything, see sharper, hear the drop of a mouse whisker twenty yards away. As I lope toward my truck, I detour through the woods that line the swamp. I wish Luna was with me. I’m going to have to bring her hunting with me again. In fact, the thought of a family hunt gets my blood pumping. That would bond us outside the bedroom as much as sharing Luna during her heat did inside it.

Ahead, a small vole has grown still, sensing my presence. I loom over it, barely breathing. Then, I rear up on my hind legs and pounce.

He’s too quick for me and pops into his burrow, away from my waiting mouth. I let out a sneeze of laughter and forge deeper into the preserve.

Ahead, wolf growls ring out, so I stop and sniff the air. It’s pack members, so I trot towards them. When we’re in visual range, we all shift into our human forms so we can talk.

“Hey, Axel,” Kato says, standing next to Borris, Adopha, Chann, Hati, and Lobo.

A sliver of a moon lights the sky behind him.

“Out for a hunt?” I ask.

“Hell, yes,” Borris says. “We’ve all been too focused on repairs after the storm. It’s such an awesome night we thought to head on out and have some fun. You?”

“Same. Well, I had to deliver the news to the vamps that the mutant wolves are definitely the culprits. They attacked their lair again last night.”

“No one on guard after the last attack?” Kato says.

“What a bunch of idiots,” Chann says, shaking his head.

“That’s what I said. They may be cavalier about the whole affair, but we need to prepare for war.”

“Yeah,” Kato says, glancing at Borris. “Warrick already told us.”

“What? When did he do that?” I try not to react, but my blood’s boiling. He’s supposed to run all his plans through me. He’s my Second, not the pack Alpha.

“Um,” Kato says, appearing uncomfortable. “When was it, y’all?”

“This afternoon,” Hati says. He looks as uncomfortable as Kato. “When

he brought the weapons.”

I can't appear unsure to my pack, so I snap my fingers and say, “Oh, right, I did tell him to drop those by. Too much shit on my mind.”

I shake my head, and Kato slaps my back. “I hear you. Life's crazy anymore, right?”

“It sure is.”

Everyone grins and relaxes out of their moment of discomfort.

“I'd better get back home,” I say. “Dinner's waiting.”

“Yes, Alpha,” Borris says, lifting his hand in farewell.

“Later,” Kato says. Before he shifts and gets back into hunting mode, he says, “Tell Warrick if he finds any more weapons, we'll put them to good use.”

“Will do,” I manage to choke out. I turn and stride toward my truck, fuming. Once I start it up, I speed back to the triplets at a breakneck speed.

I skid to a stop in the driveway, throw open the door, and leap from my vehicle.

The garage is lit up, so I head there, sure that Warrick is out there messing with his ride.

Sure enough, he's sitting on an ancient plastic milk cart from years back. “Hey,” he grunts when I enter the room, not taking his eyes off the engine. He grips the wrench in his hand and twists a bolt.

“Remember how you gave me shit for asking for Luna's hand in marriage without consulting with the rest of you?” I demand.

His eyebrows stitch together, but his gaze stays glued to whatever task he's performing. “Yeah? What about it?”

“What the fuck are you doing going to the pack without consulting me?” I shout. “It's *my* pack. You're my *Second*. You don't talk to them about going to war with the lone wolves or give them our fucking weapons. That's my job, Warrick.”

“What the fuck is your problem?” He stands and takes two steps toward me, towering over me. “You've been kind of busy, Romeo, so I thought I was doing you a favor.” He grabs the neck of my t-shirt, twisting it in his grasp.

“You're overstepping,” I growl at him. “If you want to challenge me for Alpha, be a man and fucking do it. Don't sneak around behind my back like a pathetic little pussy.”

Warrick yanks the t-shirt in his hold, jerking me off-balance. “Is that what you think I'm doing?”

Warrick is a threatening presence on his best days. But when he's mad, red-faced, eyes bulging, looking at me like he could eat me for dinner, he's looks like death itself. Fighting to the death is standard when an Alpha is challenged, though. My whole life is a balancing act, and nothing is guaranteed. One day, someone will take my place. It could be today or tomorrow or in twenty years.

"Isn't it?" I snap back at the meathead.

"I opened my home to you, asshole. Why would I want to slide in and take over the pack?" His spit sprays my face, but I make no move to wipe it off. "I've got enough on my plate being your Second, joining the pack, fucking our mate senseless every night, and making sure my brothers don't murder anyone in your pack. I'm not trying to take over."

"All directives come through *me*." I pound my chest with my fist.

"I'm your *Second*," he says, glowering. "I've been informed by my prick of an Alpha that decisions can be made when said Alpha is otherwise engaged. And you've been otherwise engaged." He releases his hold on my shirt and slaps his palm against my chest.

It stings, but I don't react.

"Christ, just a few weeks ago, we all thought you were dead. Would I have cared? Not for myself. After we brought you here, did I *want* you to move in? Fuck, no. Did I set aside my preferences and do it anyway? Yes, I did. I did it for Luna. Because I love her, and for some fucking reason, she loves you." His shouting makes the walls of the garage shake.

We stare at one another, unwilling to show weakness and look away first.

Luna races through the garage door, and we look away at the same time. "What's going on?" she cries. "I thought something happened to you, Warrick."

"Something did happen to me," Warrick says in a quieter voice. "Your boy here got in my grill about 'going behind his back' and speaking to the pack today about matters which concern us all."

"Axel," she says, and my name lands like a punch to the gut.

"What?" I snap. "He went over my head, making me look like an asshole in front of the pack."

"He wanted to take some of the burdens off your shoulders," she says in a voice like honey. "He told me before he left today."

Now I feel like a bigger idiot, but I'm not going to let Luna see that, and I'm definitely not going to let Warrick see.

She turns to Warrick and says, “And I thought when you told me you’d already cleared it with Axel.”

“No,” Warrick says, scowling. “I’m not used to checking in with people to get shit done.” He crosses his arms over his massive chest and glares at me.

“And I’m not used to people performing my role in the pack,” I say, matching his stance.

“I did it to *help* you, Axel,” Warrick says, his voice calmer.

“Thank you,” I grit out. “But I shouldn’t be hearing it after the fact.”

“Yeah, okay,” he acknowledges.

“He did open his home to you, Axel,” Luna says. “Otherwise, you’d be sleeping on someone’s couch.”

Yes, I think glumly. *Without you by my side.*

This whole situation is kind of fucked. With all the dominant energy in the house, it’s a good thing we have Luna’s calming presence or we’d have ripped each other to shreds by now. Clearly, we need some space. We’re living on top of one another. And so, I hold out my hand to Warrick to shake.

He pumps my hand. “We good?” he asks, slapping me on the back with his free hand.

“Yeah, we’re good. As long as you understand you can’t undermine me to the pack like that.”

“Yeah,” he grunts, and I know he’ll never apologize, but that’s all right. “Won’t happen again.”

I wouldn’t expect it from a dominant wolf like him. He’ll learn his place and get used to it, and allowing for that is part of my job as Alpha, just as I’d allow any submissive to make mistakes. That’s part of pack life, and part of family life, too.

Chapter Fifteen

Luna

Living with four men has its challenges—just as we get one conflict squared away between Axel and Warrick when Axel asked me to marry him, the next one flares up like a forest fire. Last night it sounded like two ogres bellowing in the garage when in fact it was only Warrick and Axel at each other's throats again. But now, Axel and Warrick are playing horseshoes in the front yard while I lounge nearby in the warm sun.

Where, oh, where are we going to find our next home?

“Luna!” Callan's voice comes from inside the house.

“Out here,” I shout. I want to slip deep into the woods for some peace and quiet, but with rogue wolves on the loose, I'm not allowed to be alone.

The screen door slaps open, and Callan bounces from the house, grinning broadly. He makes his way over to me and settles next to me in an old metal chair left out here to rust. “I've got all the food planned for our wedding. It's going to be a feast. Venison over the fire-pit, potato salad, apple pie, the works...”

“Oh?” I say, not knowing why all this fuss has to be made for a wedding. I've been so busy trying to keep peace in the house it slipped my mind to ask what a wedding entails. “So, there's a ceremony *and* a dinner? Seems like a lot of work.”

“No, silly pup,” he says, rising from the rusty chair and sinking onto the ground beside me and kneading them into my shoulders.

The feel of the warm air against my face, coupled with his warm hands, eases me out of my sour mood.

“I'm one of the grooms. I called Adolpha, and she and some of the other women are seeing to the food. She and I planned the feast.” His hands move

down my body, and tingles of pleasure coil between my thighs. Still, I'm unsure how I feel that he's called Adolpha and chatted with her extensively to plan this event.

"Luna," he says with a scoff.

"What?" I say.

"Don't be jealous." He flips over on top of me, holding himself a few inches off my body.

"Who says I'm jealous?"

He lowers himself and kisses me. "We're all connected telepathically, remember?"

"Do I have anything to worry about?" I say, scrunching up my face.

He places his hands on my cheeks and pulls me into a kiss. It's tender and slow as he moves his head in slow circles, moaning into my mouth and making wetness seep into my underwear.

He withdraws and looks at me with lowered eyelids. "Does that feel like the kind of kiss a guy you should be worried about would give you?"

"No, but..." I stare up at him.

"But nothing. I'm in love with you, girl." He taps the end of my nose. "Only you."

Reassured, I relax, running my bare feet gently up his thighs before linking them behind his ass and pulling him against me.

"That's better," he says, moving his hips against mine to let me feel the impressive size of his hard cock against my center.

"I guess I need to know more about this wedding business," I breathe. "All I know is it's a ceremony that Elder Amexaryl will conduct and then we'll all be married. What will be different, though? We all love each other already."

"We all love *you*, Luna. My brothers are still my brothers, and we're learning to all get along with Axel and work together as a team. This wedding shindig is making our commitment to you formally acknowledged and witnessed by the pack and everyone outside it. And we're all committing to you as our only lover."

"You won't love anyone else?"

"Never," he says, rubbing his nose gently back and forth against mine. "Or fuck them."

My heart swells hearing this. "And I only need y'all to keep me happy."

"Good." He gives his hips another push, sending me soaring with

pleasure. “Because if another guy tries to touch you, we’ll tear his head off and hang it outside the house as a warning to anyone else who gets any ideas.”

For a long beat, we stay silent as I picture that, and my heart swells with warmth at his protectiveness.

I reach down, sliding my hand along his hard length. “What do I need to do for this wedding?” I ask.

“You need to go shopping,” he murmurs.

“What for?” I say, tugging my skirt up so he’s resting against my underwear.

“Because you need to look pretty for this here wedding,” Callan says with a grin, winding my lilac hair around his fingers. “Not that you don’t look pretty all the time.”

I bat my eyelashes at him, taking his cock into my hand and guiding it to my pussy. “What do I need to look pretty?”

“Oh, girl things. I don’t know.” Callan groans and strains to get his thick cock inside me when I pull my panties aside. His girth finally breaches my entrance and sinks into me. “The devil in hell, but you’re tight,” he breathes. “Your cunt smells so good I want to eat it and fuck it at the same time.”

He pumps into me slow and sweet, and when I look up, Warrick and Axel have stopped playing and come to watch. I can see a pronounced ridge in both their jeans, and my walls clench around Callan with desire. He grunts and thrusts into me harder, gripping my ass so I won’t slide across the ground as his hips slam into mine. I lean up on my elbows to watch what they’re seeing—me holding aside my panties as his big, slick cock plunges deep into my shaved pussy with each pass.

The sight makes me come almost immediately, and Callan finishes up a minute later. Then he straightens my clothes and climbs to his feet, pulling me with him.

“I think it’s my turn now,” Axel says.

“I noticed them going at it first,” Warrick argues.

“Oh, boy,” I say. “This again.”

“Get Warrick to take you shopping,” Callan says with a wink, heading for the house.

“Good idea,” I say, turning to the other men. “You and Axel need some time away from one another, or you’ll start fighting again.”

Axel and Warrick glance at each other.

“Would you take me shopping today?” I ask, placing my palms on his chest.

“Nah,” he says, backing toward the house. He pulls me with him as he lowers into the edge of the porch, lifting me onto his knee. “Let’s stay here and do other things.”

“She does need new clothes for the wedding,” Axel says. “It’s in a few days.”

“Then a definite no to that idea,” Warrick says. “I can’t pick a wedding dress. Take Axel, baby girl. Better yet, send Axel to pick it out for you, and we can head to the bedroom.” He gently squeezes my breasts, rolling the nipples with his fingers through my t-shirt. “I want to feel that sweet cunt milking my cock like it did Callan’s.”

I wiggle my rump against the erection forming in his pants.

“Nope, not me,” Axel says, striding up the steps. “I’ve got pack business to attend to this afternoon.”

“Need your Second in Command to be with you?” Warrick says, eyeing my mouth.

“Not this time,” Axel says. “I have to help put out some domestic squabbles.”

“Fuck,” Warrick says, turning and calling into the house. “What about you, Callan? You’re better than me with girly shit.”

“Nope,” Callan says. “I’ve got to go buy some parts for my bike.”

“You can buy parts and then get whatever shit Luna needs,” Warrick says, massaging my breasts until I want to take him up on his idea to stay here and fuck.

“Why can’t Warrick and I stay home? Who says I need a new dress?” I ask breathlessly.

Callan marches onto the porch and tugs me from Warrick’s lap. “Because you do. It’s part of the ritual. We’ll be wearing tuxedos, so you’re going to get glammed up, too.”

“Ohhh,” I say, laughing. “Because *you’re* getting dressed up, I have to get dressed up, too.”

“Exactly,” Callan says. “Now, *go*.”

I turn to Warrick, and he tries to look grumpy, but a slight smile tugs the corners of his mouth. “Let’s go then,” I say. “We can make it fun. Remember how much fun we had when you bought me all those things like tampons and clothes?”

“Don’t remind me,” he grumbles. “I still bear the scars from that outing.”

With a grunt, he pushes to his feet and takes my hand. “Let’s go before I change my mind.”

Out on the open road, sitting on the back of Warrick’s motorcycle, I feel elated. I love riding on Warrick’s Harley.

Warrick drives like the badass he is—fast and hard. We cruise along the dirt road heading away from the house until we get to the paved roads. Then he opens up the throttle, and we take off.

I’ve got one arm wrapped around his midline and the other one keeping a firm grasp on his hair, so it doesn’t pummel the shield of my helmet. I’d rather not wear a helmet, since none of them do, but they’ve made it clear that I have to wear one. So, to keep the peace, I let them put it on me each time. At least it prevents me from getting slapped in the face by whirling hair.

We get to Jacksonville’s largest mall in record time, thanks to Warrick’s refusal to adhere to speed limits. Ethan explained it like this. He knows if the cops pull him over, he’ll mess up their faces with his fists or grease their pockets with fat cash. They never know which. So they turn a blind eye to his speeding, hoping for the latter but fearing the former.

The mall is the very one we went to where Warrick had to buy me tampons, shampoo, and such. But this time we head for a different store.

“This is the one you want, Luna,” he says, directing me across the blazing hot parking lot toward a store called, *Your Special Day*.

“That’s a strange name for a store,” I say.

“Yeah, well, girls get all goofy about weddings. But thank fuck, you’re not one of those kinds of girls, or we definitely wouldn’t be here,” he says, reaching for the front door.

Tiny bells tinkle against the frame as he holds it open for me to enter.

I sashay past him and enter a world of white everything—long white dresses, white lacy headdress-looking things, white shoes, and white purses with beads all over them. Instantly I want to turn around and leave. It’s like the cleanness inside shines a bright light on how grubby we are.

“Why, hello,” a crisp-sounding voice says to me from across the room.

I look up to find a woman who looks like she sat on a stick. Everything about her is rigid, from her tight blond hairdo to the rose-colored dress clinging to rolls of flesh to the pale pink shoes her feet are jammed into.

At least she brings some color to this environment, as bleached out as everything looks, like bones laid out in the sun until they’re pure, moon-

white.

“Someone needs to remove that stick from her ass,” Warrick mutters.

I giggle. “I was just thinking that!”

“How can I help you?” the woman says, barely moving her lips as she speaks. She eyes Warrick fearfully like he might lunge for her at any moment.

Knowing Warrick, he might, just to get a rise out of her.

A wicked grin spreads across his face. “My girl and I are getting hitched. We’re having a biker’s wedding. Ever been to one?”

“Why no, I haven’t.” Miss Tight Ass sidles behind a rack of shimmering cream-colored dresses, probably to keep something solid between her and Warrick. “But I’m sure we can find just the right dress for the occasion.”

She nervously fingers a cloud-colored satin number in front of her.

“It needs to have easy access to this place,” he says, palming his crotch and grinning. “Me and the boys all take a turn with her as part of the ceremony. There’s a good number of us in the club, so it’s a long night of fun.”

Miss Tight Ass backs away, her eyes on me. “Do you consent to such behavior, dear?”

“I don’t mind when they take turns or all go at once,” I admit. “Both are fun in different ways.”

The woman looks like she’ll faint. Warrick chuckles and pulls me in, palming my breast and squeezing.

“I’m not sure if we’re the right place for you,” Miss Tight Ass says.

I swear, even the skin on her face doesn’t move when she talks.

“Really,” says Warrick, pulling a fat roll of cash from his pocket. “That’s a shame because I want her to look pretty. It ain’t every day you get hitched, you know.”

Miss Tight Ass’s eyes glitter as she looks at the wad of green bills in Warrick’s hand. “Maybe I can find you something,” she says at last.

“But not white,” I say with a frown. “These dresses are all too bright. The wedding guests will need sunglasses if I wear one of these.”

The shopkeeper’s lips form a tight sphincter.

“What about this one, doll?” Warrick says, lifting a short, puffy dress from the rack closest to him. “Ethan will like this.”

“Oh, no,” Miss Tight Ass says, rushing toward him. “That’s for a child, for the flower girl. You need something becoming. Something that will cover

your derriere.”

She grabs the dress from Warrick and hangs it back on the metal bar.

The hanger makes a slight clink as it lands.

“I love that dress,” I say.

“And she wouldn’t need to push it aside when all the bikers make their move on her,” Warrick says with a wink.

“Oh, my,” Miss Tight Ass says. “Dear, you shouldn’t let men treat you that way. And shame on this man for condoning such a thing.”

“It’s how it’s done in our club,” he says with a shrug. He doesn’t budge when Miss Tight Ass tries to scoot around him, so she has to maneuver through a wall of satin fabric.

“Come with me, dear,” she says, taking my hand in her cool, papery one. As she ushers me along, she seems to be protecting me.

I can barely keep from laughing. “I really like that little dress over there,” I say, pouting. “It won’t get in the way of moving. How am I supposed to move my legs in these long things?”

“This dress will be lovely,” she says, taking what looks like miles of glossy fabric on a hanger from a rack. She holds the sleeveless dress up to my body and eyes it, whispering, “This one is perfect.”

I look down and agree it’s a lovely dress, even if it is the color of a bleached gator skull. “Can it be dyed a different color?” I ask.

“Different than white?” The woman looks shocked. “It’s traditional to wear white.”

“Do we look traditional?” Warrick calls from across the floor, where he’s rolling a cigarette between his fingers. “Luna’s been fucked every which way. She don’t need any of that white bullshit.”

The tinkling bells sound as another customer enters.

“Oh, no,” Miss Tight Ass says, dropping the dress to scurry toward Warrick. “There’s no smoking in here. You’ll ruin these dresses. Ruin them!”

“What kind of a place is this?” he says, placing the smoke between his lips.

“Jacksonville’s finest,” she says, attempting to push him toward the door.

Of course, he doesn’t budge. It’s like a fly trying to shove an elephant. He strides toward me, pushing her out of the way.

She falls back into a rack of dresses.

The new customer stares at us. When her friend enters, they huddle together, pointing and whispering.

“This dress is so pretty,” I moan, lifting the dress into the air.

“Is that the one you want, baby girl?” Warrick says as he stands before me.

“Yes,” I cry. “I love it.”

“But now it’s all dirty,” he says, brushing off some non-existent dirt. “Look at those fingerprints we’ve gotten on it. Let’s get another one.”

“I’ll give you a discount,” Miss Tight Ass says in her tight-lipped fashion, hurrying toward us.

The two women turn and exit the store.

“Can it be dyed purple?” I say.

“Anything... Anything you want as long as we get you out of here.” She seizes the dress from my hands and fluffs it. “Let me ring you out over here.”

She hurries toward the counter where her payment device is located.

Warrick removes his lighter and flicks it into flame.

“Outside with that,” she cries.

He extinguishes the flame and saunters next to me. At the counter, he rests his forearms against the glass and says, “Will you have this delivered?”

The un-lit smoke bobs up and down between his teeth.

“Absolutely. Where would you like it sent?”

Warrick gives her the address, and she pales.

“What? You don’t like people like us who live in those parts? You think we’re uncivilized animals just because we turn into wolves?”

“We don’t judge here,” she says, her hands shaking as she taps the payment console. “All supernatural species are welcome.”

“Sure seems like you judge,” Warrick says.

I’m about to lose it and burst into laughter.

Paper spews from the device with the price on it.

“Did you discount that dress? It’s dirty from your negligence,” Warrick says.

Her lips press so tight I think they’re going to shatter. She stabs the console repeatedly, and, again, paper spits out. She holds out the receipt for Warrick. “Here’s your discount.”

He peels several bills from the roll and hands them to her. “Keep the change. And we need the dress delivered tomorrow.”

She sputters, then thinks better of it and closes her mouth. “That’ll be fine.

“Thank you so much,” I coo, batting my eyelashes.

Warrick tucks the cigarette into the pocket of his leather vest. “I wasn’t going to light up,” he says, glaring at the shopkeeper. “What kind of manners do you think I’m made of?”

I hook my arm in Warrick’s elbow, and we exit the store.

Out on the sidewalk, we howl with laughter.

“Damn,” Warrick says as we weave toward his motorcycle. “I haven’t had that kind of fun in a while. Nice job playing along. I wasn’t sure you’d catch on.”

“I learned to play pretend with Ethan and Callan,” I manage to say, unable to stop laughing.

“Don’t tell me. I can only guess what those two came up with for a game.” Still laughing, he climbs on his motorcycle and starts it up.

I clamber on behind him. “Where to next?”

“The lingerie store... We’ll see what kind of fun we can have there,” Warrick says with a grin.

God, how I love this guy. There’s no one like Warrick. But then a lightning strike of fear quashes my good mood. What if I were to lose him... To lose any of the boys to those evil mutated wolves? That thought chills me to my core. We have got to find the maneaters and kill them before it’s too late.

Chapter Sixteen

Luna

The entire ride home from Jacksonville, clinging to Warrick's torso, my brain has been scheming. Warrick and I had a blast in town, and I want to make sure he knows how much it means to me that he took me out today. We went shopping for a dress, shoes, makeup, lingerie—which I found out is just fancy underwear—and even a glittery crown called a tiara.

To show my gratitude, I intend to give Warrick so much pleasure his mind will explode.

When we finally get home, with stars twinkling in the sky, I enter the house while Warrick parks his bike in the garage.

“Hey,” I say, finding Axel stretched out on the sofa, icing his leg, which healed but still hurts him if he works too hard building one of the houses for the pack wolves.

“Hey,” he says with a smile, flipping the TV to mute and tossing the remote on the coffee table. “How was your day?”

“Oh, we had so much fun! We messed with a couple of store clerks, making up stories about how I'm going to get married in a biker's wedding. Fifty bikers are all going to have their way with me, and...” I start laughing again. “This one shopkeeper—I thought she would combust. All she wanted to do was to get rid of Warrick and me as fast as she could.”

Axel pats the cushion next to him. “Sounds like fun.”

“And then we went out for burgers, fries, and milkshakes. And then Warrick took me out on a long ride, soaring through the backroads. It was incredible.” I settle next to Axel and take his hand. “Where are Callan and Ethan?”

“They crashed already,” he says. “Today was brutal, but we got a lot

done.”

“You waited up for me?”

His expression falls and he tugs his hand away. “I thought I’d sleep on the mattress in the corner tonight. What about you? You’ll probably sleep with Warrick after the day you two had.”

“Probably,” I admit. “I wish we had a bigger bed.” I draw circles on Axel’s chest. “We need a bigger bed and a bigger house—bigger everything.”

“It’s okay, Luna. We can’t always be together. It’s good to sleep apart sometimes.” He picks up the remote and flips on the sound again.

I take the remote from his hand, mute the noise and toss it out of reach.

Warrick tromps into the front room. “What’s this about sleeping apart? I thought I could keep you busy for a while, Luna.”

He waggles his eyebrows as he steps toward the couch and scoops me into his arms.

Axel’s jaw works side to side, and he reaches across the couch for the remote, flipping on the sound again.

Warrick slings me over his shoulder and heads for his bedroom.

“Hey,” I say, pounding his back.

“What?” he says, slapping my rump. When we get to his bedroom, he slams the door and pitches me on the bed. Then, he falls next to me and starts peeling off my clothes.

“Warrick, wait,” I say between squeals.

“Been waiting all day,” he says, grabbing my waistband with his teeth and yanking my pants down my hips. “I’m about to suck my baby girl’s pussy dry.”

“I have an idea,” I say, lifting my hips so he can tug them from my legs.

“Does it involve role play?” He shakes my pants in his mouth like they’re prey, then tosses them from the bed.

“No, it involves Axel,” I say.

His frenetic movements cease, and he stares at me, blinking. “It involves Axel how?”

“Here in bed with us, taking pleasure together.”

Warrick wrinkles up his nose. “Nah, I’m fine with what we’re doing.”

My t-shirt’s still on, but my ass is bare, so Warrick lowers his face between my legs and takes a long sniff. “Heaven,” he says, spreading my thighs with his palms. And then he starts to lick me.

The sensation is exquisite. It’s like our outing today served as foreplay.

Before I get lost in pleasure, I wriggle my nails into his long hair and say, “Daddy, wait.”

“What now?” he says, licking the taste of me from his lips.

“Axel... Can I ask him to play with us? He looked so sad. I need you to see how much I need both of you.” I clasp my hand beneath my chin and bat my eyes at him. “Please, Daddy?”

He lets out a groan and collapses on the bed next to me. “Fine. Go ask him. But hurry.” He rolls on his back, grabs his thick cock, and starts to pump it. “I’ll be ready to finish in that tight little cunt when you get back.”

I try to pry his hand away from his erection, but it’s Warrick. And if Warrick doesn’t feel like budging, he won’t budge.

“Get a move on, sweetheart,” he says with a grin. “And get that pussy wet on the way or it’ll be a sore tomorrow for you.”

“I’m moving, I’m moving.” I scramble from the bed and hurry toward the front room.

Axel’s lying on the mattress in the corner with his arm over his eyes.

“Axel,” I whisper.

“What,” he says in a grumpy voice.

I lower to my hands and knees next to him. “Want to play with us?”

He lowers his arm from his face and stares at me. “With you and Warrick? No, thanks.”

“Come on...*please*?” I run my palm across his bare torso.

Axel chews his cheek. He shakes his head.

“Warrick’s down with the idea.”

Axel’s eyes narrow as he regards me. “I highly doubt that.”

“Warrick!” I yell.

“What?” he calls back.

“You’re down to play with Axel, right?”

“Get on in here and find out,” he yells. “But hurry the fuck up or I’ll finish without you.”

“Come on,” I say, scrambling upright and grabbing Axel’s hand. I drag him into the bedroom.

Once I’m next to the bed, I leap next to Warrick. He glances at Axel, then pulls me on top of his bulky body. “Are you playing, or what?” he says to Axel without looking at him.

Wordlessly, Axel climbs onto the bed next to Warrick.

An awkward silence fills the room. I slide from Warrick and nestle my

body between the two men, tugging on Warrick's shoulder until he rolls to face me.

He slides a hand between my legs and thrusts his thick fingers into me, two at once. I whimper and tense up. "You can take it, baby girl," he says, grinning and plundering my pussy with his rough fingers.

Axel begins to stroke my back, my hips, my shoulders. His hands are sure, and his touch is loving, and I begin to relax.

Loving Warrick is like loving a bear—all bulk, and fur, and power.

Warrick's tongue plunders my mouth as he thrusts his cock against my belly. Then, he makes this low grunt in the back of his throat, like the bellow of a lion. "You're so fucking tight. Like my baby girl's still a virgin."

Axel slides the head of his cock between my ass cheeks. It glides smoothly, lubricated by his pre-cum, but each time it slides past my rear entrance, I tighten up. He wriggles closer to me and bites my neck, holding on with his teeth. His hand snakes around and finds one of my nipples, which he twirls and tweaks.

I gasp and rock my hips against him.

Warrick guides my leg over his hip, takes his cock, and slides it up and down my slick folds.

This allows Axel greater access, so he presses the head of his erection against the hole of my backdoor.

I suck in a breath and tense slightly, but he just waits there, like he's knocking before entering.

Warrick drives inside me with a grunt, distracting me.

"Warrick," Axel says.

"Yeah?"

"Hold up just one sec. I need Luna to relax so I can get in, too."

Warrick's cock pulses inside me, but he doesn't move his hips. Instead, he returns to my mouth and sucks, nibbles, and kisses me.

Axel whispers in my ear. "Relax. Open up, Luna, my mate."

I take a shuddering breath and allow myself to open.

Slowly, with exquisite care, Axel enters me.

It's an intense sensation, stretching me apart.

"Oh, fuck," Axel utters. "Can you feel this, Warrick?"

"What, your cock?" Warrick says against my mouth.

"Yeah," Axel says, but it sounds more like a groan. "Oh, fuck."

"I'm well aware." Warrick slowly thrusts inside me.

Axel barely moves, but I feel him deep inside.

I'm consumed with the sensation of these two powerful males loving on me, with me sandwiched between them. All talk ceases as we fall into the rhythm of pleasure. It's intense, and it's driving me mad. When Axel begins to move, claiming my asshole, Warrick groans and begins to pound into me relentlessly, his size making tears fall from my eyes as he grows rougher and rougher. Their cocks fill me again and again, stretching my ass and my pussy until I can barely stand it. I'm sobbing with pleasure and pain as Axel's hips meet my ass and his hand snakes around my body, tormenting my clit while Warrick jams his oversized cock so deep inside me it's torture.

Finally, I can hold it back no more. I scream as my body begins to spasm around both their cocks. Warrick bellows his release while Axel whispers dirty love talk into my ear. I come hard, too, crying and shaking as Warrick grinds so deep my whole body clenches.

"Sweet wolf spirit above," Axel moans as he lets go. I come again, blinded by the intense pleasure coursing through me. It rolls through me in waves.

When we all come down, Warrick rolls on his side, away from me, and pulls me close.

Axel whispers, "Be right back."

He slides away and rolls off the bed. I lay hugging Warrick as he starts to softly snore.

When Axel returns, the smell of soap wafts into the air. He rolls me onto my back and gently cleans me with a wet cloth, then rolls me over to clean my rear entrance, too. His soft touch and gentle care eases the sting of the soap and water on my tender flesh.

When he's done, he comes back to Warrick's bed instead of returning to the front room. I snuggle in, pulling him closer still. Then I drift away, cocooned in the arms of the two strongest males a girl could ever want.

Chapter Seventeen

Luna

It's one of those days in Florida when the weather is sublime, and the skies are clear. Not a single cloud mars the sky, and a light breeze gently plays with my hair. It's the perfect day for a wedding, now that I know what makes up a wedding.

I'm standing at the edge of the Creebay Preserve clearing with Elder Amexaryl, Adolpha, Kato's mate, Okami, and two little wolf children, waiting for my bridegrooms to arrive. Guests sit in chairs arranged beneath the trees, dressed in their finest clothes. There's an air of expectancy humming through the pack at this most unusual day when I am to take not one, but *four* mates. Sure, I've heard whispers of gossip and questions floating through the air, but no one's said anything unkind—not yet, anyway.

Adolpha has threaded purple orchids through my long hair, which has been re-dyed a bluer shade this time. I'm wearing the gown Warrick bought for me, which compliments the flowers and my hair both. It hugs my waistline, plunges to my navel, and cups my breasts, and I think my mates are going to howl when they see me.

I scan the road leading to the clearing, searching for signs of my lovers. Finally, a distant rumbling alerts me to their arrival, and a big, goofy grin spreads across my face. A few minutes later, three shiny motorcycles roar into view, leading the way for Axel's truck. The truck has been washed and polished, and flags of the Jacksonville wolf pack flap in each corner of the bed.

The motorcycles and truck pull up to the edge of the clearing. The boys rev their engines to the whoops and applause of the pack.

But the vehicles pale compared to their riders and driver who exit from

their rides. All four men are dressed in their rented tuxedos with violet waist sashes—they called them cummerbunds—and bow ties.

Warrick and Callan's hair hangs glossy and abundant around their faces, while Ethan's short-cropped hair has the sign of the wolf shaved close to his skull. Axel's is combined back neat and shiny.

They can't see me behind Adolpha and Okami, but I can see them. The sight of them takes my breath away. They're all tall and muscular, exuding power and dominance that makes my wolf want to roll on her back and give them her belly.

Elder Amexaryl strides to the podium set before the guests and gestures for the men to follow. Her yellow robes billow about her body, tossed by the breeze. In her hand, she carries a staff with the teeth of fallen wolf warriors dangling from the end, clacking softly together.

She's radiating magical energy as she stands tall, waiting for the men to take their places.

They stand next to her with their hands clasped loosely before them, in the position of rank—Axel first, then Warrick, then Callan and Ethan.

“Ready?” Adolpha says, hooking her hand into my elbow.

I roll my lips between my teeth and nod my response, overcome with emotion.

“Girls,” she says to the two children, dressed in their pretty white dresses with purple trim—I'm pretty sure one of them is the dress Warrick picked for me first at the shop.

The girls skip toward Elder Amexaryl, strewing wildflower petals on the ground.

Dressed in a loose-fitting dress to cover the baby bump in her belly, Okami follows them, herding them along.

Adolpha nods at me, her eyes glistening. “Let's go,” she whispers.

We step into the clearing, and a hush falls over the crowd. All eyes are on me as I float toward my four mates.

Each one of them stares at me with emotion brimming in their eyes. Devotion clouds Axel's eyes. Hunger radiates from Warrick. Ethan winks at me, wolf playfulness and mischief threading through the admiration in his gaze. Pure love shines through Callan's beaming smile.

When I reach the podium, Elder Amexaryl says, “Please surround your mate.”

My men move around me until I'm cocooned in their masculine energy.

Elder Amexaryl reads a passage from a book on wolf lore. Then in a clear, rich voice, she performs the simple ritual. “Do each of you accept Luna as your sole mate, through love and laughter, through trial and tribulation, in wolfskin and human form, for all of your days on this earth?”

They all murmur their assent.

Axel adds, “In this life and beyond.”

Elder Amexaryl nods. Then she looks at me and says, “Luna, do you accept Axel, Warrick, Callan, and Ethan as your sole mates...”

“I do,” I say, unable to wait a moment longer to claim my mates.

Elder Amexaryl finishes the sentence and then lifts her staff and touches the wolf teeth to each of our heads. “And now, by the power vested in me by our holy wolf spirit, I pronounce you life mates.”

Each of the men kisses me in turn until my cheeks are ablaze.

Then, Warrick grabs my waist and lifts me to his shoulder.

I let out a squeal.

Axel supports me on the other side.

Callan and Ethan take their places on either side.

“Congratulations,” Borris shouts.

“Our pack is mighty!” someone else calls.

The pack folds around us until we’re surrounded. Fiddles start playing, and two people begin to dance, then two more and two more until everyone is caught up in the music.

Someone reaches for me and sweeps me from Warrick and Axel’s shoulders. I turn to see Hati, who grabs my hands and twirls me in a circle. Someone else moves in on Hati, and we skip through the crowd. Then Axel cuts in, places one hand around my waist and the other holding my hand, and we weave through the pack.

“I’m so in love with you,” he says, smiling.

“Me, too,” I say, grinning. “Or you, too? Which one is it?”

“I don’t know,” he says, laughing. “I just know I’m honored to be your husband.”

Warrick slides in front of Axel. “My turn. Go play Alpha.”

His tone of voice is warm, though, and Axel allows the intrusion.

Next, Callan and Ethan appear on either side of me and sweep me away from Warrick.

I don’t think I’ve ever felt so happy.

A few of the women prepare the barbecue pit, setting it ablaze.

Everywhere pack members are nibbling on snacks, drinking, laughing, and talking.

Thoughts of my mama and all she denied me whiz through my brain. For a moment, I'm flooded with compassion for her—in denying me access to the pack, she also rejected entry to the community. But I won't think a single bad thought today.

I fling my arms skyward and send all negative thoughts of her flying. Mama deserves to be free, wherever she is...and I deserve to be happy with a pack at last.

Chapter Eighteen

Warrick

We're hours into the festivities. I'm sitting on a tree stump next to my brothers. It's the best place for me to be right about now, since walking is difficult. I'm about to tip a bottle of whiskey to my lips and drain it dry. My limbs are loose, and my speech is slurred. Which accounts for not being on alert and sensing danger.

Suddenly, three huge shadows rocket into the clearing from the shadows of nightfall. I bolt to my feet and stumble backward, caught off-guard by their arrival. We've all been busy celebrating and intoxicating, letting down our guard and letting loose, working off the stress of the year.

Now, the enormous beasts loom over us, bounding into our festivities in the form of wolves that are three times the size they should be.

Chaos explodes all around me as women scream and run for their children, grabbing them and yanking them toward safety. One of the mutants launches for Kato, who stands next to me. Without time to shift, Kato falls to the ground, writhing and shouting.

I glance around wildly for my new mate, who's several yards away, sprinting away from the murderers. "Get Luna," I bellow to Ethan. "Get her the *fuck* out of here."

"On it," he shouts, already in motion.

I shift, shredding my rented tux to strips that fall away from my fur. I leap for the throat of the motherfucker attacking Kato.

That bastard wolf is twice my size and completely berserk.

I'm struggling for purchase on his neck when Axel leaps toward his other side.

Together, working as a team, we manage to take the maneater to the

ground.

Axel shakes his head viciously, and the maneater's skin is torn from his neck.

Blood spurts from his veins, and his massive head and body fall with a thud to the ground.

Axel tugs Kato's limp body out of the way. Then he takes off to save someone else.

I sure hope Kato makes it, but none of us have time to check. I race after a maneater who's chasing Adolpha and manage to sink my teeth into one of his back legs before he can attack her.

He turns on me, and we roll over and over in a giant blur of snarling fangs and fur. If the first freak wolf was big, this one is enormous. He's too big for me, and he escapes, leaving me panting.

Thoughts whisper through my brain, and I realize Axel is telepathically issuing a command to my brothers and me, and the whole pack.

We've got to work as a team. They can't be brought down alone. Let's get into formation side by side and chase the bastards from our territory.

I send back my affirmation and hear the echoing assent from the pack through our bond.

I wheel around and see my brothers charging toward me. Pivoting, my gaze lands on three maneaters that are tearing two pack members, limb from limb. *This is war, baby!*

My brothers and I hurtle toward the motherfuckers.

Axel joins us, and we barrel toward the intruders.

Flank them, flank them! Axel commands.

We split into two groups on either side of the three wolves, slightly behind them.

Go for the legs. Hobble them.

Moving as one, Callan, Ethan, and I lunge simultaneously, seizing their back legs with bone-crunching fury.

The three wolves fall to the ground, their back legs in pieces.

I spit out fragments of bone and make eye contact with Axel.

The two ahead of us?

He nods and takes off, with the warriors in the pack in hot pursuit.

We work like this in tandem until all of the mutant wolves are either dead. Then, satisfied that we're safe, we shift back to humans.

Blood covers Axel's chest. It drips from Callan's neck and oozes down

Ethan's arms. I glance at my torso, and I've got a few scrapes and gashes, but nothing major.

"Good work, everyone," Axel says, wiping the back of his hand across his blood-covered mouth. "I'm going to go check on the submissives back at the clearing. Callan, you and Ethan find Luna and make sure she's safe. Warrick, head over to the vampire's lair and warn them of impending danger. There could be more of these wolves in the area."

"You got it," I say.

Before I go, I glance around at the rest of the pack, some still in wolf form, some back to their human form. Everyone looks shaken and battered. A couple of the women weep over their too-still mates.

I shake my head. Those motherfucking mutants are going to pay.

"Let me take a look at your wounds, Axel," Callan says. "You look pretty beat up. Ethan, you take care of Luna. We'll join up with you once I've stitched Axel's wounds."

"I'm fine," Axel growls.

"You're too jacked on adrenaline to know if you're fine." He claps his hand on Axel's shoulder. "If it helps you feel like a man, I won't numb you up when I stick my needle into your skin."

"Asshole," Axel says, shrugging Callan off. "I've got to see to the pack."

"Macho alpha prick," Callan says, grinning. "You won't be around long enough if you don't let me stop the bleeding."

Leaving them to argue, I shift and lope toward vampires territory. Axel and I worked well together today. I think our baby-girl is a wise woman to have brought Axel into my bed. I feel as close to him today as I do with my brothers.

I increase my speed, loping across the dirt, skirting through trees and underbrush, using my senses and keen night vision to guide me on my way. I pick up the scent of wolves ahead and slow my speed. Then I lower myself to the ground and belly crawl toward the sound.

Ahead, the vampires are surrounded by the giant, foreign wolves.

Their fur is bloody. A few of them who got away from us bear the marks of our attack in the form of skin flapping from their necks and broken legs.

There's a slight problem here. There's only one of me.

The vampires are surrounded, held captive by the snarling muzzles of at least a dozen enormous mutant wolves with the strength of three of me, the rage of a man hopped up on steroids, and no apparent instinct for self-

preservation.

Chapter Nineteen

Luna

Sometimes it stinks to be watched over like a wolf pup, and tonight is no exception. Adolpha and Okami keep me trapped in the back of Okami's van while the mutant wolves are destroying the pack—*my* pack. Since there are no windows in the back of her van, I can't even see what's going on. The only thing I can see is the road into town, which is where we're headed.

Ethan insisted we go to Adolpha's house, away from the attack.

I'm beyond anxious, wondering if the four men I just married are okay. I know we're supposed to share a telepathic connection, but I've only caught snippets. They checked in to see if I'm okay, and since then, I can only feel them, not hear clear thoughts. I can sense each of their life essences, but I'm new to this whole pack bond communication.

"You've got to stay calm and let the warriors deal with this," Adolpha says from the front passenger seat. "They train for this kind of thing."

"But my *mates*... What if one of them gets hurt?" I bite my fingernails, or what's left of them. They've been bitten to the quick already.

"Let's not go there," Omaki says. "Thoughts are things. Instead, let's give thanks for the strength of our warriors and let our affirmations increase their speed and stamina."

I don't know what she's talking about, so I focus on my beautiful purple wedding dress—it's got a tear in it. My hem caught something when I clambered into the van. I was being pushed, hustled, and hurried along by Adolpha, Okami, and Ethan before Ethan took off in a mad sprint for the fight.

Oh, well. The dress served its purpose.

The smells in this van are intense. It's a sour, rotting plant smell that

makes me want to wretch. “What’s the smell back here?”

“Oh, that,” Okami says, chuckling. “You’re smelling sauerkraut. We use the van for deliveries. Kato and I started a small home business a while back to help with expenses. It might smell funky, but it’s yummy.”

“If you say so,” I say, wrinkling up my nose.

“Wolves making sauerkraut. Funny, isn’t it?” Okami grins, making her petite features light up like the sun.

She’s being nice, but I’m sure she’s just babbling to keep me from fretting. It isn’t working. Today was my wedding day, and those assholes just ruined it. I’m sure if they let me out of the van, I could kill one of the scary beasts for that reason alone.

The van comes to a stop. Adolpha climbs out of the passenger door. I wait while Okami exits the driver’s seat and disappears for a few seconds until the back doors swing wide. “Out you go.”

Her gaze glances nervously in the direction of the preserve, and it’s evident she’s as freaked as I am. She’s just been doing her best to keep me calm.

I climb free from the van and follow Okami up the sidewalk.

Adolpha’s already on the porch, digging in her purse for her keys. Glancing over her shoulder, she says, “Come on in. We’ll lock the doors, shut the windows—whatever we have to do to stay hidden.”

“Do you think the mutant wolves will follow us here?” I say with a shiver.

“Anything is possible,” Adolpha says, her expression dark. “I don’t know what they’re after. Most wolves are honorable, and their warriors challenge ours if they want pack land or dominance... They’d never dream of hurting a submissive, male or female. Submissives are protected and treasured, as we bear the children to keep the pack lineage alive. But these wolves... I just don’t know.”

I don’t like that statement at all.

“Because they already attacked me,” I say quietly.

I hurry into the house after Adolpha and lock the door. I help her shutter all the windows. Then we wait...and wait...and wait some more. We don’t talk much—the tension is high. But suddenly, my brain is tickled with a communication.

Get ready, baby-girl!

I start to grin—Warrick’s on his way to get me. And when the familiar

roar of a motorcycles approaches, I leap to my feet and run toward the window.

“Wait,” Adolpha cries. “Don’t open the shutters!”

Too late—I’ve already thrown them open.

I’m thrilled to see Warrick careening onto the front lawn. In one swift move, he parks the bike, leaps from the seat, and sprints toward the house. I unlock the deadbolt and swing it open before giving him a chance to hammer on it with his fist.

I gape at my Daddy—he’s disheveled and bloody, but at least he’s okay.

“Luna,” he barks. “And you two. Let’s get a move on. All wolves are needed. The vampires are surrounded, and we need to gather *everyone*, and I mean *everyone*, to fight. The war has begun.”

He pauses mid-sentence and eyes Okami’s swollen belly. “Except for you. No pregnant women.”

“What’s happening?” I ask.

“You’ll ride with me, baby girl,” Warrick says as he seizes my hand.

Together, we sprint across the lawn toward his motorcycle.

“Warrick, hand me your knife,” I say once I’m standing near his bike. “I need to make some alterations.”

He removes his long blade from the sheath on his belt and hands it over.

I slice the hem from my beautiful dress and rip the rest of it off so my legs are free.

Warrick grins as I hand the knife back. “Nice legs, baby girl. Can’t wait to have them wrapped around my head tonight.”

“Me, too,” I say as I wait for him to climb on his motorcycle.

This time, however, he pats the seat between his legs. “I want you right here, baby girl, with my arms around you, keeping you safe.”

His words land in my heart with a cascade of heartfelt emotion. I settle my rump in his crotch, leaning into his abdomen, and rest my palms on the curved handlebars.

He balances the bike on one leg and kicks the kickstand back with the other. Next, he holds the choke lever down and flips on the ignition. After that, he closes the choke and throttles the engine into a powerful growl. “Ready, baby girl?”

“Ready,” I say, snuggled into him.

He stretches his long legs into the foot pedals, and we take off, speeding toward Creebay Preserve.

When we arrive at the preserve, Warrick turns off the engine and climbs off.

As I clamber from the motorcycle, Warrick says, "Let's go. Axel's at the front." He lifts his hand and points.

A sea of wolf-shifters stands before me, all waiting for instruction from their pack leader.

Axel's pacing back and forth, barking out orders while moving with a significant limp.

"Oh, no! What happened to Axel?"

"He got injured saving someone. But that's battle. You should have seen how well we all worked together," Warrick says, grinning, as he throws his arm around my shoulders and guides me through the crowd. "We're a force to be reckoned with."

"I'm sure you are," I say, pride filling my chest to be with four of the fiercest wolves in the land.

"My brothers are already on their way to the vampire's territory with the first flank of warriors." Warrick's long legs propel him forward with speed and strength as I trot to keep up with him. Finally, he scoops me into his arms and carries me the rest of the way.

We reach the front, and Warrick places me on the ground.

I hurry toward Axel.

Axel's face lights up, and he limps in my direction, pulling me into his arms for a quick embrace. "Damn, I'm glad you're safe."

"I wanted to fight beside you," I say, pouting at him.

He presses his palms on either side of my face and looks intently into my eyes. "You'll get your chance. You're going to stay close to me and the triplets, though, got it?"

I nod. "Understood. I'm ready."

"Good." He plants a quick kiss on my lips and turns to face the pack. Then, in a loud, clear voice, he calls, "Let's shift and move out."

It's like witnessing a gigantic explosion to see so many werewolves shift at once. Within seconds we're all fang and fur, loping toward our destination, the territory occupied by the vampires.

I feel powerful as I lope between two of my men, on my way to the other two.

The scents of the swamp are always one hundred times more potent when I shift into a wolf. I can smell the swamp mice, owls, snakes, and gators. The

foliage comes alive with different aromas. Each plant and animal carries a distinct odor, and they all mesh together to form one giant scent cocktail.

All too soon, though, the scent of blood invades my nostrils. When we arrive, we come upon a scene of carnage. Giant wolves are tearing apart the vampires. Vampire body parts lay strewn across the bog. They're supposed to be immortal, but no one can put together this unrecognizable mashup of flesh and bone.

A message comes through my thoughts, a quick order.

Surround them. Work in teams. Don't let a single maneater get past.

Working as one, the pack spreads out and surrounds the mutant wolves and vampires. I stick close to Axel and Warrick—while I might talk a good talk, I'm scared of the terrifying, oversized wolves attacking everyone.

They appear to be fearless, hell-bent on killing everything in their sight, and not at all deterred by thoughts of their own mortality.

I don't know how we're going to do it. We might be mighty in number, but the hybrid wolves are crazed. And as far as I can tell, none of the Jacksonville wolf pack ever prepared to fight against maneating, drugged-up giants.

Chapter Twenty

Luna

Go for the legs, Axel urges in my head as he, Warrick, and I herd one of the mega wolves toward the swamp which lines the vampire's territory.

I lunge, feeling the satisfaction as my teeth connect with bone and muscles. The tang of bitter blood fills my mouth, and I shake my head with fury.

The giant wolf, whose leg is in my grip, snarls, and scream, turning on me.

Axel and Warrick go for either side of his throat.

In seconds, the man eater lays still on the ground.

We take off for the next mutant—the one with his teeth around Drake's leg.

Drake's face is clenched in a rictus of pain. His fangs extend, and he tries to seize the mutant's muzzle to pry his leg free. The wolf clings to Drake's leg like he's fused his teeth with the vampire's bones.

We dive in, tearing at the mutant wolf's hind end. Axel and Warrick are like two killing machines, and I'm glad they're on my side, even if our opponents are bigger and stronger.

The massive wolf rips its leg from my teeth. Another lupine freak slams into me from the side, knocking the wind out of my lungs. As I struggle to catch my breath, he grabs my neck and bounds away.

I start to call for the others, but I don't want to distract them and get them killed. The wolf whose teeth are clamped firmly on my neck is the most enormous one I've ever seen in my life—no way will I be able to overpower him, but maybe I can outwit him or get free and outrun him.

My legs flail and kick as I'm being dragged across the sand by my neck.

We're out of sight of the others before the hybrid wolf giant drops me. He plants his feet firmly on the ground, lowers his head, and snarls at me. The sound is vicious and deadly. I'm afraid to even breathe, let alone break eye contact with him. If I do, I'll be dead in two seconds flat.

And then a strange thing happens.

A voice, not the triplets and not Axel's, slithers into my brain.

Tastes. So. Good.

I blink, staring at the mutated wolf who has me trapped. *Are you communicating with me?*

I swear that fucker grins at me, but another low snarl leaves his throat.

You... Taste so good. I haven't tasted your bloodline for almost twenty years. But a wolf never forgets his first taste of human flesh. I've had your blood before. It's like nectar-infused water.

How is it I can hear you? I demand of the giant, trying to stall him. I'm afraid to call for the others now, since he'll hear it and surely kill me if I do.

I used to be in the Jacksonville pack. They found out I killed one of ours and ate him to hide the evidence. They knew I'd grow stronger, that I could challenge the Alpha with my new strength and take over. They banished me on the spot, but I ran before they could dissolve the bond.

His word hit me like bullets. Axel said the maneaters had killed my father, that the pack had trouble with them years ago. He didn't say they were from our pack!

When I was banished, I was alone. At first, I didn't know I'd grow stronger. They don't want you to know, so they don't tell you that. But I grew bigger and more powerful, and I figured out why. So, I consumed even more humans, and look at me now! I found others like me, outcasts and lone wolves, and I showed them how to be stronger than they could be even with a pack. The pack lies to you, little she-wolf. You don't need them to be strong. You only need the diet they forbid. If they allowed it, you'd be strong like me.

He stops the telepathy and slowly licks my blood, shuddering as he does so.

Suddenly, I'm consumed with rage. Rage that my father's dead because of maneaters, that my mother's stories about trusting the pack weren't all lies—my father was killed by the pack, just like she said. And most of all, I'm furious at Axel for lying to me. I feel utterly betrayed.

Awareness dawns on me, and every hair on my body stiffens. This exact wolf said he'd tasted my bloodline, that he'd never forgotten the taste since

his first kill. The motherfucker standing before me is the same wolf who killed my father, effectively destroying my mother's and my lives. Fury burns through me like a hurricane of fire.

Without thinking, I launch into an attack, going for his neck, his face, whatever I can get my teeth on.

He meets my attack, and we roll over and over, all fang and fury until I'm laying in a heap in the sand, breathing hard, barely able to catch my breath. I'm no match for an overgrown freak who grew giant from eating his own kind.

He places a paw the size of one of a dinner plate on my ribcage and growls. *You can't win, sweetheart.*

I'm not your sweetheart!

I wriggle and writhe beneath his paw to no avail. It's like an anvil on my chest.

You soon will be...I'm going to eat your flesh and then feast on your bones. You'll make one hell of a tasty meal, and I'll be that much stronger. And I'll enjoy every delicious bite. Your bloodline tastes like honey. He makes a rumbling sound in his throat like a wolf-chuckle.

Still keeping me pinned to the ground, he lowers his head and licks the sanguine liquid flowing from my neck. I kick and flail until he places his other paw on my belly. He's so heavy and so strong I can barely breathe from the weight of him.

I want to cry, I want to howl, I want to *kill* him. I was married to four of our packs' greatest warriors today, but it feels like a dream. I didn't even have one day to be their wife, and now I'm going to die, leaving them without a mate.

The man eater laps my blood, growling with pleasure. I'm helpless to stop him. Soon, this asshole will tear me apart limb from limb, growing even stronger. Maybe he will challenge Axel now. Maybe he'll win, and the pack will belong to a savage cannibal. And Axel will be dead.

So it doesn't matter if the giant kills me. It's better for him to kill me than to kill my mate and eat the pack's weakest members one by one until only mutant wolves remain. So I close my eyes and summon all the strength I possess, and I unleash it.

Axel! I scream in my mind. *Help me!*

Chapter Twenty-One

Axel

All around us lies the evidence of war, in the form of dead pack members and vamps, dying wolves and giant maneaters desperately trying to kill us all. The vampires fight wickedly, trying to protect their own. My pack fights like the warriors they are—relentlessly, without mercy, using cunning and strategy as their weapons.

The land is drenched in blood.

Warrick, Callan, Ethan, and I have just vanquished another one of these giants jobs when a scream ricochets through my mind.

Help me!

The cry lances my heart like a sword, and I scan my surroundings wildly. Luna's gone. How could this have happened? She was just here, fighting side by side with us.

I sprint toward the call without another thought in my mind. Luna, my Luna, the heartbeat to my existence, is in danger. If I don't get to her in time...

I rocket away from the fight in the direction of her silent pleas. As my legs carry me, my head whips from side to side, searching for her scent.

When I find her, she's deep in the underbrush, and the largest maneater I've ever seen is tearing at her neck.

My vision turns red, hot with rage, and there's only one thought in my mind. I'm going to destroy this fucking wolf if it's the last thing I ever do. I'm like a missile as I launch at the beast.

He yips as if surprised by the attack, and then turns on me, going for my throat.

You're dead, Alpha.

Stunned by the communication, I falter, and his teeth connect with my flesh, grasping my foreleg.

You're nothing but a puppy.

This bastard is communicating with *me*. How is this possible?

Adrenaline pumps through my body, and I wrench my leg out of his grip and bite down on his throat.

Suddenly, Luna's at his hindquarters. Her sharp fangs sink into his muscles, and she rips and shreds with vicious shakes of her head. Finally, she pulls off a chunk of his leg, flings her head, and sends it flying. Then, she goes for the tender juncture between his hind leg and his belly. It's right at his groin, and it's one of the most sensitive parts of anybody, animal or human.

Blood spurts from his abdomen.

No, he screams. *The bitch is mine.*

Wanna bet? I rip out a chunk of his throat, and more blood spurts from his neck. I sink my teeth in and tear through his jugular, spraying blood as I sever it completely.

Soon, the bastard lays quivering in the sand. With a last puff of air, he stills.

I turn toward Luna, expecting to soothe her, but she launches at me.

Her communication screams through my mind.

You knew! You fucking knew!

Knew what? Luna, what are you talking about? I'm scrambling to keep away from her teeth. Has she lost her mind?

I don't want to do it, but I overpower her, pinning her to the ground under me. She's already wounded, so I'm careful not to use too much force. *Shift*, I command.

No.

Shift, goddamn it.

No!

Luna, obey my command.

I place my teeth around her throat in a threatening pose, but I don't break the skin. Still, the salty, sweet taste of her fills my mouth from where the other wolf bit her. For the first time, I use my dominance on her, forcing her submission.

She shifts and glares at me in all her glorious nakedness. "You knew, Axel. How could you keep this from me?"

I keep myself on top of her. “*Keep what?*” I ask through our bond.

“This wolf!” She stabs her finger in the air in the direction of the dead mutant.

“*What about him?*”

“Oh, sure, act like you don’t know,” she says.

I eye the blood seeping down her neck. I want to lick it and comfort her, closing the wound.

“Don’t even think about comforting me,” she snarls. “You’re nothing but a liar and a betrayer.”

Anger launches into my throat at her challenging my honor. “*You’re going to have to come up with some facts to support your claim, Luna.*”

“Are you going to stand there and tell me you don’t know who this is?” she yells.

“*I don’t know who that is.*”

She whacks my chest with her palms, punctuating each word she speaks. “He. Killed. My *father*. And he was a pack member—*this* pack.”

“*What?*” My gaze ping-pongs between the dead wolf and Luna.

“You had to know,” she says, adding more whacks to my chest. “You weren’t the Alpha eighteen years ago, but you were a member of the pack. You must have been a teenager then.”

“*I didn’t know it was him,*” I growl. “*I only knew there was a fight between two wolves. Your father died and the other was banished, and your mother fled the pack and became a lone wolf.*”

Her eyes narrow into slits. “But you knew it was someone from your pack!”

Now she starts pounding on me with her fists. I seize her wrists to stop the assault.

She writhes and squirms, kicking at me in an attempt to get free. She arcs back her head and tries to clock me in the forehead, but my paws stop her.

“*I didn’t know they were still alive or that they’d ever return for you. Hell, we didn’t know you existed. Your mother severed the pack bonds and ran away without telling anyone she was pregnant.*”

Fat tears slide down her cheeks, breaking my fucking heart.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“*He was banished,*” I say. “*It’s not something a pack likes to think about, that we had a cannibal among us. The pack was so ashamed that our alpha at the time ordered us to never speak of it, think of it... By his command, the*

events were cast from our memories and nearly ceased to exist.”

I lick her face, trying to comfort her.

“But he didn’t cease to exist,” she says with a snuffle. “He came back.”

She shakes her head, knocking loose more tears. “You *knew*, Axel. You knew.”

“I didn’t know him at the time. He was an older member of the pack, and I was a kid, horrified when I learned of it. I didn’t want you to fear joining the pack for no reason. He’s not in it and hasn’t been since before you were born. But you were so fearful...”

“You didn’t think it was relevant?” she says in a voice laced with pain.

The shards of her words lance my chest. “I was only trying to protect you. The pack can do that. If they hadn’t been here today, you’d be dead.”

“I was never given a chance to choose for myself,” she whispers, her head still shaking back and forth.

“I didn’t know he’d come back,” I assure her. “He was banished, and we never heard from him again. We were ordered to never speak of him or his despicable acts. I’ve only wanted to protect you and keep you safe, have you as my wife and part of my pack.”

“By not telling me the truth,” she says in a dead-sounding voice. Her hands grow limp in my grip, and she meets my gaze with her teary eyes. “I knew nothing of this, of what happened to my father. Mama never told me a thing. All I knew growing up was that belonging to a pack meant belonging to something evil. I’m starting to think she was right. If being part of a pack means being fed lies to keep you safe...”

Panic hammers against my heart. “*It doesn’t,*” I assure her. “*We just got married—all of us. We’re happy now. You can’t leave, Luna. Not now. Not when you could have a baby in your belly like your mama. Please don’t make the mistake she did. I promise I’ll never withhold the truth from you again. You have my word.*”

She gives one last shake of her head, shoves me off, jumps to her feet, and races away.

Pain floods me inside, covering my thoughts with a landslide of grief.

As Luna disappears into the brush several yards ahead, I bolt after her. I find her wading into the swamp, her arms hanging limply from her side. I rush forward, pouncing on her, and we flounder into the murky water.

“*I trusted you, Axel,*” she cries. “*And you lied to me! Again!*”

We fall back into the shallow water, and she wraps her arms and legs

around me to keep herself from the water.

“I know, sweetheart. I know. And I let you down.”

“I gave you my everything. I committed to sharing my life with you,” she says, kicking at my sides with her heels. “I let you in.”

I deserve this. I deserve everything she’s giving to me. *“I know. I fucked up. You were so broken when I found you—so mistrusting. All I wanted to do was protect you and keep you safe. You can let me in. I promise. Let me in again.”*

I stagger up onto the bank and lick her face, and she’s still crying but she arches up against me.

“Shift,” she says, panting and squirming against me. I realize she wants to fuck, and I’m only halfway shifted when she grabs my cock and thrusts up against it. I sink into her, needing the connection more than I’ve ever needed anything in my life. My hind paws dig into the mud as I thrust deep inside her slick little pussy. She gasps, her head falling back, her eyes closing in bliss. This is how we bond, how we come back to each other, every time. Our relationship might be volatile, but this is always right between us.

The muddy swamp bottom gives way beneath my claws, and we both slide deeper, but we don’t separate. I lick her cheeks, swiping her tears away as I pump my cock deep inside her, my hulking form driving her pale little body down into her soft mud with each rough thrust.

“I loved you, Axel.” Her face is swollen and flushed as she stares at me with eyes of betrayal and a broken heart. But she opens her thighs wide, lifting her hips to let me go deeper.

“Don’t you love me anymore?” I say, my heart threatening to beat from my chest, my cock straining inside the tight grip of her shaved little pussy.

A beat lasting a lifetime stretches between us. I grind deep inside her, holding back as I feel my knot stretching her until she can’t bear it. Her sheath begin to clench rhythmically around my cock, and her arms flail, churning in the shallow water as I thrust against her cervix a few times.

“I don’t want to love you,” she whimpers. “But God help me, I still do. I love you, Alpha.”

Hearing those words makes me lose all control. My cum explodes into her, and I throw back my head and roar as my cock throbs so hard I see stars. Her cunt grips me in a second wave of orgasm, sucking and milking every drop from my engorged member. We’re shaking with the power of it before her grip on my cock loosens and my knot contracts enough for me to slip

from her. I finish shifting into my human form and pull her onto the bank again.

There, I press my hands on either side of her face. “Let me make it better. Let me try again. I promise to never lie to you again. To never withhold the truth from you, even if I’m afraid to share.” I kiss her eyelids and her temples. I kiss her cheekbones and her chin. Finally, I make my way to her mouth, and she yields to me, kissing me with all the tenderness of a submissive mate.

The trees shudder with movement like bull elk are heading our way.

“Yo, Axel,” Warrick bellows.

Luna and I slowly pull away from one another.

A terrible thought ricochets through me. I left the fight—I left everyone to save my heart.

The outlaw triplets thunder through the trees, and I scoop up Luna and stand.

“We kicked their asses,” Warrick says, his chest puffing with pride. They’re all covered in tattoos and blood—a dozen injuries mar their thickly muscled bodies, and blood soaks their beards and runs down their chins and chests from where they tore into the wolves. But they look like they’ll all make a full recover. I’m surprised by the strength of my relief and happiness at that knowledge.

“It was epic,” Ethan says.

“Tell me,” I order. I kiss the top of Luna’s head as I step through the sticky mud, heading for solid earth where they stand.

“The war...” Warrick says, beaming with pride at his prowess in battle. “It’s over.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Luna

“We ripped those motherfuckers’ heads off and ate their hearts out,” Warrick bellows, shaking his shaggy head as we forge through the woods, heading back to the battleground.

He’s dripping with blood, and there are scrapes and bruises everywhere.

“We were all engaged in battle.” Warrick sweeps his hand through the air. “Callan was dragging a dying mutant freak by his tail. Ethan and I were double-teaming another, about to tear his throat apart from both sides. And then others started running to help us. We looked up, and we had the last two living mutants who hadn’t turn tail and run.”

He holds aside a branch for me to duck under.

“You did good,” Axel says, unwilling to release my hand. That’s okay with me because I don’t want to let go of him, either. We just went through something epic, and the bonds between us are stronger than ever. I can feel him pulsing through my bloodstream like a rushing river.

“Yeah, I didn’t know where the fuck you went,” Ethan says to Axel, with one raised eyebrow. “But then I heard Luna’s call, and I knew.”

He gives me the warmest look that turns my bones into jelly.

“So, what happened?” Callan says to me.

I gave him a brief synopsis of what just went down, omitting all the pain and rage I experienced when I thought Axel had betrayed me.

“Holy fuck,” Callan exclaimed. “So that was the asshole who started this whole thing?”

“Seems so,” I say.

“By killing your father?” Ethan says, stepping over a log.

I nod. “Apparently. When that wolf ate him, he became strong. Then he

convinced others to join him and eat more humans and wolves.”

“And you knew about this, dude?” Warrick says to Axel.

“I knew one of ours killed her father,” Axel says. “I fucked up. I didn’t know it would make him come back for her, or I’d have told everyone.”

“I’d say that’s an important fact to share,” Callan says, frowning.

“It wasn’t relevant, but I’ve paid for keeping it from Luna,” Axel says, releasing my hand with a scowl. “And I’m guessing I’ll keep paying.”

“Oh, no, you don’t,” I say, snatching his hand before it reaches his side. “We worked it out. Axel made a mistake. We *all* make mistakes.”

“Except for me,” Ethan says, grinning.

“Asshole,” Axel says, slugging him in the arm.

“Hey,” Ethan protests, still grinning. “That’s one of my best attributes.”

I smile at him. “If all the maneaters are gone, I want to put all this behind me and move forward. Are we in agreement?” I say, meeting each of their gazes as they turn to glance at me.

“Yes, little mama,” Ethan says, giving me a mock salute. He throws his arm around my shoulder on the side opposite Axel. “So, you killed the last giant freak, huh?”

“We sure did,” Axel says. “Luna got the first kill strike. She got him right here.” He points to the juncture between leg and belly where I bit the wolf.

“Oh, shit,” Callan says, cringing. “That had to hurt. You probably tore his femoral artery.”

“It started spurting blood like a fountain,” I say, grinning with pride.

“I’ll bet it did,” Callan says, smiling back at me with just as much pride as I feel.

Ethan drops his arm so I can scoot past a tree. I keep a steady grip on Axel, though. I don’t want to let go of him.

We all come to a stop when we step from the underbrush. Dead, eviscerated bodies—vampire, maneaters, and members of the wolf pack alike—lay everywhere. The injured lay moaning or silently suffering, writhing in the sand. The wolves who emerged relatively unscathed have all shifted back to their human skin. Some slump on the ground, their arms over their knees or lean against trees, utterly fatigued, while others are bandaging the wounded.

The vampires cluster in a circle, their heads bowed. Drake looks up from the circle and calls out to us. “We need to talk.”

Axel nods.

Warrick looks down at me. “You, baby-girl, need to find somewhere safe while we confer with the vamps.”

“I want to meet with them, too,” I say, my spine stiffening. I turn to Axel. “Can I stay?”

Warrick places his large hands on my shoulders. “No. Absolutely not. Just because we united to fight a common enemy, they’re still *vampires*—our sworn enemies. It could be a trap.”

“Please, Daddy?” I ask, batting my eyelashes at him.

“I think she should be allowed to attend,” Axel says, and my heart swells with gratitude. “She’s the Alpha’s wife, and the Second’s wife. She should know pack business, and it’s good to have a few submissives temper our natures in negotiations like this.”

“Thank you,” I say to him. “He’s right. I need to find my place in the pack, not just our family. You may be the Second, Warrick, but it’s my pack, too.”

“Fine,” Warrick grits out, placating me with his palms facing forward. “Far be it from me to get in the way of my baby girl’s powers of persuasion.”

“Yeah, Luna, you’re a powerhouse,” Callan says. “No one can deny you anything.”

Their support fills me with pride, and I beam at all my rough and bloody men. “Then let’s go talk to some vampires.”

We tromp toward them as a mighty team, connected with one gigantic beating heart.

Once we’re standing in front of them, Axel pulls himself to his full, imposing Alpha height. “What do you need to say?”

He says the words calmly, but I can tell he’s poised and ready for battle, if it comes to that, even though we’re all exhausted.

Drake steps away from the circle with Evan by his side. Drake’s pants leg is stained crimson, but he holds himself tall, too.

“We owe you our lives, Alpha,” Drake says, meeting Axel’s gaze with his dark, dead eyes.

“Go on,” Warrick says, crossing his arms over his chest.

“We were certain you were responsible for the attacks on our human feeding stations and us. Even when you came to warn us of the maneaters, we were suspicious of your intent. Please accept my apology on behalf of my clan. I, for one, wouldn’t be standing here today were it not for your warriors.” Drake nods his head in a show of respect and Evan does the same.

Axel's face appears impassive, but I know his wheels are turning a mile a minute. "Thank you. We accept your apology on one condition."

"Of course," Drake says, one eyebrow raised imperiously. "You wouldn't be the Alpha if you weren't always negotiating for your pack."

"I want our land back," Axel says evenly. "Our pack land belongs to all our people, not just me. It is sacred to our people, and I gave it under duress when my mate was in danger. As a show of good faith between our people and yours, I would ask for it to be returned."

Drake looks down his nose at Axel, but I think he looks impressed. "It speaks to your devotion," he says coolly, his gaze sliding toward me. "A sacrifice for one's mate is a noble one."

My chest puffs at his words, but I school my emotion into neutrality and wait for the vampire's answer just as my mates do, with dignity.

After a long beat, Drake locks eyes with Axel. "Your land is yours, as payment rendered for your warning, and for defeating the hybrid wolves beside us."

"That's most generous," Axel says. "May this usher in a new era of peace between our peoples."

"Yes," Drake says. "In addition, we do not hunt game as you do. If you're in need of hunting grounds in the wake of the damage from the hurricane, we'll allow you access to our land for those purposes." He folds his arms over his chest and rises to his full height, displaying his arrogance like a peacock's tail.

Axel dips his head at the vampire leader. "In return, we'd like to offer you access to the same. You may feed from humans in our territory, as long as they are consenting."

"Of course," Drake says with a smirk. "Thank you, Alpha."

They nod their heads to each other, and then the vampires turn and shoot off through the trees in a blur, disappearing from view in seconds flat.

My men and I all start talking at once.

"Axel, you did it!" I say, jumping up and down.

He catches me in his arms and smooches me hard on the mouth.

"Good job, man," Warrick says, clapping him on the back.

Axel sets me down and smiles at me with a look of purest love. "You're going to get your dream house, Luna love."

"That I get to share with all of you," I reply, beaming at my men.

"Aw, shucks," Callan says. "Don't make me cry, pet."

With joy in our hearts for each other, we turn to the somber task that precedes the building of our home—burying the dead and restoring the injured in the pack. If anyone's capable of undertaking the job, it's the five of us, the toughest wolves in all of Jacksonville.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Luna

A few days later, we prepare to head back to our home at the triplets' cabin. We've been crashing at Adolpha's in her living room, tending to the dead and the grieving, but now, it's time to leave.

"It's been an honor housing our Alpha," Adolpha says with a smile as she bids us farewell. "You all seem to complement each other so well. I'm glad you forged new territory and got married. The pack will be stronger for it."

"Thank you," Axel says. "Coming from you, that means a lot."

Out in the sunshine, we stand before our respective vehicles. I'll ride with Axel in his truck, and the triplets will take their bikes.

"We need to stop at the mall before we head home," Callan says, with a sly wink at Ethan.

Warrick scoffs.

"Why's that?" I say, pausing before climbing into the passenger side.

"It's a surprise," Callan says, waggling his eyebrows.

"Yeah, take your time getting home," Ethan adds. "We have a few things to do before you arrive."

Intrigued, I turn to Axel and lace my fingers with his. "We can think of something to do, can't we?"

We've all been touchy and lovey since the battle. I think we're all just relieved and grateful that we're all safe and well. Our wolves healed our injuries, and now we're all as good as new, and married to boot.

"I hope you won't be too disappointed if it's pack business," he says. "I have to meet with Kato before we head out of here, see how he's healing."

"Of course," I say. "There will be plenty of time to play later."

He smiles down at me with gratitude and kisses me before lifting me into

the passenger seat of the truck.

“Have fun getting your secret supplies,” I say with a wave at the triplets.

Warrick gives me a salute, and the three of them roar down the street on their motorcycles.

The business Axel has to address takes about an hour. Axel insists I come in, since I’m an important member of the pack, but in truth, all the strategic planning bores me. At last, Axel sees my fidgeting and sends me out back with Okami to pick flowers from her garden. It’s a huge patch with all different colors and varieties.

Okami insists I pick a huge bouquet to grace our dining room table at home. It makes me remember my sweet little house and how much pride I took in decorating it. The triplets’ house is great, but it could use some prettying up.

“Those are beautiful,” Axel says when we come in from the garden and find the business meeting over. “But not as pretty as you are.”

I beam up at him, and he takes my hand and leads me out to the truck. We trundle down the road, chatting about everything. Before I know it, we’re home.

As soon as I step from the truck, I smell delicious scents coming from the kitchen. I flash Axel a narrow-eyed look as I hug the flowers to my chest. “This is a setup, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” he says, the picture of innocence.

I race toward the house and throw open the screen door to the kitchen.

“Surprise!” Ethan hollers, hopping off the step-stool where he was hanging pink and gold crepe paper.

A large banner hangs across the entrance to the front room. It reads, “To Us!”

Callan stands at the stove, stirring something flavorful in a large pot. A chocolate cake sits cooling on the counter.

“What’s all this?” I ask.

“It’s our honeymoon,” Warrick says, striding into the kitchen. He scoops me and the flowers into his arms and kisses me soundly. Then, he places me back down on the floor.

“What’s a honeymoon?” I ask, all flushed and excited from the kiss.

Candles sit in the middle of the kitchen table, along with a vase full of water for the flowers. Besides the banner and crepe paper, balloons bounce from the ceiling, reading, “It’s a celebration!” and “Congratulations!”

“It’s where you hide away and have sex, eat, have more sex, eat some more, and have sex again,” Callan says over his shoulder.

“How fun!” I cry. “Those are my favorite things. I love honeymoons!”

I whirl in a circle and step toward the table where I deposit the bouquet. Ethan grabs my hand and pulls me into his arms. “A celebration calls for music. What do you say? Want to help me pick something?”

In the front room, we flip through ancient vinyl records and old CDs, searching for the perfect music mix. When we find it, we start dancing, bouncing around the room, leaping onto the couch, and jumping for joy.

Axel steps into the room and stands in the door watching until I grab his hand and drag him into the room, forcing him to dance with me. Callan hears the commotion and joins, and Warrick stands in the door, watching me with a lust-filled gaze as I wiggle my hips and shimmy to the music.

When dinner is ready, we make our way into the kitchen.

Callan sets a platter of fish stew in the middle of the table with sourdough bread.

As I nibble a piece of bread, I eye each man, anticipation churning in my belly.

“What is it, Luna?” Axel asks, laying a gentle hand on mine. “You usually wolf down your food. Are you feeling alright?”

“I think so,” I say shyly. “But I have an announcement.”

They all start banging their spoons against their glasses. “Luna has an announcement,” Ethan bellows. “Hurrah!”

When they quiet, I set down my utensils and flatten my palms on the table. “I haven’t been feeling so good for a few days,” I say. “And then I missed my moon.”

“Are you saying what I think you are?” Axel asks intently, looking like he might pounce over the table at me.

I nod. “I think... I’m pregnant.”

Ethan whoops. “That’s fantastic!”

Callan wipes his eye and pretends the pepper in our food is making him tear up.

“We’re going to be dads,” Axel says, staring at me. Suddenly he jumps up, wraps his arms around me, and twirls me around and around. “I’m so happy, sweet Luna.”

When he sets me down, I turn to Warrick, my stoic mate. “What about you, Daddy?” I ask, sliding onto his knee and wrapping my arms around his

neck. “Are you happy your baby girl is having a baby?”

“So fucking happy.” He puts his hands around my rump and guides me up onto his lap, straddling him. His cock is rock-hard and enormous against my pussy.

“Is this the part where we get to have sex before we eat some more?”

“Abso-fucking-lutely,” he says.

With my legs wrapped around his hips, he carries me into the bedroom and lays me on his king-sized bed.

“What about the others?” I ask.

“Get your asses in here, and let’s start honeymoon,” Warrick bellows. “Or I’ll fuck our baby girl full of pups all over again.”

As the others file in, strip me bare, and worship every inch of my young body, I know I’ve got to be the luckiest wolf in the world. Four amazing older men to teach me the way and love me the way I love them, as only we can, with full love and acceptance of who we are. Life thrumming through my veins, safe now that all the threats to us have been eliminated. A baby in my belly who will grow up loved and with plenty of room to run. And the promise of a lifetime of happiness as we bring the next generation of wolves into the world.

Epilogue

Luna

Five years have passed since that terrible time when giant, maneating wolves almost destroyed the pack, the vampires, my men, and me. But in those five years, so much has happened. First, we reclaimed the packland from the vampires. Axel and our family took the clearing he'd envisioned as the perfect place for our family.

The lair the vampires had designed and started to build was too froufrou for our tastes. They wanted a winding staircase and crystal chandelier kind of dwelling. We used the framework and existing structure the vampires had already started to build a roomy, spacious home to *our* liking—simple, spacious, and functional. That's what we got, thanks to my men building it themselves. It's beautiful inside and out, with plenty of light and flowers always on the table.

Today I stand in the doorway, leaning against the frame, tea in hand as I watch Ethan pushing our son on the rope swing hanging from the Tupelo tree.

"Harder, Daddy," our fearless firstborn yells, laughing and kicking his legs.

"That's what your mother says," Ethan jokes, but the adult innuendo goes right over our child's head, thank goodness.

"Push me higher!" Aidan bellows.

Callan and Axel are trying to teach our three-year-old to play catch, while Warrick is pretending to ignore the four-year-old who is "helping" him work on his bike in the driveway.

A lovely little stream gurgles as it runs alongside the yard. The kids love to "go fishing" in the stream with their daddies. "Go fish" consists of

everyone shifting and wading in the creek to try to snap up the crawdads as they scurry under rocks—everyone but baby Gavin, that is. Gavin's our toddler, and he usually occupies a place on my hip or at my side. With four men competing to see who can fill me with most seed every time I come into heat, I've gotten pregnant every time. I've been with child most of the past five years, but I don't mind. My men wait on me hand and foot for nine months and help raise our children the way they wish their parents had raised them.

"Where's Gavin?" I yell, searching for the two-year-old.

"He was right...." Axel's head swings back and forth. "Damn it. Gavin! Where'd you go, buddy?" he calls, exiting the game.

A loud splash sounds, and a child's wails follow.

Axel charges toward the stream. He wades in the ankle-deep water at the edge and fishes the toddler out by his shirt. "What did mommy tell you about playing near the stream?" he asks, bouncing Gavin on his hip to calm his fears. Gavin keeps crying, so Axel swings him up in the air until his wails turn into peals of laughter.

Ethan calls, "Let's head in and see what your mother's up to. Sound good, boys?"

Gavin cries, "Mommy! I want mommy!"

When Axel sets him down, Aidan takes Gavin's chubby hand and leads him toward the house.

The four men lumber along behind.

"I could use a cold beer. Who's with me?" Warrick states, wiping the sweat from his brow. We all agree in unison.

Our four-year-old races toward me, fast as his little legs will carry him. "Mommy!" he says, after colliding with my thighs.

I reach down to ruffle his golden curls. I'm sure he's Axel's, but we all share in the duties no matter which man fathered the children. They're *ours*, all together. "What do you say we get your daddies some refreshments?" I ask.

"Okay," he says, tugging me toward the refrigerator in the custom kitchen.

I waddle like the elephant I've become. I'm eight months pregnant, and I'm pretty sure this one will be a little girl at last. I had a dream two weeks ago, and Elder Amexaryl confirmed it.

Speaking of Elder Amexaryl, I've been apprenticing with her. Axel thinks

I'm the perfect person to assume her role in the pack when she retires, though we don't know when that will be. No one knows her age and she won't tell, but when the time comes for her to rest and do what she feels like, I'll be ready. I'm pretty far along in my studies already. She says I'm a natural, being so submissive and in tune with the needs of others. She'll still attend the ceremonies, but they'll be conducted by me.

Everyone tromps into the kitchen and sits around the table. Aiden helps me hand out beers to the men and apple juice boxes to Coinin and Gavin. He hands me a non-alcoholic beer, since I can't drink much but developed a taste for beer when I first lived with the triplets.

Aidan helps Gavin into his high chair, then settles next to his brother and oversees him and his juice box.

I hand off the baby and lumber over to sit in Warrick's lap.

"How's my baby girl?" he says, smiling down at me.

"Happy as can be," I say, kissing him on the cheek and then snuggling into his big, strong chest. "Y'all have given me a dream life."

"As it should be," he says with a contented sigh.

The others beam at me from their places around the table.

"And how's this baby-girl?" Warrick asks, stroking my massive belly with his large hand.

The warmth is soothing, and I close my eyes for a moment. I've got everything a woman could want—a fantastic family, a beautiful home that we all fit in with room to grow, and a kick-ass community of welcoming wolves.

"Oh!" Warrick exclaims.

My eyes pop open.

Warrick's eyes widen and he grins. "She's saying hello to daddy number one."

"Hey, I'm daddy number one," Axel says, rising to step toward me.

"You're all daddy number one," Coinin says, rushing over.

Gavin sits in his high chair and sucks down his apple juice as six sets of hands pat my belly, feeling our new baby girl kick.

It's a good life. Hard-won, for sure, though. We've survived hurricanes, floods, assaults on our lives, hunting mishaps, heartbreak, break-ups, make-ups—with what Ethan calls all-night fuck-a-thons that make us too exhausted to hold a grudge—and so much more. But through it all, we have each other, and that's what matters. We have a beautiful home, a thriving family, and most of all, we have love, because that's what keeps us together in the end.

The End.

This concludes the *Rejected Mate* trilogy! Thank you for reading!

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Keep reading for a short excerpt from our complete Magical Academy series—we call it Harry Pornier. It's like if HP was a girl... With sex magic. 😊

Excerpt from Academy of Sorcery

With a bucket in one hand and a plunger in the other, I take the back stairs to the basement, doing my best to avoid places my boss might be lurking. There are two bathrooms down here, so I might be able to stay out of his way for a while.

Stepping off the last stair, I turn on the lights and find Silas sitting in the corner.

What a creep.

He crosses his legs and leers at me. “You’re late, young lady. I’ll be docking your pay for that.”

“As is your right,” I say through a forced smile. Trying to hold my tongue is a chore in itself, but as I learned a long time ago, arguing with him is a waste of breath. And maybe this once, if I’m polite, he’ll be generous.

My nerves are in full-fledged explosion mode when I realize that now I’m going to have to ask him for a favor. I swallow down my fears and measure my words carefully before speaking.

Here goes nothing.

“So, the Unleashing is today,” I begin. “As you know, I turned eighteen last week. I received my invitation in the mail. Here, see?” I pull the folded letter from my pocket and hold it out to him. “Since every descendant of magic has to go, that includes me. I need to take a few hours off work. It’s not for me. It’s the law.”

But then, Silas thinks he’s above the law. He glares as he stands from the chair. His 5-foot-8 frame isn’t intimidating whatsoever, but he uses his position of power in the magic-wielder community to its fullest. The dude takes little man syndrome to a whole new level.

He snatches the letter from my hand, shakes his head, and rips the paper into pieces before dropping it to the floor.

If my mouth weren't hanging open in shock and indignation, I'd seriously have to bite my tongue not to give him a piece of my mind.

"You are a servant," he says in a cutting tone. "Not a witch. Even if you have magic, which I highly doubt, you are no longer free." He crosses his arms over his chest. "I own the next thirty-plus years of your life, and therefore I own your magic for that duration. I decide if and when you stay or go. You're lucky I allow you to live with your ailing father at all. If I weren't such a compassionate man, you would be living in my servants' quarters."

Compassionate man, my ass.

We both know that the only reason I get to live at home is because the courts granted my mother that right in her contract. I take a breath and do everything in my power to keep my mouth shut. Calling him out will only piss him off, and next thing you know, I'll be scrubbing the floor with a toothbrush for his amusement.

"Your life is mine," Silas purrs in a voice that makes my skin crawl. "Now take your supplies and get to cleaning my toilets. That's the work you deserve, and the work you'll do until you've paid off the debt your dead mother owed me."

He turns and disappears up the stairs. My gaze drops to the floor where the shredded invitation lies scattered across the carpet—along with my hopes and dreams. I let out a sigh and crouch to pick them up. He could have at least let me go to the Unleashing as a formality, even if I don't have magic. Now I'll probably have some supernatural law enforcement knocking on my door in a few weeks and handing me a fine for not showing up.

"Fuck my life," I mutter, crumpling the paper scraps. I head toward the bathroom, drop them into the toilet and watch as they spin in circles, disappearing down the drain.

There goes that. Brushing off my hands, I pull on the blue plastic gloves, pull out the cleaning supplies, and arrange them on the floor. Starting with the sink, I clean and polish, then move on to the toilet. Spray, scrub, hold my breath.

As I scrub, my mind conjures the image of Silas turning into a toad. Too bad I can't flush him down the toilet. I was an idiot to think Silas would allow me to go anywhere. Now I'll never know if I have magic at all. All that wasted toad-transforming potential.

Just when I'm starting to sweat from the scrubbing, and I'm elbow deep in the toilet, I hear voices outside the bathroom. Voices I don't recognize. Silas doesn't usually bring visitors down to where I'm cleaning, so I pause to swipe blonde hair off my forehead with the back of my wrist and strain to make out their voices. If Silas has to bring his guests all the way down here so they won't be overheard by anyone upstairs, it must be good.

"Look what you've been hiding," says a gruff voice from behind me. "This is a reportable offense, Silas."

I turn to find two of the most beautiful men I've ever seen standing behind my boss. Great. I'm in toilet water, and these two look like they've just stepped out of an ad for Supernatural GQ. The one who spoke has thick, luscious honey-blond hair that falls over his forehead, a strong square jaw, and just the barest hint of a dimple carved into his chiseled chin. His blue eyes are locked on me, studying me so closely I'm sure he can tell that his deep, growly voice does something indecent to my body.

"Quite the contrary, Rocco," Silas says, interrupting my admiration of the guy. My boss wrings his hands as he speaks. "Jade is my servant by law. Her life belongs to me. I have a contract."

"Silas." The other man stares him down from a height that must be nearly six and a half feet. His hair is so black it glints blue in the fluorescent light of the bathroom, and his broad shoulders speak of many, many hours at the gym. "You are a member of the Society. You know all eighteen-year-olds of magical descent must go through the Unleashing. That is the law, and it supersedes your contract." His lip gives a slight curl of distaste at the last word, and I know he must have heard about Silas's unconventional rulings as judge—and he doesn't approve.

"Maybe so, Thorn. But..."

"Enough," Thorn says, turning to me. "Stand up, girl."

My gaze flickers between the two of them. I have no clue who they are, but I'm intrigued. I hadn't expected the supernatural police to be so... Hot.

On the other hand, who the hell does this guy think he is, calling me *girl*? If they came to find me, they must know my name.

Rocco snaps his fingers at me. "On your feet, Cinderella."

With a huff, I get to my feet and plant my hands on my hips. Even if he's summoning me in the same manner he'd use for a dog, he's still the police.

I think.

"You received your summons, yes?" Thorn asks, his emerald green eyes

narrowing as he waits for an answer. God, why is he looking at me like that? His eyes are so gorgeous I want to memorize them, but I don't want to stare quite as obviously as he is.

"Yes, but I can't go," I say, raising my chin.

"That's not your decision to make," Rocco says. "Or your boss's. You were summoned by the Society of Supernaturals. You're going."

"I have to work." Even though I really want to go, saying no is my only option. If I don't fight this, Silas will definitely take it out on me later, or worse, my dad. Plus, these guys just barging in and bossing me around makes me less than thrilled to go anywhere with them. They may be freakishly gorgeous, but their manners leave something to be desired.

Silas looks at me with a strange expression before turning to the two hotties I can't stop staring at. "She's my servant. If she wants to stay, I grant her that right."

"The law says even slaves have to go to the Unleashing ceremony."

"Slave?" I demand. What the hell? I'm no one's slave. Silas might own my working hours, but no one owns me.

"She's headstrong," Silas says, splaying his hand toward me as if to demonstrate. "I told her to go, but she refused."

My jaw drops.

"You liar," I blurt out, unable to hold my tongue any longer. I may be a lowly servant who barely earns enough to pay for bread, but I still have a spine. "I showed you my invitation, and you ripped it into pieces."

Rocco turns to Silas and gives him a look I would hate to be the one receiving. Silas shrinks visibly, and I almost feel sorry for the bastard.

"Everyone must go," Thorn says, his voice as icy as his gaze. "Now take off those gloves and come, or we'll be late for the Unleashing."

Priceless is the only way to describe the look on Silas's face as Thorn and Rocco drag me out the back door.

I wish I had that effect on him. Although I'm secretly reveling in it, I know there'll be hell to pay later, so I do the only thing I can think to soften the blow. "I'll make up my hours later, Silas," I call. "I promise."

"All right, Cinderella," Rocco says with a smirk that makes a dimple appear in his cheek. "Let's go. As much as I enjoyed seeing you on your knees, we've got places to be."

"Well, I hope you took a mental picture of me *on my knees*," I shoot back with a sugary smile. "Because that's the last time you'll ever see it."

The smirk widens into a real smile, and he lets his eyes flick down to my breasts for just a fraction of a second. Long enough to let me know he wants to check me out, but not long enough for him to actually do the checking out. He might be tempted, but he's not going to ogle the likes of me, in my canvas overalls and work shirt.

"Too bad," he murmurs, holding my gaze for a second.

I yank my eyes from his, unnerved by this gorgeous guy who seems to be toying with me. Thorn strides ahead, crossing the parking lot toward a shiny black town car. Thankfully, the rain has stopped as they walk me to the vehicle. It's one of those super fancy ones you see in the movies. They have a driver and everything.

Thorn opens the back door and points to the seat. "Move it, girl. We're late."

It takes everything in me not to go off on the guy as I climb in and scoot to the other door. Rocco and Thorn climb in beside me, and then the car takes off through the washed out and nearly flooded streets of Jacksonville.

"You know how this works, right, Cinderella?" Rocco asks.

I offer him a glare. "Are you seriously talking to me?"

"Yeah, I'm talking to you," Rocco says. He grins, showing off a perfect set of shiny white teeth.

Holding my tongue seems to be my superpower these days, especially considering how hard it is to do, but I refuse to acknowledge his insult. In answer, I turn and stare out the window, trying to memorize the route in case I need to get back home. Which at some point, I will, and I'm not trusting these assholes to return me to where they found me.

Thorn snorts with suppressed laughter.

"Hey, I think Cinderella fits," Rocco says mockingly. "Did you see her working? The girl has a talent. In fact, I've got something else she can polish..."

Did I say holding my tongue was a superpower? Scratch that.

Turning back, I glare at Rocco, determined not to let his drool-worthy jawline and bright blue eyes deter me.

"You're awfully brave, taunting a salty teenager with untested magic. Keep it up, and I just may turn your dick into an earthworm. You know. *By accident.*"

Rocco licks his lips. "I like my women salty."

"I'm not your woman," I say with a glare. "Why don't you crawl back

into your cave, Neanderthal?”

Rocco starts to speak again, but Thorn cuts in. “You know what to expect at the Unleashing?”

Peeling my death stare from Rocco, I turn to Thorn. “Sure. Everyone with magical heritage is called to the Unleashing Ceremony at age eighteen, and if we have magic, it’s unlocked by the highest sorcerers.”

“Do you know why we wait until you’re eighteen?”

“Everyone knows that.”

He raises his eyebrows as if sending me a message to grow up. “Magic is mature then, and hopefully, so is the one who wields it.”

“I’ve been working full time for the last two years. Don’t worry. I’m mature enough to wield magic responsibly.” Then, because I can’t help myself, I add, “I won’t turn any dicks into earthworms unless I’m absolutely sure they deserve it.”

“Those of us with the most powerful magic will unleash everyone else’s powers. If you have significant magic, you’ll go to the Academy of Sorcery to master your gifts.”

“You realize Silas will never go for that,” I say. “Even if I do have magic, he’d never let me out of my contract. The guy hates my family with a passion.”

“Silas will just have to deal,” Rocco says. “Everyone with powerful magic goes to the Academy. Period.”

I like the way this guy thinks. And looks.

Thorn raises an eyebrow. “Unless you’re just a psychic like your mother,” he says. “You can take online classes for that scant amount of magic.”

Just when I thought they might not be completely insufferable.

“What are you guys?”

“Higher up on the food chain than a psychic,” Thorn says with a frown.

I grit my teeth and ignore that little dig at my humble magical origins. “Does that mean dark magic wielders are evil people?”

Rocco throws back his head and lets out a belly laugh. Not even five minutes with these guys, and I already know Rocco is gonna drive me to drink. Reviving my death glare, I give him a one-word reminder. “*Earthworm.*”

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